Middlebrow Matters

Diana Holmes

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In March 2007, the manifesto ‘Pour une “littérature-monde” en français’, signed by 44 French-language novelists, appeared in Le Monde. Though its primary aim was to argue for a polycentric and ‘world’ vision of literature in French, rather than one that made ‘francophone’ writing subsidiary to that produced in metropolitan France, the manifesto also attacked what it claimed was the formalist creed that governed contemporary French literature: ‘Le monde, le sujet, le sens, l’histoire, le “référent”: pendant des décennies, ils auront été mis “entre parenthèses” par les maîtres-penseurs, inventeurs d’une littérature sans autre objet qu’elle-même’ (Barbery et al., 2007; ‘The world, the subject, meaning, history, the ‘referent’: for decades, these have been set aside by the most influential thinkers, who have invented a literature concerned only with itself’).

In the same year Tzvetan Todorov, a prominent French intellectual who in the 1960s had played an important part in the introduction of formalist criticism to France, surprised the French literary world with a passionate essay, La Littérature en péril, in which he condemned the ‘formalism, solipsism and nihilism’ of not just much contemporary French writing, but also of the educational and critical discourse that shaped its reception and promoted a view of the authentic literary work as solely ‘un objet langagier clos, autosuffisant, absolu’ (Todorov, 2007, 31; ‘a linguistic object closed in on itself, self-sufficient and absolute’). Todorov defended the right of the ‘lecteur non professionnel’ (‘non-professional reader’) to find in the reading of stories a direct relationship with his or her own life, to believe that literature can ‘nous faire mieux comprendre le monde et nous aider à vivre’ (72; ‘make us understand the world better and help us to live’), endorsing this belief
unreservedly and applying it across the spectrum of fiction from the classics to *Harry Potter*. Those who dominate the cultural scene in France, he argued, have diverged so far from such a view that they can only interpret such readerly enthusiasm as ‘intolérablement naïve’ (68; ‘intolerably naïve’).

Manifestoes, and indeed deliberately provocative essays such as Todorov’s – *La Littérature en péril* came out in Flammarion’s Café Voltaire collection, designed, as the cover announces, to be ‘un lieu où les humeurs s’affichent, où les idées s’entrechoquent’ (‘a place where moods can be expressed and ideas can collide’) – are by nature polemical and given to demonising the opposition. Both texts were predictably attacked by other writers and critics. Todorov’s thesis was comprehensively critiqued, for example, in an issue of *Télérama* (no. 2976, 27 Janvier 2007), and his manifesto’s naïveté and ‘nostalgia for the real’ (Toledo, 2008, 41) extensively denounced by Camille de Toledo in a book-length essay. However, most readers familiar with the contemporary French literary scene could recognise the phenomenon to which these polemics refer. In France, more than in other European and certainly more than in anglophone cultures, the dominant critical and academic discourse since the early twentieth-century advent of modernism has been anti-mimetic, opposed to the narrative coherence and pleasure in illusion that characterise those fictions plebiscited by the majority. A principled suspicion of fictions that are easy and pleasurable to consume, a powerful belief in the salutary nature of forms that deconstruct habitual modes of perception and belief, these have underpinned literary theory, literary history and critical reviews in the ‘serious’ press for many decades. Particularly since the *nouveau roman* era (1950s and ’60s), formal experimentalism has tended to be equated with progressive ideology, traditional narrative form with docile acceptance of the social status quo: in 2016 novelist and critic Philippe Vilain’s *La Littérature sans idéal* reiterated the familiar distinction between, on the one hand, a degraded ‘mercantile’ literature that tells readers the stories they want to hear and, on the other, an authentic *écriture* concerned essentially with language itself.

Vilain quoted approvingly Robbe-Grille’s dictum, ‘le véritable écrivain n’a rien à dire. Il a seulement une manière de le dire’ (‘the true writer has nothing to say. He has only a way of saying it’, 1963, 51; Vilain, 2016, 12). Meanwhile, the majority of readers have quietly maintained their allegiance to ‘immersive’ narrative forms that provide entry into imaginary worlds, and held on to the belief that it is not only ‘difficult’ literature that enlarges understanding of the self and others.
There are some good reasons for the peculiarly French emphasis on experimental literary form. The arts, and particularly literature, have been central to the construction of French national identity over a long period, surviving even the most radical of regime changes. The much-prized specificity of French culture includes a particular relationship to language; a generalised appreciation of eloquence, wit and linguistic invention; and a literary tradition that has had a disproportionate impact worldwide. Essential to the vibrancy of France’s literary history have been a restless questioning of forms that have settled into norms, a cycle of Oedipal revolts by new avant-gardes and a frequently renewed search to find linguistic and generic shapes for a changing reality. Under the Third, Fourth and Fifth Republics, state cultural policy has largely interpreted the democratisation of culture as the extension to all citizens of a demanding but rewarding ‘high’ culture, whilst the centralised nature of the French education system makes state policy a powerful factor in the legitimisation and canonisation of literary texts, as in collective understandings of literary value. The novel, a hybrid genre that attracted a wide cross-class readership from the mid-nineteenth century, was always a suspect literary form, though in its realist guise it gained a degree of legitimacy, and some of its greatest practitioners (Hugo, Zola) were canonised by the Third Republic. From the early days of the new century, though, in a manner that intensified after the Second World War, modernism displaced realism as the mode of writing that signified ‘high’ culture. Modernism, with its emphasis on linguistic creativity and the autonomy of the text, was an international movement that ‘took’ with particular intensity in France: deeply suspicious of the capacity of language to adequately represent the real, modernism asserted the need for an experimental, self-reflexive approach to art that in the case of literature meant a constant questioning of the relationship between word and referent. Modernism taught educated readers to prize the difficult, the experimental, the self-aware and, on the whole, the pessimistic, relegating immersive fiction, especially of the sort that offered closure and resolution, to what Barthes memorably termed the (merely) ‘readable’ (‘lisible’) as opposed to the ecstatic pleasures offered by the more demandingly ‘writable’ (‘scriptible’) texts of the avant-garde (2002, 121–22 and passim). Generations of twentieth-century intellectuals and students have thrilled to modernism’s heroic project of endless iconoclasm and invention, its contention that, as Rita Felski puts it, ‘the value of literature lies in its stubborn resistance to paraphrase, fixed truths, and taken-for-granted orthodoxies’ (2003, 148). Difficulty itself became ‘the
The novel that told a story in relatively transparent language and conjured up a recognisably ‘real’ world might be read for leisure purposes, but was certainly not part of the category of authentic literature.

Feminism too had good cause to question the validity of established modes of representation, and to adopt a resolutely iconoclastic literary stance. French feminists have led the rejection of the claims to transparency of a language deeply ingrained with masculine values, and have also opposed the hegemony of genres such as the realist novel that in France have largely excluded women. Much of the most vibrant writing by women in the twentieth century sought to rework words, syntax and literary form so that they might give voice to a feminine perspective on the world, enacting Cixous’s wonderful double entendre of the vol (in French both ‘theft’ and ‘flight’) of language: ‘Voler, c’est le geste de la femme, voler dans la langue, la faire voler. Du vol, nous avons toutes appris l’art aux maintes techniques, depuis des siècles que nous n’avons accès à l’avoir qu’en volant’ (2010, 58; ‘Flying/stealing is what women must do, flying/stealing in language and making language fly. We have all learned the many techniques of flying/stealing, since for so many centuries we have only been able to own anything through theft/flight’). Realism, mimetic narratives and the craft of thrilling storytelling have been as critically devalued in feminist literary theory and practice as elsewhere in France, and the gap between majority reading tastes and what is respected as ‘literature’ has become correspondingly wide.

