

On "Middlebrow"

A few readers have asked me to clarify what I meant by [writing yesterday](#) that Zadie Smith's column in *Harper's* is in the "grand middlebrow tradition," which they found offensive. My fault: it's a fraught term. I actually was using "middlebrow" in a positive sense. I view it as an important part of how ideas are circulated in our culture among different strata of society (specifically, among groups with varying levels of wealth, education, and access to "high" or "avant-garde" culture). Both *Harper's* and *The New Yorker* have often been viewed as prime examples of the middlebrow: both magazines are devoted to the high but also to making it accessible to many; to bringing ideas that might remain trapped in ivory towers and academic books, or in high-art (or film or theatre) scenes, into the pages of a relatively inexpensive periodical that can be bought at bookstores and newsstands across the country (and now on the Internet). When I was a student at a public high school in Texas where literature was not valued much, and had little communication with the avant-garde, I benefited immensely from *The New Yorker* and things like the national tour of "Angels in America." I also knew that these came from cultures not precisely my own, and they inspired me. There have been many arguments over the past century about whether the sort of mass middlebrow experience I had growing up is "good" or "bad," and I will point you to [the Wiki entry for "middlebrow,"](#) because it actually provides a smart summary (and because Wiki is itself a kind of middlebrow product).

For our purposes, it's important to note two key figures in the middlebrow debate: Virginia Woolf, who denounced middlebrows for missing the intrinsic value of art and using it for their own whimsy (I think of it as using art to decorate one's life rather than viewing art as a way of life); and Russell Lynes, an editor at *Harper's* at the time Woolf was writing, who attacked her for wanting a world in which all art "belonged" to highbrows, and who praised the aspirational qualities of middlebrows. Their disagreement was somewhat rhetorical and demonstrates the slipperiness of terms like "highbrow" and "middlebrow":

Woolf's own reviews have often been categorized as middlebrow because she wrote about books that were not "high" art for middlebrow publications, using accessible language. And this is what popped into my mind at the event last week when Zadie Smith lauded Woolf for reviewing whatever she wanted, however she wanted, without being overly concerned about what her snooty colleagues might think; and in making the distinction she did between "reviewer" and "critic."

Since Woolf and Lynes there have been decades of contemplation about the term "middlebrow" and how it relates to mass culture (most notably by Dwight MacDonal in his 1960 "Masscult and Midcult"), and I brought the idea up in yesterday's post because the Internet is forcing us to rethink (again) what "middlebrow" means: in an era when the highest is as accessible as the lowest—accessible in the sense that both are only a click away (there is so much more to be said about this than I can say here!)—we actually have to think anew about how to walk that middle line. I wrote that Zadie Smith is one of the current re-inventors of the (middlebrow) book review because she combines a very high level of critical intelligence with accessible language, an abbreviated format, and a strong personality.

-

-

-

-

-

