Middlebrow Matters

Diana Holmes

Published by Liverpool University Press

Holmes, Diana.
Middlebrow Matters: Women's reading and the literary canon in France since the Belle Époque.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/72680.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/72680

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2492429
CHAPTER FIVE

The ‘little world’ of Françoise Sagan

The most successful middlebrow fiction captures, through compelling stories, some vital element of the mood, aspirations and anxieties of its era. In the 1950s and ’60s, Françoise Sagan’s concise, elegant tales of love and disillusion, set among an affluent yet bohemian section of the French middle class, attracted a readership of millions both at home and abroad. She was a highly mediatised star in France from her dramatic arrival on the literary scene in 1954, aged just 18, with the scandalous Bonjour Tristesse, and on through the following decades, remaining an instantly recognisable name and face up to and beyond her death in 2004. Her success was in part the product of a new type of commercial publishing, itself one aspect of the accelerating consumerism of the 1950s, and of the decade’s appetite for youth and novelty in the aftermath of defeat and humiliation. Like her contemporary Brigitte Bardot (and like Colette’s fictional Claudine), she was widely touted as a ‘girl of today’,¹ but her novels were read and enjoyed for reasons that went well beyond effective marketing and mediatisation.

Sagan’s world is one of whisky-fuelled nights in smoky bars and nightclubs, of open-topped sports cars gliding through Paris at dawn or racing down open country roads, of white villas or beachfront hotels overlooking the blue Mediterranean, of lives sufficiently leisured to make relationships and the pursuit of pleasure their central focus. Protagonists work in journalism, the good ones for left-leaning journals, or in publishing, advertising, architecture, fashion or interior design – the cultural industries that burgeoned as France moved into a more American-style, consumerist stage of advanced capitalism. Affluence in this world is easy, a given rather than a goal. At one level, Sagan’s fictions

¹ Roger Vadim attributed Bardot’s star quality to the fact that she had ‘a “now” face, she was really a girl of today’ (Bernert, 1991, 1086).
mirror the mythologies of *Paris Match* or *Elle*, two of the period’s most popular and glossy weeklies which represented the French back to themselves as young, well-off and stylishly modern, reflecting the reality of increased material wealth – car ownership, for example, like that of radios, washing machines and refrigerators, rose exponentially between 1948 and 1968 (Gaffney and Holmes, 2007, 11) – but also giving visual and verbal form to less earthbound dreams of luxury, glamour and personal freedom. But Sagan’s stories also register the dark shadows underlying the bright surface of 1950s and ’60s France. These are also the decades of France’s violent wars of decolonisation, of political instability (between 1947 and 1958 the Fourth Republic had 20 changes of government) and of an anxious sense of national identity threatened not just by the bloody end of empire but also by political and cultural dependence on a confidently aggressive Cold War USA. Sagan’s success coincides with the prominence, popular as well as intellectual, of existentialism – an austere philosophy that defines the human condition as one of vertiginous freedom and total responsibility in a meaningless world. Though her narratives pay only scant attention to political events and avoid all explicit philosophising, Sagan’s playboys and aimless pleasure-seekers also carry a sense of life’s absurdity, and of their own mortality: ‘Un jour il n’y aura plus rien. Le noir, L’absence. La mort’ (‘One day there will be nothing left. Blackness, Absence. Death’), as Alan puts it in *Les Merveilleux Nuages* (1961, 84).

The *tristesse* that Sagan’s first heroine greets with self-deprecating irony – for even sadness is softened by a privileged life free of material cares – also shadowed the 19 novels that followed, and lent Sagan’s fiction its characteristic, oxymoronic tone of desultory *joie de vivre*.