To interrogate constantly the relationship between language and truth, to question the ideological implications of literary forms that have come to appear natural through familiarity, are surely laudable aims. But the triumph of modernism in French culture, with its attendant distrust of the sort of text that can be easily, pleasurably understood, can also be interpreted in less benevolent ways. Pierre Bourdieu famously analysed cultural taste as a means whereby a social élite asserts and maintains its own supremacy: the dominant social group will attribute absolute aesthetic value to works whose interpretation in fact depends on a particular kind of education, thereby defending and naturalising their own distinction against the inferior tastes of the masses. Thus

2 In The Difficulties of Modernism (2003) Leonard Diepeveen traces how in anglophone cultures too the victory of modernism established ‘easy’ pleasures as aesthetically inferior, so that ‘Difficulty […] became – and continues to be – our central cultural gatekeeper’ (224).
distinguished or ‘high’ taste disdains the accessible, the easy, whatever can be enjoyed by the public at large, because if a work of art can be appreciated by anyone, then it no longer confers value on the few who know how to ‘read’ it. Works that offer easy pleasures are ‘a sort of insult to refinement, a slap in the face to a “demanding” audience which will not stand for “facile” offerings’ (Bourdieu, 1984, 486). Art that pleases the majority, Bourdieu points out, ‘annihilates the distancing power of representation’ (489), whereas art coded as ‘high’ will (in the modernist fashion) draw attention to its own formal properties, demanding interpretative strategies that need to be learned through education, or through regular exposure to high cultural forms. In the gulf that separates ‘literature’ from what most people like to read, Bourdieu detects the anxiety of an élite to preserve their own superior social status.

Bourdieu is also alert to the gendered dimension of cultural hierarchies. He pinpoints the way in which common characterisations of ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture mirror those of masculinity and femininity, the ‘high’ being associated with the ‘masculine’ concepts of culture, intellect, emotional sobriety, whilst popular culture is frequently portrayed as instinctive, bodily, sentimental (2001, 138 n. 10). Rita Felski demonstrates how modernism established its credentials in the 1920s by characterising the discerningly modern reader capable of appreciating modernist texts as ‘critical, judicious, and masculine’, and the ordinary reader who failed to keep up with a changing world as ‘susceptible, emotional and feminine’ (2003, 33). The relegation of women’s writing to lowbrow status on the grounds that it deals with the domestic and the emotional is so familiar a critical move as to scarcely need analysis here, and the rejection of immersive storytelling as a legitimate literary goal certainly plays on the negatively gendered connotations of ‘being carried away by a story’. To get lost in a fictional world suggests a swooning passivity strongly associated with the feminine, whereas to get to grips with an unfamiliar form of textuality carries a sort of virile dignity.

In seeking to liberate literature (and culture more broadly) from the restrictive conventions of the old world, modernism gendered mass or mainstream culture feminine and claimed for itself the intellectual potency of the new. Emotional surrender to the text became a degraded readerly stance,¹ and the negative charge of ‘sentimentality’ came to

¹ Nicola Humble employs the nice distinction between ‘sitting forward and sitting back’ to capture the different kinds of reading perceived as ‘high’ and
be taken for granted, ‘condens[ing] the way gender still operates as a political unconscious within criticism to trigger shame, embarrassment and disgust’ (Clark, 1991, 11). Suzanne Clark pithily writes of the effects of modernism’s ascendancy on literary culture in the USA that ‘Becoming an intellectual in America is sort of like […] learning not to be a sissy’ (12), and the same could be said of France. The affective dimension of the reading experience must be carefully hedged around with claims of irony, self-reflexivity and cerebral engagement if it is to avoid ridicule. As we shall see in the course of this book, middlebrow women’s fiction does in fact have significant recourse to these key attributes of modernist (and postmodernist) sensibility, but it also tends to be characterised by an optimistic, everyday, domestic realism that invites a primarily affective response.

The low critical esteem accorded to those qualities that determine what Todorov’s non-professional reader might term a ‘good read’ (immersivity, emotion, page-turning plot, characters who provoke readerly identification) can thus also be interpreted, at least in part, as the consequences of social and gendered hierarchies of power, and the desire to sustain these. But although it undoubtedly carries a certain truth, this explanation sits awkwardly with the more affirmative view offered above, which sees in literary experimentation a laudable desire to seek out ways to articulate and explore an unconformable, constantly changing reality. The major problem with the consensual rejection of what we might broadly label ‘narrative realism’ lies perhaps elsewhere, in the assumption that the type of novel that depends on the reader’s suspension of disbelief in a compelling, coherent and absorbing fictional world – that is, the type of novel preferred by most ‘ordinary’ readers – is formally uninteresting and conceptually mundane. This view is regularly articulated in public discourse on culture in France, for example by the well-regarded contemporary writer Philippe Forrest in a 2011 article ‘La Fin du roman’, published in the serious weekly Le Nouvel Observateur. Forrest, a practitioner of what is possibly now the dominant French literary genre of fictionalised autobiography, dismissed the novel in the sense of fictional story as a genre ‘in a comatose state’, as an affair of ‘vieilles formules avec lesquelles, sous couvert d’imagination, l’auteur ‘middle’ brow. The serious reader sits up to the task, for ‘Highbrow reading practices attempt to leave the body behind’ (Humble, 2011, 48); the middlebrow reader lounges comfortably, understanding ‘the intimate connection between bodily and readerly pleasures’ (50).
The middlebrow in Britain, the USA and France

Dismissal of plot-based mimetic fiction in France extends well beyond the formulaic series that can be described unequivocally as popular: Harlequin romances, crime series (though we will return to the interesting status of crime fiction), the chart-topping mid-Atlantic fantasies of Marc Levy and Guillaume Musso, each of these interesting in their own right but unashamedly formulaic and aiming for maximum transparency of style. Critical suspicion of the kinds of stories that, as Janice Radway once put it, ‘absorb readers totally into their felt worlds’ (1997, 282) extends to novels clearly aimed at an educated, socially engaged readership, worthy of interest at both a thematic and a stylistic level, but nonetheless deploying the familiar techniques of narrative realism. Such novels, which for the first decade of the twenty-first century would include, for example, the bestsellers of Anna Gavalda, Muriel Barbery and Claudie Gallay, tend in France to be lumped together with the fully popular as part of ‘mass culture’ and, broadly speaking, deplored (see Chapter 7 below). But this simple binary – authentic literature on the one hand, merely popular on the other – fails to register the difference between novels such as these and genre series: a more useful category is that of the ‘middlebrow’.

