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Having It All in the Belle Epoque: How French Women's Magazines Invented the Modern Woman

Rachel Mesch

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At once deeply historical and surprisingly timely, *Having it All in the Belle Epoque* shows how the debates that continue to captivate high-achieving women in America and Europe can be traced back to the early 1900s in France. The first two photographic magazines aimed at women, *Femina* and *La Vie Heureuse* created a female role model who could balance age-old convention with new equalities. Often referred to simply as the "modern woman," this captivating figure embodied the hopes and dreams as well as the most pressing internal conflicts of large numbers of French women during what was a period of profound change. Full of never-before-studied images of the modern French woman in action, *Having it All* shows how these early magazines exploited new photographic technologies, artistic currents, and literary trends to create a powerful model of French femininity, one that has exerted a lasting influence on French expression.

This book introduces and explores the concept of Belle Epoque literary feminism, a product of the elite milieu from which the magazines emerged. Defined by its refusal of political engagement, this feminism was nevertheless preoccupied with expanding women's roles, as it worked to construct a collective fantasy of female achievement. Through an astute blend of historical research, literary criticism, and visual analysis, Mesch's study of women's magazines and the popular writers associated with them offers an original window onto a bygone era that can serve as a framework for ongoing debates about feminism, femininity, and work-life tensions.

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