

## Proust 2020: Introduction

---

On April 12, 2019, a Proust 2019 colloquium was held at the Maison Française of Columbia University, under the aegis of the French department, the Maison Française, and the Heyman Center, the whole made possible by the generous sponsorship of the Maurice I. Parisier Foundation.

With the help of Jeanine Parisier Plottel (PhD, Columbia University; professor emerita City University New York, Hunter College; Chevalier de la Légion d'honneur) as well as my colleagues, I conceived this colloquium as a Proust conference with a difference. Innumerable Proust events have been held, especially before, during, and since the centenary year of publication of *Du côté de chez Swann* in 2013, including our own *Proust Reread/Proust relu* in October 2013, the proceedings of which became a special issue of *Romanic Review* (105 nos. 3–4).

The impetus for this particular conference came via a conversation I had with Michael Lucey, who was organizing an MLA session on Albertine 1919, which reminded me that it was Proust's controversial Prix Goncourt in 1919 for *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* that had propelled him into true literary prominence. It occurred to me that it might be interesting to hold a Proust conference with a mixture of Proust scholars and nonspecialists, in particular writers who might talk about how reading Proust had affected their lives and careers. We therefore invited some Proust specialists and some writers who were not Proust specialists. The conference included a number of prepared papers, but consisted mostly of roundtable discussions during which writers spoke about their experience of reading Proust and debated what might account for the improbably immense popularity of his works today.

The cluster of Proust essays in this special issue is inspired by the

Proust 2019 conference, but it bears only an oblique relation to the proceedings. Because most of the conference was spontaneous discussion, I decided that rather than attempt to re-create the event itself, I would try to gather something like a textual equivalent of the conference, with some essays being versions of the papers from the proceedings and others being unrelated to the conference. Some of the essays here are formal academic papers, and some are informal, autobiographical accounts of reading Proust from nonspecialists. They are organized in alphabetical order by author. In their very different ways these essays all bear testimony to the enduring relevance of Proust over a century hence.