The term ‘middlebrow’ is richly meaningful in English but has no adequate French equivalent, ‘culture moyenne’ being about the closest. It is certainly not a complimentary adjective: first recorded in the Oxford English Dictionary in 1925, it was coined with a sneer, to mean not just ‘somewhere between highbrow and lowbrow’, but rather a type of culture that had neither the dignity of the high nor the colourful if vulgar energy of the low. It suggests a failed aspiration to artistic value – a form of art that is second-rate, mediocre, middle-of-the-road, a literature
(since this is the subject here) that reaffirms commonsensical truths, that conforms and reassures rather than contesting or opening new horizons. Somewhere around 1940, Virginia Woolf wrote a letter to the *New Statesman* (never actually sent but later published) in which she asserted the mutual respect and need of highbrows for lowbrows, and vice versa, and called for them to ‘band together to exterminate a pest which is the bane of all thinking and living’ (1947, 118), namely the middlebrow. Comically hyperbolic in tone, but resonant with heartfelt dislike, Woolf’s letter characterises middlebrows as ‘betwixt and between’, as ‘bloodless and pernicious pests’. Woolf was a feminist and defender of women’s writing whose stance on the mainstream, mass-market novel of the day was complex and ambivalent. On the one hand, she found realist techniques outdated and ‘the wrong tools for (contemporary writers) to use’ (Woolf, 1966), on the other she partially admired the archetypally middlebrow novelist Hugh Walpole, and herself wrote some novels in realist mode (e.g. *Night and Day* [1919], *The Years* [1937]). Here, however, she colourfully articulates a modernist contempt for the aspiring bourgeoisie and by implication the types of narrative fiction they preferred, namely the transparently realist stories of English middle-class life that formed the backbone of inter-war publishing.4

It is this inter-war fiction that is most immediately evoked by the term ‘middlebrow’. Widely read if critically disparaged or ignored at the time of its publication, British middlebrow fiction of the 1920s and ’30s, in particular women’s fiction, has been substantially recovered and republished by feminist publishers, notably Virago and Persephone, and re-evaluated by feminist critics.5 The novels in question are mainly by female, middle-class writers, aimed at and largely consumed by similarly middle-class women readers, many of them in the inter-war years subscribers to lending libraries such as the ubiquitous Boots, and – since paid employment for wives of their class was frowned upon – with enough leisure time to allow for extensive reading. Novelists such as Elizabeth Bowen, E. M. Delafield, Winifred Holtby, Rosamond

4 See Nicola Wilson’s article on the ambivalent relationship between Woolf and Walpole (Wilson, 2012). Though mutually critical of each other’s very different approaches to representing reality, the two were friends: the publication of some of Walpole’s work by the Hogarth Press (owned and run by Woolf and her husband) exemplifies the complexity of what can seem a simple binary opposition between modernist and middlebrow.

Lehmann, Rebecca West, Dorothy Whipple (and many more) published stories set in the domestic and social world of their readers, narratives of everyday lives, romantic and family relationships, novels that displayed ‘little action and less histrionics’ but ‘illuminate[d] female attitudes to experience’ and ‘thr[ew] light on the texture of women’s lives’ (Beauman, 1983, 7). Though, as Nicola Beauman nicely puts it, they were ‘clearly deficient in strong male thrust’ (7), these were skilfully plotted novels that wove their tales of ordinary aspirations and disappointments, desires and compromises with unobtrusive humour, quiet precision and a compelling sense of place and social context. They did not, on the whole, provide the blatant optimism of a happy ending, but by giving narrative form to the complexity of everyday experience, they did make provisional sense of their characters’ lives and thus, by extension, of those of their readers. Feminist critics have astutely analysed the historically specific structures of feeling articulated in these novels. Alison Light, for example, pinpoints the commonsensical anti-romanticism that characterised a widely shared sense of national identity in an inter-war Britain stripped of colonial bluster by the horrors of the First World War, and shows how this translates in the novels into a downplaying of drama and romantic passion in favour of reticence and quiet survival, and the sacrifice of ‘the romance of gender difference […] to even-tempered common sense and competence’ (1993, 106), as for example in that supreme expression of inter-war Englishness, David Lean’s film Brief Encounter (1945). The emotional restraint of a shell-shocked era translates in formal terms into self-effacing narrative techniques and style.

Access to these stories also depended on the infrastructure of libraries and efficient mass publishing: middlebrow culture, like popular culture, is ‘both a material and an ideological form’ (Radway, 1997, 367). Joan Shelley Rubin (1992) and Janice Radway (1997) have historicised American middlebrow culture as emerging in the decades when modernism became the driving force behind high culture, namely the 1920s and ’30s. Both see the American Book of the Month Club (BOMC) as central to the development of the middlebrow, Radway devoting her book wholly to the phenomenon of the BOMC which, from the 1920s

6 The BOMC was soon imitated in Britain by the Book Society (founded by Hugh Walpole and Arnold Bennett), which appeared in 1929 and performed a similar role for British readers. There followed the Book Guild (1930), the Left Book Club (1936) and the Readers’ Union (1937). See Wilson (2012).
until well after the Second World War, provided a new professional, managerial class with the serious but pleasurable reading material they sought in order to further their own education and upward mobility, make better sense of a rapidly changing social world, and enjoy that ‘tactile, sensuous, profoundly emotional experience of being captured by a book’ (13). Radway’s project is driven in part by memory, the repressed but intense memory of her own middlebrow reading pleasures before she was trained, as a student then an academic, to despise the facile pleasures of ‘the rush of a good plot and [...] the inspiration offered by an unforgettable character’ (7) and learned instead to value literary form and an analytical approach to the text. Like the critics working on inter-war British fiction, Radway identifies the historically located specificity of certain forms of reading pleasure: books attract a large readership at a given moment because they articulate widely shared emotions, aspirations, anxieties, and the institution of the Book Club addressed a particular social category created by changes in the American economy, appealing to their desire for self-improvement, enhanced understanding of their age and entertainment. But she also defines middlebrow fiction in a less period-specific way by associating it with the pleasures of immersion. If Radway’s Book Club editors and members shunned most modernist works, it was not only because these spoke less directly to their own lived experience, but also because the cerebral engagement they demanded meant a withholding of that emotional release, that ‘sense of boundaries dissolved’ (114) provided by a novel that fully absorbs the reader emotionally and cognitively into its ‘felt world’.

In France there has been no such revival or revisionary reading of past middelbows. No Persephone or Virago has sought what women best liked to read in the ’20s, ’30s or ’40s and returned it to print; no feminist critics (to my knowledge) have studied what past generations of ‘ordinary’ women liked to read and thus engaged in an ‘act of non-judgmental respect for our parents and grandparents’ taste, choice of entertainment and self-education’ (MacDonald, 2011, 11). Literary history continues to pay scant attention to market success as a criterion for inclusion, and many authors (particularly female ones) read by vast numbers of their contemporaries have disappeared so comprehensively from print that it is difficult to study them. If there has been a middlebrow tradition in France, it has been neither preserved nor cherished, and where ‘literary’ texts have made an unexpected transition to the middlebrow market, as happened for example with Simone de Beauvoir’s novella La Femme
Reclaiming the Middlebrow

15

rompue, published in Elle magazine in 1967 to the general enthusiasm of readers, or Marguerite Duras’s Goncourt-winning L’Amant, which became a massive bestseller in 1984, this tends to be a matter of mild embarrassment. Chris Bongie points out how even postcolonial French studies, the academic field closest to the Littérature-Monde manifesto, displays a distinctly ‘elitist bias’ in line with its ‘modernist genealogy’ (2008, 10), maintaining a sharp division between its own ‘valuable objects of study’ and ‘the coarse world of mass consumption’ (281).

