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The Banned Emile Zola Book That Prefigured Black Friday

Dan Matthews · Wednesday, November 14th, 2018

One day, after my usual coffee shop writing session, I walked around the block and ran into a bookmobile full of banned books. It was [Banned Books Week](#), which happens each year in September, and a local chapter of the Banned Books Week Coalition was handing out free copies of books that have been banned, at some point in time, from libraries, schools, and bookstores.

Among the books I picked up was a copy of Emile Zola's *The Ladies' Paradise* (*Au Bonheur des Dames*). Very strange that this book was banned from schools. Nudity could have been the only reason for banning it, and the description of nudity in this book is nothing — there's nudity in a window advertisement for The Ladies' Paradise, which is a department store. In the book, Zola depicts French consumer culture during the 1800s.

Zola's depiction of The Ladies' Paradise is based directly on Le Bon Marche, which was the first department store ever. Zola did all his research there, and he describes exactly how the world's premiere department store ate small businesses alive with its “one day only” sales, mail order business, cutthroat prices, and predatory, sexualized marketing.

Here's the thing: Zola didn't condemn the department store and its tactics, he was saying they're smart — they're the way business will work in the future. The Ladies' Paradise is the blueprint for how big businesses operate now. To finally clinch its victory over Paris' small merchants, The Ladies' Paradise pulls off the ultimate, no-holds-barred sale: the original Black Friday.

The owner of the Ladies' Paradise is Octave Mouret, a man who uses psychology to lure in female customers. [Applied psychology](#) experts note that marketing does twice as well if it emphasizes “emotional content” instead of “rational content.” Mouret uses advertising, which was a new thing when Zola wrote about it, to pique women's sensual excitement. Zola writes, “Mouret's sole passion was the conquest of Woman. He wanted her to be queen in his shop; he had built his temple for her in order to hold her at his mercy. His tactics were to intoxicate her with amorous attentions, to trade on her desires.”

In America, modern marketers try to use the emotional appeal of likability to lure people into Black Friday sales. This says a lot about our society — we want to merchants to be personable, it helps us feel secure and welcome. In Zola's day, the emotional appeal of the most successful store was implicitly sexual. Women, who were the ones doing the shopping, wanted to feel excited, aroused, and swept away.

Have you seen the videos of people trampling through stores on Black Friday, practically rioting to

get the best deals? *The Ladies' Paradise* has scenes of this exact sort. "The descriptions of the sales in *The Ladies' Paradise*, with their swirling movements and their frenetic circulation of money, goods, and bodies, are the perfect expression of commodity culture," says translator Brian Nelson in the introduction to the book. Commodity culture is one of "speed, movement, dislocation, disorientation."

Black Friday is a consumer's holiday, a day that follows Thanksgiving as if to say, 'Now that you've had your family holiday, it's time to join your extended family of fellow consumers and celebrate all these good deals.' [George Washington University](#) recalls how at first, when Macy's decided to extend its Black Friday sale hours into the Thanksgiving holiday, people were outraged. Macy's acted fast. According to GWU, "Clear, direct promotions explained the new schedule and generated a positive buzz about the sale." The store's promotions turned the Thanksgiving encroachment into good PR.

On the list of [retailers open on both Thanksgiving and Black Friday](#), Macy's is notable for just how ambitious its hours are. No other retailer on the list is open from 5pm to 2am on Thanksgiving, after which it turns around and opens from 6am to 10pm on Black Friday. In *The Ladies' Paradise*, the Paradise department store is also extreme about its hours for the mega-sale. The modern tactics of Black Friday were pioneered by the original French department store: accumulate a ton of goods, offer them at insane discounts for extended hours, and arrange them in an illogical way so that people are forced to go through departments where they will buy things on impulse.

Macy's is the modern-day American equivalent of Le Bon Marche (which is the store *The Ladies' Paradise* is based on) — in fact, Macy's acquired the American version of Le Bon Marche in the 1980's. The American version was called, appropriately, [The Bon Marche](#). Its founder's name was Edward Nordhoff and he was influenced directly by the original Le Bon Marche.

When I read *The Ladies' Paradise* I was ambivalent, just like I am now about Black Friday. Zola presents a picture of an entrepreneur who really does have ideas that work, and Black Friday is an event where people can save money. So what? It works. I think, overall, the issue is the machine. Zola calls *The Ladies' Paradise* a machine, and these small organisms — individuals, their families, their businesses — are constantly being assimilated by the machine. It's a good thing we now have Small Business Saturday to provide a counterbalance.

At the end of the day, though, Black Friday sales beat Small Business Saturday sales because the corporate tactics pioneered by a French department store are more effective at manipulating people. People don't mind being manipulated when they can get a good deal. In *The Ladies' Paradise*, and in America, people are commodities that feed the rapid turnover of the corporate machine. Hello, it's Black Friday, come on in. Welcome to the machine.

Paul-François Berthaud / [Wikimedia Commons](#) / *Le Bon Marche*

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