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**Prioleau, Betsy. *Diamonds and Deadlines: A Tale of Greed, Deceit, and a Female Tycoon in the Gilded Age.* New York, NY: Abrams Press, 2022, 368 pp., \$30.00 (hardback).** Reviewed by Jennifer E. Moore, University of Minnesota Duluth, [mooreje@d.umn.edu](mailto:mooreje@d.umn.edu).

Cultural historian and radio personality Betsy Prioleau's biography about a nineteenth-century female media mogul is written with a twenty-first-century mindset and is a much-needed addition to the existing literature on Mrs. Frank Leslie. Born Miriam Florence Follin in 1836, Mrs. Frank Leslie's climb to become the "Queen of Park Place" (168) in the late nineteenth century is a story truly stranger than fiction. Calling Miriam a "national treasure" (6) in her heyday, Prioleau tells the story of a publisher who led an unquestionably glamorous and adventurous life that no one would have predicted, given her provenance. Despite the stories Miriam spun about her aristocratic heritage, her upbringing was unstable at best. Her father was a fortune hunter, and evidence suggests her mother was Black and enslaved by the Follin family. With relatives, Miriam did receive an education that would position her well for the life she would eventually lead as a white woman and the "empress of journalism" (13) in the Gilded Age.

Prioleau asks a simple yet weighty question that drives the book's narrative: "How did she (Miriam) get away with it?" (6). A typical unmarried woman in nineteenth-century America would live at home until married, and when married would remain in the home to keep house and raise children. This hardly describes Miriam Leslie. Evidence suggests she worked for a time as a prostitute and entrapped her first husband into marriage. Miriam's early life was also shaped during her short stint as the protégé of the world-famous dancer Lola Montez. Montez not only taught Miriam stage skills but also provided a model for what life was like for an independent, working woman. Miriam's career as a journalist began during the U.S. Civil War when publisher Frank Leslie, who would eventually become her third husband, hired her to run one of his periodicals for women. What Miriam reported on gave readers an escape from the war and levity that more people probably appreciated than

would admit. Miriam's second husband, anthropologist E. G. Squier, also worked for Leslie. She and Squier spent most of their marriage in a living situation with Leslie in what Prioleau calls a "ménage à trois" with all innuendo that French expression connotes. Prioleau details how the arrangement likely worked, and how Miriam thrived in her unconventional life as a nineteenth-century American working woman. How Leslie and Miriam split from Squier to marry one another further fuels Miriam's colorful and remarkable story.

Prioleau explains her many talents and accomplishments, including her fluency in at least four languages, the six books she authored, and the many society salons she hosted. Noting that much can be learned through public records about Miriam's life, Prioleau used newspaper articles, court proceedings, and ample anecdotes about Miriam's character and interpersonal relationships from a significant collection of letters written and received by Squier.

A central theme Prioleau presents in this book is a woman who was often let down by the men in her life. Beginning with her father and then with the men she chose to be with, all were in one way or another prone to bad decision-making, especially when it came to financial choices. Despite this, Miriam thrived as a female entrepreneur in a time when women were largely absent from public life and when "ladies" did not work outside of the home. Miriam remarkably presented herself as a model of femininity while simultaneously holding her own as a captain of industry in the publishing world. She was a capitalist and a champion of conspicuous consumption, rising above the "old money" elites who shunned her and instead hobnobbed with foreign aristocrats during her many trips abroad and at home.

When Frank Leslie died in 1880 his finances were a mess. Miriam took over Leslie's publishing empire

upon his death and waged battles on multiple fronts for control. She legally changed her name to Frank Leslie and eventually stabilized the business, thanks in part to her visual reporting of President Garfield's assassination in 1881 which earned her the "Queen of Park Place" moniker (154). While Miriam wasn't always as news savvy as her competitors, especially at the end of her publishing career, Prioleau's retelling of Miriam's choices indicates she was at least as competent as her male competitors. If money is any measure of success, she came out ahead in the end. It's curious why Miriam did not do more publicly for women's suffrage while she was alive, considering her success as a businesswoman in a male-dominated industry. Perhaps that approach was by design and how she was able to thrive in a man's world. But, if there was any doubt about her commitment to women's suffrage during her lifetime, that was resolved upon her death in 1914 when she left most of her estate, roughly two million dollars, to Carrie Chapman Catt, the President of the National American Woman Suffrage Association. That infusion of cash is credited for a well-funded PR campaign that undoubtedly helped pass the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution sooner than it would have been without her donation.

At points in the narrative, Prioleau might go a bit too far in her imagined conversations and interactions

among the historical actors, but that technique also makes the book a page-turner. Scholars of this era will also have something to learn and enjoy from Prioleau's work. It's a book appropriate for upper-level undergraduate or graduate-level courses and could spark meaningful discussions about gender roles, nineteenth-century publishing practices, and the rise of the commercial press. As an example of narrative nonfiction with trade book style citations, this book is also appropriate for teaching historical research methods.

While the publisher claims this is the "first major biography" about Miriam Leslie, some scholars know better. In 1953 The University of Oklahoma Press published *Purple Passages: The Life of Mrs. Frank Leslie*, by Madeleine B. Stern. Prioleau acknowledges that her work follows Stern who first charted Miriam's unconventional life. Prioleau writes more candidly about Miriam's prejudices as one would hope to read in 2022, making more of her deceitfulness and intolerance of non-whites and the poor. The author also goes deeper into Miriam's early history, using additional primary sources that include records that were feared lost. Prioleau tells the story of a woman who is simultaneously a product of her time but in many ways ahead of it. This book is a needed reintroduction to Mrs. Frank Leslie.