However, a good starting point for an exploration of what might constitute French middlebrow will be a closer look at those qualities of narrative technique and structure that characterise mainstream bestselling fiction across the decades, and that so dismay contemporary incarnations of the modernist spirit, neatly represented by Philippe Forrest. What are these ‘vieilles formules’ with their ‘intrigues stéréotypées’, ‘papier mâché’ characters and ‘trompe-l’oeil’ settings? Why do readers still cling on to them? A better definition of the middlebrow novel will provide a basis for seeking out what constituted middlebrow at particular moments of French cultural history, including the present. Thus whilst the narratological, textual approach more associated with the French critical tradition will help to produce a broad generic definition of what constitutes ‘middlebrow’, the belief that texts are always historically and ideologically situated – an approach closer to the Anglo-American ‘cultural studies’ tradition – will mean that rather than a single ‘middlebrow’, it will be a matter of ‘middlebrows’ that speak of and to particular configurations of culture and sensibility.

For a poetics of the middlebrow

The type of fiction that appeals to a wide non-specialist readership – people who read for pleasure, in bed at night, on the beach, whilst travelling on trains and planes, in preparation for an informal book group meeting – tends strongly towards the mimetic, the immersive, the plot-driven. Bestselling novels, on the whole, create fictional words that can be believed in, into which the reader may disappear in imagination, dreading (in the case of the most effectively immersive examples) that final full stop that will mean the end of the fictional voyage. When I open Zola’s Germinal (1885), and follow Etienne Lantier down that lonely nocturnal road towards the welcomingly human glow of a brazier, burning in the dark before the monstrous shadow of the pit towers, or
when on page one of Dorothy Whipple’s *They Were Sisters* (1943) I find Lucy seated in a sunny dining room opposite her husband, beginning Sunday breakfast as she opens a letter that announces a visit from her sisters, my own lived time and location are suspended and I set off into that world imagined for me by the author. Unless I am reading as an academic or critic, trying to understand and explain exactly how such effects are achieved, I am unlikely to pause for long at the splendid precision of an adjective, or the bold hyperbole of Zola’s imagery (though I might register this too, without disturbing my suspension of disbelief too much). For the illusion to work, the linguistic surface must retain a degree of transparency, and the physical and moral phenomena evoked – however exotic – must bear enough resemblance to what I already know to produce the sense of a multidimensional reality extending off-stage, beyond what is actually described. I know that the people and places represented here are fictional, but for the purposes of reading I am willing to grant them a whole pre-narrative biography and a geographical hinterland. I may like, sympathise with, detest, disapprove of these imaginary characters just as I might in the case of real people. For modernists, from Paul Valéry early in the twentieth century, with his famous interdiction on beginning a novel with a simple fictional event (Breton, 1979, 17), to Robbe-Grillet and the other *nouveaux romanciers* in the 1950s and ‘60s, to twenty-first-century authors like Forrest or (to take another contemporary example), the prize-winning novelist Éric Chevillard, published by the revered Éditions de Minuit, the immersive text with its failure to remind the reader of the disjuncture between word and referent invites a lazy and complacent suspension of the critical faculties. Chevillard (2001) declared that ‘le “bon vieux roman” défend et illustre l’ordre des choses qui est une tyrannie stupide et sanguinaire’ (‘the good old novel defends and illustrates a stupid, bloody established order’). For Robbe-Grillet, in the realist novel ‘tout vis[e] à imposer l’image d’un univers stable, cohérent, continu, univoque, entièrement déchiffrable’ (1963, 31; ‘the whole aim is to impose the image of a stable, coherent, continuous, univocal world, that can be fully interpreted’); ‘l’intelligibilité du monde’, he objected, ‘n’est même pas mise en question’ (‘the intelligibility of the world is not even questioned’). As Christopher

7 Paul Valéry’s declaration that no self-respecting twentieth-century novelist could write a ‘Balzacian’ sentence such as, ‘La marquise sortit à cinq heures’, has gone down in literary history, though its source can be traced only to André Breton’s reporting of this view in the 1924 Surrealist Manifesto.
Prendergast put it, modern French critical thought largely agrees that ‘the “order” of mimesis is repressive and claustrating [...] part of the fabric of mystification and bad faith from which the dominant forms of our culture are woven’ (1986, 6).

Yet in both French and English critical writing, it is possible to find compelling arguments for the beneficial effects of vicarious living through fiction, most of these pitching themselves against what they take to be an opposing consensus. Narrative theorist Jean-Marie Schaeffer argues in Pourquoi la fiction? (1999) for mimetic fictions to be seen not as anaesthetising distractions from the hard matter of the real, but as an important mode of enriching cognitive and moral knowledge. It is not, he maintains, solely through conscious, reflective learning that we acquire understanding, but also through imitation, make-believe, acting out in imagination alternative forms of experience. Fiction has a ‘fonction modélisante’ (‘a modelling function’): ‘l’exemplification fictionnelle de situations et de séquences comportementales [...] met à notre disposition des schémas de situations, des scénarios d’action, des constellations émotives et éthiques [...] susceptibles d’être intériorisés par immersion’ (Schaeffer, 1999, 47) (‘the fictional exemplification of behavioural situations and behavioural sequences [...] puts at our disposition schemas of situations, scenarios of action, emotive and ethical constellations, etc. that are susceptible to be interiorized by immersion’, Schaeffer, 2010, 27). Rather than immersing its readers in a pre-packaged set of ideological assumptions, fiction extends their cognitive and emotional range beyond that of direct, lived experience, enabling an experimental assent to alternative ways of seeing and reacting to the world by providing a safe space in which these can have no practical consequences:

elle nous permet de réorganiser les affects fantasmatiques sur un terrain ludique, de les mettre en scène, ce qui nous donne la possibilité de les expérimenter sans être submergés par eux. (Schaeffer, 1999, 324)

(it allows us to reorganize the fantasmatic affections on a ludic terrain, to produce them, which gives us the possibility of experiencing them without being submerged by them [Schaeffer, 2010, 298])

Schaeffer’s closely argued defence of mimesis, and of fiction’s power ‘à enrichir, à remodeler, à réadapter tout au long de notre existence le socle cognitif et affectif originaire grâce auquel nous avons accédé à l’identité personnelle et à notre être-au-monde’ (1999, 327) (‘to enrich, to remodel, to readapt all along our existence the original cognitive and
affective base thanks to which we have acceded to person identity and to our being-in-the-world’, Schaeffer, 2010, 300) seems applicable to any ‘level’ of narrative fiction that works through the provision of simulated experience. It also suggests one possible route for defining the specificity of the middlebrow through the nature of the ‘constellations émotives et éthiques’ that different types of fiction provide.

American theorist Lisa Zunshine adopts a ‘cognitive-evolutionary’ approach to the salutary effects of immersive fictions. Her *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (2000) shows how reading fiction develops the very necessary human capacity to ‘mind read’, that is to interpret other peoples’ thoughts and feelings on the basis of behavioural evidence. Fiction ‘builds on and experiments with our cognitive propensities’ (Zunshine, 2000, 36) by offering a sustained and varied exercise in interpretation, asking us to ‘read’ the inner worlds of characters from clues provided by expression, gesture, action, possibly deceptive speech, and in many instances to operate this interpretative process to the third or fourth degree (‘I see that she thinks that he believes that they are feeling …’ and so on). Zunshine maintains convincingly that these complex mental operations form a significant part of the pleasure of reading fiction, that the ‘mental work-out’ they provide is a thoroughly enjoyable dimension of immersion in the imaginary world. And the concept of fiction as a pleasurable means to exercise the faculties of ‘mind reading’, like Schaeffer’s image of fiction as the provider of new ‘emotive constellations’, invites the reflection that the most widely read and appreciated narratives may achieve their popularity precisely because they offer a satisfyingly arduous ‘workout’ that does not, however, exhaust or frustrate the reader to an extent that destroys the fictional illusion. Zunshine’s emphasis on fiction as the deployment and refinement of empathy may also throw some light on the feminisation of reading over the past century: close attention to the feelings and thinking of others tends to be a skill more developed in dominated than in dominant groups, and under patriarchy women have had good reason to develop that cluster of attitudes known as ‘soft’ or ‘feminine’ skills.