It is hard to prove, but is almost certainly the case that Sagan was and is read mainly by women. Though she makes male protagonists the central agents and focalisers of several of her novels, what is at stake in her narratives is arguably of particular relevance to female readers, most acutely in the years between the early 1950s and the post-May ’68 feminist movement, which is also the period of her greatest success. Those years were intensely contradictory for French women: on the one hand, the ‘second sex’ had finally been acknowledged as full citizens of the Republic, with the right to vote and stand for Parliament won at last in 1944; the equality of the sexes was formally enshrined in the new constitution of 1946, and though female employment rates declined over all, new demand for workers in the tertiary sector encouraged a gradual opening up of advanced education to both sexes. On the other hand, though, the 1950s and early ’60s saw a strong reassertion of traditional gender roles:
pro-natalist policies meant that abortion remained a criminal offence and contraception was strictly controlled, whilst both state policies and publicity for the developing new retail industries (domestic appliances, food and cleaning products) glorified motherhood and domesticity as central to women’s fulfilment. Through advertising campaigns for the expanding retail trade in fashion and beauty products, and through the plethora of colourful magazines aimed at a female public, women were also encouraged on a daily basis to think of themselves as objects of the male gaze, and of sexual appeal as essential to their identity. *Elle* magazine, read by at least one in six French women by 1955 (Weiner, 1999, 400), embodied this dichotomy in appealing images of the woman who could ‘have it all’, proposing a ‘fantasised equilibrium between an Eternal Feminine and modern self-sufficiency’ (Weiner, 1999, 403). The *Elle* woman was distinctly modern, busy and managerial, albeit chiefly on the domestic front, well-read, independent-minded and socially engaged, but at the same time committed to her ‘couple’, the quality and survival of which was primarily her responsibility, as well as to high standards of elegance and personal beauty. Though a confident player in the new era of hi-tech pleasures and enlightened individualism, she was inalienably defined, and self-defined, in relational terms. Sagan’s fictions mirror this duality. They represent girls and women to themselves as free, restless, individuals in a world without absolute values, sexually liberated and intellectually able, unconvinced by the mythology of romance and settling instead for ephemeral pleasures. Yet her plots depend on the countervailing force of another desire – disavowed, uncertain but real: for intense and durable relationships, for the warmth and generosity represented (at whatever cost to herself) by the traditionally maternal, other-directed woman. Sagan, like *Elle*, captured the tension in pre-Second Wave femininity and gave it vividly recognisable form. It was no wonder that *Elle* adopted her and amplified her fame, devoting a two-page article to the debut novelist on 26 July 1954 (10–11), and thereafter regularly featuring articles both about and by her.

---

2 Kristin Ross shows how the couple in post-war French culture became the ‘bearer of the totality of affective values’ (1995, 133), with the high media presence of couples such as Simone Signoret and Yves Montand, Françoise Giroud and Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber, Beauvoir and Sartre and regular features in the women’s press (notably *Elle*), of features and quizzes such as ‘Êtes-vous un couple idéal?’ See Ross (1995), Chapter 3 ‘Couples’, 123–56.

3 Sagan was first commissioned by *Elle* to write a series of travel articles on Italy, published in the autumn of 1954 (Grandpierre, 2012, 13–15).
Sagan burst onto the French literary scene in 1954 with a novel that would form the blueprint for much – not all – of her subsequent fiction: the international bestseller *Bonjour Tristesse*. Middlebrow success, as earlier chapters have shown, is achieved by strategies of production and marketing as well as (though never to the exclusion of) qualities of theme and form, and the enterprising post-war publisher René Julliard showcased the 18-year-old Françoise Quoirez, as she then was, with an astute sense of the desires and anxieties that made up the contemporary *zeitgeist*. The marketing of Sagan played on the post-war era’s fascination with youth and the mingled glamour and threat of modernity. Julliard had already used these tactics to sell the first novels of other young women: Françoise d’Eaubonne (later a prominent feminist activist) was 24 when Julliard published her *Le Cœur de Watteau* (1944) and Françoise Mallet (later Mallet-Joris) 21 when *Le Rempart des Béguines*, a lesbian love story with a teenage heroine, achieved a *succès de scandale* in 1951. With Sagan (the demand to replace Quoirez with a catchier pen name came from Julliard) he also appealed to the collective memory of an earlier case of literary notoriety, the teenage Radiguet’s 1923 bestseller *Le Diable au corps*. Copies of *Bonjour Tristesse* were embellished with a wrapper emblazoned with a photo of their young author, and the words *Le Diable au cœur*.

The novel appeared in March, and by October had sold 100,000 copies (Lloyd, 2007, 183–84). Critics were divided on the book’s morality and depth, but broadly in agreement on its literary quality: in May *Bonjour Tristesse* won the Prix des Critiques, a prize previously awarded to Albert Camus’s *La Peste* (1947) and New Novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet’s *Le Voyeur* (1953). An article in *Le Figaro* by the eminent author François Mauriac further consecrated this slim novel as a fine piece of writing and a significant emblem of its era. Mauriac declared that Sagan’s ‘literary merit’ was ‘beyond dispute’, though he deplored the novel’s representation of post-war youth as casually immoral. Sagan was rapidly established as the charming if shocking personification of the ‘new wave’ generation, and firmly identified with the decor, lifestyle and (a)morality of her fictional world – a role that she was to embrace to the point of near self-destruction. *Bonjour Tristesse*, its massive sales figures

---

4 See above, pp. 104–05.

5 Sagan’s personal life rapidly transformed from that of an upper middle-class
sustained over the following year (by September 1955, Julliard claimed sales of 350,000), also placed her firmly on the middle ground of novels that are acclaimed for the quality of their writing (Sagan was compared to both Proust and Colette) and simultaneously read by a huge public for their compelling plots and characters, and accessible topicality.