Schaeffer and Zunshine both present the reader of fiction as an active figure, not – as the modernist argument tends to – as the deluded victim of fictional deceptions. For Schaeffer, the reader chooses to participate in a ‘feintise ludique partagée’ (1999, 148), a voluntarily shared, playful act of make-believe, a contract between author and reader rather than an imposture. Marie-Louise Ryan’s splendid *Narrative as Virtual Reality*
(2001) also emphasises the reader’s agency and celebrates immersion as, at its best, ‘an adventurous and invigorating experience’ (11). Here too, simulated or virtual experience is seen as a mode of learning, of expanding cognitive and emotional range, and Ryan affirms too the accentuated agency of the reader as opposed to, for example, the viewer of visual fictions: language cannot provide directly the sensory environment of the imagined world, but only ‘coax the imagination into simulating sensory perception’ (122), a process that requires considerable writerly skill and readerly engagement. So powerful can this simulation be that it is quite possible to react in a bodily manner (tears, laughter, sexual arousal, shivers of fear) physically indistinguishable from reactions to ‘real’ sensory triggers, but at the same time the knowledge of fictionality ‘holds the dosage within the limits of pleasure’ (157). Ryan explores the narrative strategies that the nineteenth-century novel developed to produce these ‘reality effects’ and procure the ‘imaginative transportation of the readers’ virtual body onto the scene of events’ (133), from omniscient narration to free indirect style, to varied focalisation and use of a fictionalised first person, demonstrating that the ‘disappearing act of the transparent medium’ (175) is not a matter of facility but of extreme skill. Ryan characterises the reader’s experience as composed of both immersion and interactivity, the negotiation between these being complex, since too much awareness of the medium undercuts the autonomy of the fictional world and thus reduces pleasure, whilst at the same time appreciation of the ‘imaginative presence of a fictional world and […] the virtuosity of the stylistic performance that produces it’ (351) enhances the enjoyment of reading. She concludes that ‘a subtle form of awareness of the medium […] does not seem radically incompatible with immersion’ (352), coining the neat image of reading as an ‘amphibian’ activity in which pleasurable immersion depends on the reader also ‘taking oxygen from reality’ (97).

Ryan’s discussion of the variable ways in which ‘entrancement’ and awareness of the medium can interact suggests a spectrum of types of reading practice, from cerebral, non-immersive ‘concentration’ at one extreme to ‘addiction’ at the other in which, like Don Quixote, the reader confuses the fictional and the real. Most reading of fiction, though, belongs between these two points, mixing ‘imaginative involvement’ (absorbed in the virtual world yet aware of the writing itself) with ‘entrancement’ (where awareness of language disappears). The modernist text, then, with its self-reflexive emphasis on form, would sit towards the ‘concentration’ end of the spectrum, whilst fully ‘popular’ fictions lean
towards entrancement. Marina van Zuylen writes that ‘the difficult text denies itself the comforts of mimesis’ (1998, 46). The middlebrow text, I suggest – Woolf’s ‘betwixt and between’ – sits between the two middle stages, oscillating between imaginative involvement and entrancement.

For Ryan, a sense of immersion in a fiction depends not only on compelling narrative, or plot, but also on the depiction of place: indeed for some readers, she claims, ‘mental geographies’ may ‘steal the show from the narrative action’ (121). The verbal representation of place, as opposed to that of visual media, cannot ‘create an illusion of presence to the senses’ but only ‘evokes the thought of temporally or spatially distant objects’ (122); language can pull us into the imaginary world, but spatial immersion through the written word retains a particular emotional quality, for language ‘is the medium of absence’ (122). A plausible textual world demands a coherent and – in a variety of ways – an emotionally compelling geography and, as Lynne Pearce suggests in *Feminism and the Politics of Reading*, it is also often place that provides the open canvas for the staging of the reader’s own fantasies and desires. The function of depicted place, Pearce suggests, may be compared to that of music in films (1997, 98) – at once contributing to plot and theme, and providing a setting to trigger the reader’s own biographically located dreams or fears. And a strong sense of place is a characteristic of mainstream middlebrow writing that distinguishes it from, for example, the fictional worlds of Harlequin, Levy or Musso, all of these set in a generic, minimally described modernity, predominantly North American with forays into lightly differentiated cities of Europe, and into wilder locations that function as shorthand signifiers for the return of elemental emotions. By contrast, if I briefly recall my readings of the inter-war British middlebrow novels mentioned above, or of their contemporary equivalents, or of many of the French novels to be discussed here as ‘middlebrow’ – it is often a vividly specific image of a setting that first appears: the wild flat plains and stuffy council chambers of south Yorkshire in Winifred Holtby’s *South Riding*, the claustrophobic comfort of a bourgeois household in Belle Époque provincial France followed by the harsh desolation of the trenches in Sebastian Faulk’s *Birdsong*, the storm- and wave-battered coast that feels like the edge of the human world in Claudie Gallay’s *Les Déferlantes*.

In the section of *The Practice of Everyday Life* entitled ‘Practices of space’, Michel de Certeau argues for the primacy of the relationship to space in the subject’s emotional ‘take’ on the world: individuation, the development in infancy of a sense of self as separate from the mother’s
Reclaiming the Middlebrow

body, is lived as an ‘arrachement’ (1990, 163; translated as ‘differentiation’ but closer to a ‘wrench’) ‘that is simultaneously perilous and satisfied’ (1984, 109), anxious and pleasurable; our first perception of the space beyond ourselves is that of ‘localisation and exteriority’ but ‘against the background of an absence’. At its most compelling, a reader’s entry into an imaginary fictional world reactivates this primary ambivalence, combining as it does a sense of adventurous anticipation with the suspense of launching into the unknown, into a narrative that might take us anywhere. For stories, de Certeau continues, are above all ‘parcours d’espace’ (1990, 171) or ‘spatial trajectories’ (1984, 115), their narrative structures the equivalent of ‘spatial syntax’. De Certeau distinguishes ‘lieu’ (place) from ‘espace’ (space): ‘place’ he characterises as a location viewed from an external vantage point, fixed, named, mapped, grasped as a whole, providing us with a functional representation of how the various parts fit together. ‘Space’, on the other hand, is what we experience as we walk, drive or otherwise move around: it is textured with the unforeseen and the contingent; changes according to speed, weather, time of day, may seem to contradict the totalised perspective of ‘place’ (1984, 117–18). Literary fiction moves between the two, usually within a single text, providing the reader with both panorama and lived trajectory. Place and space are always, of course, social: mapping the world is a political act; the experience of moving through space is shaped and coloured as much by social as by geographic relations. The emotional and social textures of place are the territory of fiction.

In Moving Through Modernity, Andrew Thacker demonstrates the centrality of place and space to modernist literature. Modernism as a literary movement addresses the new sensory and social relations produced by modernity, by the speed of motor cars, the spread and pull of cities, the impact of new forms of work and political organisation. For Thacker it is the modernist text that, through formal experimentation, seeks ways to render and explore the new, and to oppose to dominant orderings of ‘place’ the lived experience of ‘space’. Where ‘modernist narratives differ broadly from those of realism’ is in their privileging of de Certeau’s ‘space’ (or subjective spatial experience) over ‘place’, or the mapped, objective reality of the material world (Thacker, 2003, 32). This observation is entirely defensible, as Thacker demonstrates through a comparison of descriptive passages by Thomas Hardy (realist) and James Joyce (modernist), but I shall want to argue here for the equal significance of spatial representations in mainstream, middlebrow fictions, despite their use of realist techniques. In the high modernist
period, broadly 1890–1930, many mainstream, middlebrow novels owed their success (in part) to representations of city and country that allowed their readers to navigate, in imagination, a changing material and social world. And the negotiation of the relationship between place and spatial experience, in a constantly shifting sensory and social world, remains a feature of the successful middlebrow novel. Immersion in an imaginary geography both plays on a fundamentally ambivalent relationship to the external world, by mobilising adventurous curiosity alongside fearful suspense, and provides a means to address the socially charged and unstable geography of the contemporary era.

The use of place and space must figure in any analysis of immersive fiction, and of the specificity of middlebrow forms. Still more central, though, to immersion and to modernist contempt for its ‘vieilles formules’ is plot, or the structuring of narrative to produce in the reader a desire to know: what happens next? It is plot, the sequencing of fictional events to produce the reader’s desire to know, that characterises the mainstream, immersive text but features only minimally in modernist genres such as the nouveau roman or contemporary auto-fiction. Plot, as Peter Brooks observed, is a fundamental human activity closely entwined with desire and with the knowledge of mortality, ‘the principal ordering force of those meanings that we try to wrest from human temporality’ (1984, xi). Yet it is also ‘disdained as the element of narrative that least sets off and defines high art’, and is seen rather as ‘that which especially characterizes popular mass-consumption literature: plot is why we read Jaws, but not Henry James’ (4). Plot is certainly seen as why we read a roman policier, but not Proust.

A decade and a half before Brooks, in The Sense of an Ending (1967) Frank Kermode had emphasised the centrality of narrative to making sense of life, both in literature and in the everyday shaping of experience in memory and in conversation. We are all born, Kermode writes, ‘in medias res and die there’, and in order to ‘make sense of [our] span [we] need fictive concords with origins and ends, such as give meaning to lives and to poems’ (1967, 7). Kermode employs the distinction between chronos, or time simply passing (‘one damn thing after another’), and kairos, time ordered into significance, ‘charged

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with a meaning derived from its relationship to the end’ (47), to discuss the relationship between fiction’s need to invest time with shape and meaning, and the contradictory imperative on any truthful literature to acknowledge the sheer, contingent chronicity of events. Fiction works by translating what Kermode nicely figures as the ‘tick-tick-tick’ of simple chronicity into the ‘tick-tock’ of a meaningful plot. Ian McEwan (whose novels are also characterised by tightly woven, absorbing plots) glosses this image well: ‘By listening for the next tick as a tock, as the end of something that preceded it rather than the next in a meaningless and interminable succession, we invest time with shape and significance’ (1999). And yet too coherent a patterning of time is unsatisfactory, for it fails to take account of the random awkwardness that characterises life as (most of us) know it: ‘the contingency must be there, or our as if will be mere fantasy and unrelated to the basic human task of imaginative self-invention’ (Kermode, 1967, 146). Middlebrow fictions beloved of the huge middle category of ‘ordinary’ readers seem to me to be engaged, at best, in just this negotiation between the satisfactions of coherence and pleasing design, and the acknowledgement of a ‘chaotic, viscously contingent reality’ (145), between redemption and realism. Kermode’s powerful essay presents plot as a strategy for the salvaging of meaning from mere contingency, but one that can nonetheless accommodate ‘the lingua franca of reality’ (107). And in arguing this, he takes issue with his contemporaries the nouveaux romanciers – of whose literary daring he is nonetheless appreciative – for their ‘deliberately limited, solipsistic realism’ (131).

Kermode’s eloquent meditation on narrative does recognise the sense in modernist objections to plot: it is precisely the too-neat patterning of the real into pre-fabricated, all-ends-tied stories that successive generations of modernists have condemned as more anaesthetic than truthful. But these critiques of pleasurably plotted narratives have often been caricatural and insensitive to the complex ways in which plotting works on and for the reader. Raphaël Baroni, building on the work of theorists such as Schaeffer, Ricoeur, Brooks and Ryan, argues for the ‘gratuitous but nonetheless salutary pleasure’ (2007, 34) of the well-crafted plot, laying the emphasis on plot seen less from the retrospective angle of the critic or reviewer, for whom the teleological dynamic is paramount, than from that of the reader who does not know how each event will unfold or belong within the total pattern. Baroni’s central line of argument is this: narrative that engages its readers cognitively and emotionally, through suspense, curiosity and surprise, does not simply distract them.
from reality, but enables them to play out and thus get to grips with their own fears and desires, to explore unrealised potentialities, to disturb and question habit and routine. It is the living out in the mode of simulation of uncertainty, misapprehension, the contradictions between desire (I hope this will not happen) and the resistance of a world not subject to our will (but oh no! it is happening anyway), that makes fictional make-believe more powerful than mere rational understanding in modifying and expanding our mindset and emotional scope. A gripping plot is thus good for us, providing a safe space for the exploration of experiences that in ‘real life’ might be disastrous or unbearable: ‘Dans l’espace du récit, les leçons que nous tirons habituellement des épreuves que nous réserve l’existence peuvent être enseignées sans danger: le vécu passionnel se convertit en histoire passionnante’ (Baroni, 2007, 35; ‘Within the space of the story, the lessons we usually take from experience can be taught without danger: the emotional intensity of lived experience is transformed into thrilling story’). From the point of view of a critic seeking the teleological pattern of a whole novel, the narrative may appear to be reassuringly coherent and thus to offer a worldview that is conservatively secure. But the reader lives through the uncertainty of the plot’s unfolding, and the intense emotions that accompany this, in which it is doubt, apprehension, the shock of the unexpected or the relief of a happy outcome that predominate. Rather than a comforting sense of an ordered world, immersive narrative fictions propose ‘la mise en scène, par le biais de la mise en intrigue, de la sous-détermination du devenir et du monde’ (158; ‘the staging, through plot, of the unforeseeable nature of experience’). Rather than only the ‘colmatage des fissures qui lézardent nos certitudes rassurantes’ (409; ‘sealing-up of the cracks that undermine our reassuring certainties’), plot-based novels provide a simulation – experienced at once as safely ‘pretend’ and as emotionally intense – of radical uncertainty, and of necessary adaptation to what Kermode termed the ‘chaos’ of ‘contingent reality’:

Si notre conception de la réalité est une construction visant à rendre le monde habitable, il importe qu’elle soit en mesure d’évoluer quand elle révèle ses limites, de s’adapter aux heurts incessants que lui oppose un univers d’expériences concrètes irréductibles à nos schémas interprétatifs et comportementaux. (Baroni, 2007, 410)