The title of *Bonjour Tristesse*, simple as it is, already lays claim to literary credentials, for it is taken from a poem by one of the great French poets of the twentieth century, Paul Eluard, surrealist, communist and Resistance militant. Cécile, the novel’s heroine, narrates the story of her seventeenth summer spent on the Côte d’Azur from the vantage point of the following winter in Paris, where she lives with her father Raymond. Her mother having died when Cécile was a small child, since leaving boarding school she has been assimilated into the carefree, pleasure-loving lifestyle of her father, ‘un homme léger, habile en affaires, toujours curieux et vite lassé, et qui plaisait aux femmes’ (Sagan, 1954, 10; ‘a frivolous man, good at business, always curious but quickly bored, and very appealing to women’). It is with her father and his current, much younger mistress, Elsa, that Cécile shares a beachside villa for the summer. The holiday begins with sea, sun and a mood of light-hearted sensory pleasure, heightened further when Cécile begins to share swims, boating and kisses with a handsome student, Cyril. But what sets the plot in motion is the arrival of Anne Larsen, a woman of Raymond’s own generation and a friend of his dead wife. Anne’s work ethic – she is a successful fashion designer – and her sense of order and responsibility disturb the hedonistic peace of the villa’s other inhabitants, but at the same time her elegance, kindness and air of moral certainty exercise a powerful appeal for both Cécile and her father. When Raymond and Anne decide to marry, and Anne in her new quasi-maternal role tries to impose some discipline on Cécile’s free and easy life, Cécile reacts with an impulsive but clever plan of resistance. Her campaign makes use of Elsa and Cyril to tempt Raymond back to the promiscuous, heedless life they have shared, and thus dissuade Anne from marrying him. The plan succeeds to an extent she had not foreseen, and Anne dies in a car crash that remains ambivalently poised between accident and suicide. Cécile encounters sadness, an emotion both ‘énervante et douce’ (9, ‘enervating and soft’), and not one that impedes in any way her return to a life of fleeting affairs and casual pleasure.

*jeune fille* to one of drink, fast cars and partying. In 1957 she almost died after crashing her Aston Martin.
‘Ce fameux petit monde saganesque’

*Bonjour Tristesse* established the model for much of Sagan’s subsequent fiction: her novels are not repetitive, but most bear a family resemblance that marks them unmistakably as what she herself ironically termed ‘saganesque’ (Sagan, 1972, 13). Their brief narratives – these are novels that slip easily into a pocket or handbag – centre primarily on affairs of the heart, and rarely venture beyond the milieu of a cultured, affluent elite. The voice that tells them is that of a narrator, sometimes intra- and sometimes extra-diegetic, whose coolly dispassionate tones are leavened by small, gratuitous blasts of existential joy. Cécile’s ‘goût du bonheur’ (22; ‘taste for happiness’) echoes for example in Dominique’s ‘violent sentiment de bonheur’ (1956, 13; ‘violent feeling of happiness’) in *Un certain sourire* and in Lucile’s intense ‘plaisir de vivre’ (1965, 13; ‘pleasure in being alive’) in *La Chamade*. Sagan’s fiction, in fact, exemplifies what we might call an ethic – and an aesthetic – of frivolity: as Alfred Cismaru detected in a perceptive 1993 re-evaluation of her work, her worldview is that of a universe without ultimate meaning, in which it behoves us to limit aspirations to profundity or absolutes, and to create instead ‘what is within [our] reach: small, flimsy things’ (Cismaru, 1993, 291). Cismaru connects the popularity of Sagan’s ‘frivolous’ fiction to the mood of the post-war era, and the willed escapism of a population that had survived war and occupation, knowledge of the Holocaust and the threat of nuclear mass destruction. To this one might add that in these same decades a fragile refuge was offered in the new, ephemeral pleasures of an intensified consumer culture – also vividly present in the fictional world first mapped out in *Bonjour Tristesse*. For the first novel may be seen as the blueprint for Sagan’s ‘little world’, its characters as the models for recurring, if far from identical, character types, notably the heroine (Cécile), the good woman (Anne), the mistress (Elsa) and the ladies’ man (Raymond).