(If our conception of reality is a construction whose aim is to make the world habitable, then it must be able to evolve when its limits are revealed, and to adapt to the endless collisions with a universe of concrete experience irreducible to our interpretative and behavioural blueprints)
Baroni also accounts for the curious but very real phenomenon whereby a story’s suspense, apparently dependent on the reader/listener’s ignorance of what happens next, can be re-experienced on a second or even on multiple readings. The pleasures of conjecture, foreboding and deferred revelation seem able to survive prior knowledge of what comes next, suggesting that suspense does not depend totally on ignorance of what follows, but can be triggered too by anticipation of a foreseen event, and by the repeated working through of the tension between desire for a particular outcome and its satisfaction or denial. And beyond this, there is another form of pleasure in repeated readings that co-exists with narrative’s appeal to adventure and expansion of mental scope. To experience the same story again provides a reaffirmation that narrative form can shape and preserve experience against the passing of time – what Baroni calls the pleasure of the ‘rappel’ or the ‘retour du Même’ (2007, 292; ‘return of the Same’). Time as we live it goes relentlessly forward. Through narratives we can repeat both the story and the emotional experience that it offers – albeit never without some slight variation since readers themselves bring to successive readings a configuration of experience and understanding modified, however minimally, by experience: ‘ce retour s’oppose à l’irréversibilité de l’histoire collective aussi bien qu’individuelle’ (Baroni, 2007, 292; ‘this return opposes the irreversible nature of both collective and individual history’). The pleasure of coherent plots then may include, but are not reduced to, a sort of existential reassurance, but it is hard to see why this should be seen as a reprehensible feature of a narrative work.

Middlebrow novels, in the sense in which I am seeking to define the term, may offer thrilling, edge-of-the-seat plots full of violence and shock, or work through the quiet developments and reversals of relationships, or map individual stories onto the great dramas of collective history. They may tell their stories in linear fashion, begin at the end and recount the main plot in flashback, or move freely between different points on the narrative trajectory. But despite their diversity, the novels that please the majority of Todorov’s ‘non-professional readers’ largely deploy some form of the concordance and sequencing of narrative events that produce Baroni’s ‘narrative tension’. Like Kermode, Baroni refutes the idea that plot only aims at coherence and the comforting harmonisation of all narrative elements: ‘l’histoire n’est jamais parfaitement achevée’ (‘the story is never completely finished’) as all the unrealised possibilities evoked by an engaged, suspenseful reading of a story make abundantly clear. Baroni cites that other great theorist of narrative Paul Ricoeur
who, in *Temps et récit*, ‘n’oublie jamais de préciser que la synthèse de l’hétérogène réalisée par la mise en intrigue ne produit pas une pure concordance, mais une concordance “discordante”’ (Baroni, 2007, 313; Ricoeur, 1983, 139; ‘always makes it clear that the synthesis of disparate elements produced by the plot does not lead to pure concordance, but to a “discordant concordance”’). Plot, so disparaged in the current critical climate, is central to middlebrow reading.

The transitional space of fiction

The analysis of narrative, and particularly of why we spend so much of our time producing and consuming stories, often draws on psychoanalysis to explain both the desire for story and its therapeutic effects. Peter Brooks underlines the centrality of desire in narrative, both in the sense that protagonists’ desires – to stay alive, to satisfy appetites, to find love, to make sense of existence – drive the plots of the most compelling novels, and in the sense that working through a narrative mobilises the reader’s desire to find meaning and, vicariously, satisfaction. Brooks points out how the process of Freudian psychoanalysis resembles that of constructing a narrative, since it involves ‘the working-out of a coherent and interpretative relation between “events” (real or imagined) and their significant ordering’ (Brooks, 1984, 321). The analyst’s role resembles that of the storyteller or novelist, in that s/he helps the analysand to turn the inchoate matter of experience into a workable narrative pattern, or in the terminology of the Russian formalists, to turn the raw material of ‘fabula’ (‘story’) into the coherent structure of ‘syuzhet’ (‘narrative’). Part of the pleasure of reading a narrative that is at once emotionally compelling and well-crafted is that it provides a dynamic shape onto which the reader may map their own, complex mix of desires, perceptions and memories, thus achieving a sense of both enhanced understanding and emotional release. The dialogic relationship that Freud proposes between analyst and analysand resembles that between writer and reader in the most positive accounts of how narrative fiction works: the writer provides satisfying narrative form for at least some part of the powerful, often contradictory mesh of desire, knowledge and memory that makes up a subject’s inner life, but the writer’s construction can only be brought to life through the reader’s active deployment of imagination, interpretation and desire.
Freudian theory illuminates what is at stake in reading fiction, how the novels that affect us most engage our deepest desires and fears, and how the relationship between writer and reader may in some ways be compared to that between psychoanalyst and patient. But still more relevant for an understanding of how immersive reading works, and how it might be beneficial, is the work of another, later psychoanalyst: the British paediatrician Donald Winnicott, whose concept of the ‘transitional space’ – ‘the intermediate area of experience to which inner reality and external life both contribute’ (Winnicott, 1971, 3) – is eminently applicable to what we might term the ‘space’ of fiction. Winnicott represents infantile development as hinging on the baby’s successful coming to terms with the existence of an objectively real external world, one that is irreducible to her/his own psychic reality. At first the baby is pictured as enjoying a sense of omnipotence, as perceiving no distinction between their own inner world and what is objectively real. If s/he is to function in the social world, the existence of an external reality must be recognised and accommodated, and the sense of omnipotence relinquished. However, Winnicott considers it crucial for psychic health that this be accomplished without destroying the child’s belief in their own subjective agency: that sense of ‘creating’ the world must also be preserved. Play is essential to making this transition: through play, the external world can be at once confronted in its otherness, and brought into the child’s own inner reality. Objects are both out there, having a reality recognised by others, and can be appropriated for the child’s own subjective universe: as Winnicott puts it, ‘the baby creates the object, but the object was there waiting to be created’ (1974, 104). Those special talismanic objects, ‘transitional’ in Winnicott’s terminology, pieces of old blanket or stuffed toys, play a vital role in this process of negotiation: they are found, not made by the child; they belong to the shared material world, but they become vital signifiers in her or his unique inner drama; they are real and made up at the same time. Play is crucial to the development of a sense of agency, or of creative participation in external reality; a child who is denied play, or who is not played with, may grow into a functioning adult, but they will merely comply with the demands of the external world, rather than engage with it creatively. In Winnicott’s theory, a merely compliant stance on life leads to depressive disorders. What constitutes mental and emotional health is rather what he terms ‘creative living’, in which the irreducible nature of external reality is accepted, but the subject also retains a sense of mentally creating that reality for themselves.
Winnicott coins the word ‘apperception’ in preference to ‘perception’: where the latter suggests an inner image wholly determined by the external phenomenon, the former means ‘seeing everything afresh all the time’ (Winnicott, 1986, 41), creating the world for oneself as babies do provided they receive ‘good-enough’ care.

Winnicott himself draws a close connection between the transitional space of play, and the place of cultural experience in adult life: ‘For me, playing leads on naturally to cultural experience and indeed forms its foundation’ (1974, 124). Both play and engagement with adult forms of culture take place in the ‘transitional’ or ‘potential’ space where the subject’s own imagination interacts with objectively existing elements of ‘shared reality’. Effective playing, or cultural experience, means an interplay between separateness and union – the separateness of the individual with their own unique inner world, and the acknowledgement of belonging to a collective reality which provides objects, artefacts, myths, stories available to all. Cultural experience, Winnicott writes, is ‘located in the potential space between the individual and the environment’ (1974, 118); culture always plays on the tension between individual originality and inherited tradition, the latter defined as ‘something that is in the common pool of humanity, into which individuals and groups of people may contribute, and from which we may all draw if we have somewhere to put what we find’ (1974, 116; emphasis original). This seems to have particular relevance for the kind of fiction reading I am trying to define. The pleasure of entering a compelling fictional world depends on its having been created by someone else, on its transcendence of my own horizons of make-believe, but it can only work if I bring it to life through my powers of interpretation and imagination. I do not merely comply with a readymade fictional world, but activate its potential through my own imagination. Reading fiction connects acknowledgement of a reality beyond my own individual experience with affirmation of my own creative agency.

Winnicott distinguishes between ‘fantasying’, which means the type of imagining that maintains a sense of omnipotence and finds external reality unsatisfactory by comparison with the fantasy, and playing or ‘creative living’, which involve imaginative exploration of the external world. This recalls Kermode’s distinction between works of fiction that ignore the awkward randomness of the contingent and thus become ‘mere fantasy’ on the one hand, and on the other, ‘good’ fictions devoted to ‘the basic human task of imaginative self-invention’ (1967, 146). It also evokes Ryan’s spectrum of different modes of engagement with the
Reclaiming the Middlebrow

fictional text, from detached ‘concentration’ to Quixotic ‘addiction’, passing through the often coexisting degrees of immersion which she terms ‘imaginative involvement’ and, closer to the ‘addiction’ end of the spectrum, ‘entrancement’. For fiction to become ‘transitional’ in Winnicott’s sense, it must neither keep shaking the reader out of their entrancement by demanding compliance with the rules of reality, and a cerebral ‘concentration’ on recognising the fictional illusion, nor plunge them so deeply into fantasy that the obstinate reality of the world vanishes. Middlebrow texts, situated ‘betwixt and between’, have the potential to offer a rich potential space, ‘at the interplay between there being nothing but me and there being objects and phenomena outside omnipotent control’ (Winnicott, 1974, 118).

Conclusion

Middlebrow novels are characterised by mimesis, immersivity (albeit of the ‘amphibian’ kind) and plot. Against the current of critical opinion, particularly French, some theorists of narrative have seen in these characteristic strategies of narrative realism not a cosy reshaping of the world into implausible coherence, nor a reactionary rehashing of timeworn literary strategies, nor yet a form of facile escapism – but rather a salutary and creative confabulation between author, text and reader. To inhabit a fictional world by investing it with one’s own imagination represents what Winnicott calls apperception or creative living; simulated or virtual experience can expand cognitive and emotional horizons. Nancy Huston, signatory of the Littérature-Monde manifesto and herself a widely read author of compellingly plotted, mimetic novels in both French and English, argues explicitly for what seems to me to be implicit in much of the pro-mimetic theory discussed above: that immersive fiction is not only pleasurable and creative, but also positively ethical. Through empathetic identification with fictional characters, we learn to see the world from the perspective of the other: the novel’s ‘manière d’encourager l’identification à des êtres qui ne nous ressemblent pas lui permet de jouer un rôle éthique’ (Huston, 2008, 182–83; ‘way of encouraging identification with others who are not like ourselves allows it to play an ethical role’).

This ethical function can be claimed for most immersive fiction, from the earliest children’s stories which already invite the investment of the child’s imagination in a world and in perspectives different from
Middlebrow Matters

their own, to even the most formulaic of adult novels. Middlebrow fiction, though, the category most emphatically disdained by modernist orthodoxy (at least in France), can lay claim through its combination of ‘narrative hypnosis’ (Radway, 1997, 13) and serious themes to a particular deployment of empathy with an ethical charge. Middlebrow is of course far from being either watertight or eternal as a category. The frontiers between middlebrow and ‘high’ literature, or between middlebrow and ‘popular’, are at once permeable and subjective: they shift according to the reader/critic’s evaluation of the text’s internal properties, but they also shift at different historical moments, and with different modes of production and distribution, so that what at one time may be viewed as fully ‘literary’ or merely popular may at another be seen as middlebrow. Nonetheless, it is possible to identify the key characteristics of middlebrow fiction: the creation of a satisfyingly entrancing imaginary world, the geography of which is both emotionally compelling and addresses the spatial syntax of the readers’ own experience; effective plotting that provides a coherent patterning of experience whilst acknowledging the messiness of the contingent; compelling characters who invite at least partial empathy; some degree of thematic substance, often concerned with addressing implicitly or explicitly the changing sociocultural realities of readers’ lives. Middlebrow reading favours texts that offer ‘the rush of a good plot’ (Radway, 1997, 7), vibrant characterisation and the exploration of issues that matter.

In the chapters that follow, there is no attempt to provide a comprehensive history of the French literary middlebrow, but only to develop the concept of middlebrow as a positive term through analysis of selected texts, authors and moments in French cultural history. The in-between stratum of culture need not be defined as neither one thing nor the other, as disparagingly middle-of-the-road, but may instead be viewed as a transitional space that connects, bridges and unites. After all, the pleasures of the middlebrow – the easy read that allows exodus from the fast-paced, crowded existence of most inhabitants of modernity and postmodernity – form part of the cultural experience of the majority, including intellectuals. Re-evaluation of the middlebrow should be a productive way to think about narrative itself, and to interrogate the relationship between academic critic and ordinary reader.9

9 As Faye Hammill puts it, writing of American and British inter-war fiction, ‘The term “middlebrow,” in order to be an effective critical category […]', needs to
The emphasis here is heavily, though not exclusively, on women writers and readers. The middlebrow, as we have seen, has been denigrated in part precisely because associated with women, and characterised as feminine. And in France as elsewhere, the reading of fiction has indeed become steadily more feminised over the past half-century, as Olivier Donnat’s series of surveys of French cultural practices for the French Ministry of Culture have demonstrated: by 2008, women made up an estimated 75% of novel readers. Despite this, women’s public presence on the French literary scene has been and remains severely limited: a 2011 study by the Observatoire des Inégalités found that out of the 648 literary prizes awarded in France since the beginning of the twentieth century, only 104 (16%) had gone to women, whilst prize juries remain heavily male-dominated. The Académie Goncourt, responsible for the most high-profile of annual prizes, has included (up to 2017) just seven women for 60 men.10 Although women writers appear to have gained much greater visibility over recent years, thanks in no small measure to the work of feminist critics, there is still good reason to highlight their importance for both the history and current situation of French literature. If the majority of ‘ordinary’ readers are women, then the middlebrow novel is a predominantly female phenomenon and for this reason too deserves to be taken seriously.11 A strand of masculine middlebrow12 is certainly also part of the whole map of French literature, but that would require another book.

be detached from [...] limiting definitions [...] and reconstituted as a productive, affirmative standpoint for writers who were not wholly aligned with either high modernism or popular culture’ (2007, 6).

10 Women formed an even tinier minority until the recent appointments of Paule Constant (2013) and Virginie Despentes (2016).

11 Hammill also sees ‘the reinscription of the middlebrow into literary history’ as ‘in part a feminist undertaking, since it involves attention to an undervalued literature which was, indeed, mainly produced by and for women’ (2007, 6–7).