Cécile is the prototype of the Sagan heroine: eager to enjoy whatever pleasures life offers, but (in Cécile’s case, precociously) self-aware, sceptical of emotion, determinedly unsentimental – ‘pas de quoi faire des grimaces’ (1956, 125; ‘nothing to make a big deal about’), concludes Dominique, heroine of Sagan’s second novel, when her passionate love affair with an older man comes to an end. Sagan heroines share what in *Aimez-vous Brahms* is termed a ‘pudeur honorable’ (1959, 14; ‘honourable

6 Nathalie Morello terms Sagan’s novels ‘anti-sentimental’ (1998, 81).
modesty'): an emotional discretion that is at once self-protective (to invest in emotion means to risk pain) and cynically lucid about the role-playing and self-deception involved in the performance of emotion. Cécile mourns the loss of Anne, but is also uncomfortably aware that she half-enjoys weeping, that she and her father find pleasure in playing out their readymade roles of bereaved lover and would-be daughter, that they will recover all too quickly. If Dominique (Un certain sourire) falls for Luc, and he, more provisionally, for her, this is in part because they share an abhorrence of pretence and a preference for honesty, however brutal. The married, older Luc offers Dominique ‘une aventure sans lendemain et sans sentimentalité’ (1959, 79; ‘an affair with no future and no sentimentality’), and having accepted, she can claim neither betrayal nor tragic loss when he ends the affair. Her bleak but un-self-pitying realism echoes Cécile and typifies the Sagan ethic: ‘Seule. Seule. Mais enfin quoi? J’étais une femme qui avait aimé un homme’ (1959, 125; ‘Alone. Alone. But so what? I was just a woman who had loved a man’).

These unsentimental heroines recoil instinctively from any project that demands taking life too seriously through the investment of time, energy or desire. Cécile is horrified by Anne’s attempts to make her revise for important exams rather than spend her days on the beach; Dominique resists all attempts by her boyfriend, Bertrand, to establish a mutually committed ‘vie commune’ (1959, 13; ‘shared life’); Lucile in La Chamade, an older heroine in her thirties, makes a brief foray into paid employment and quasi-conjugal domesticity, giving up her passionate love for Antoine rather than accept a structured, purposeful existence, but finds both the ‘comédie humaine accélérée’ (‘speeded-up human comedy’) of the working world and the predictability of a long-term romance unbearable. Sagan’s determined hedonists embody at once a new consumerist ideology of immediate, gratuitous pleasure, an existentialist disbelief in absolute values and post-war youth’s dawning sense of dissatisfaction with traditional family structures. As female heroines for (mainly) women readers, they also formulate through practice claims that would find a collective political voice with Second Wave feminism, notably claims to sexual freedom and the right to live independently on the same terms as men.

And yet this nonchalance, this determined superficiality that characterises Cécile and her sisters is brittle: it is a ‘nonchalance inquiète’ (1959, 9, emphasis added; ‘an anxious nonchalance’) that leads, despite a predominant tone of willed and welcome frivolity, to desolate dénouements. Cécile’s resolute declaration of happiness – ‘Mais nous
sommes heureux’ (1954, 127; ‘But we are happy’) – is undermined by her recognition that sadness, no matter how ‘douce’ (‘gentle’) and ‘égoïste’ (‘selfish’) (9), has entered her life; Dominique closes her story resisting any sense of self-aggrandising tragedy, but wounded nonetheless; Paule (Aimez-vous Brahms), after a brief attempt at a more wholehearted and committed model of love, resumes her agreeable but desultory relationship with Roger and finds herself ‘sauvée. Et perdue’ (1959, 123; ‘saved. And lost’), and Lucile (La Chamade) returns from her attempt at sustained, reciprocal love to a life of selfish affluence, relieved but profoundly disenchanted: ‘elle se savait à jamais rejetée de toute existence digne de ce terme et elle pensait qu’elle ne l’avait pas volé’ (1965, 154; ‘She knew that she had lost her right to any life worthy of the term, and she thought she deserved it’).

Nonchalance then is the chosen stance but it carries an undercurrent of bleak dissatisfaction. This finds expression too in another recurring female figure, that of the good woman whose prototype is Anne Larsen, Cécile’s would-be stepmother. Heroines display no real aspiration to become ‘good women’, but they see in them disquieting proof that authentic virtue can exist, and confirmation of their own sense of emptiness. Anne’s emotional integrity and lucid kindness find an echo in Françoise, the wife of Dominique’s older lover in Un certain sourire, who treats Dominique with tact and solicitude even when she learns of the affair; or Nathalie, central female protagonist of Un peu de soleil dans l’eau froide, whose love for the dissolute Gilles is no less absolute for being wholly without illusion. Each displays fidelity, a clear-sighted empathy and a purposeful competence that is very different from the drifting hedonism of the Sagan heroine. The good woman attracts the desiring admiration of men: Cécile’s chronically promiscuous father wants to marry Anne, Luc’s marriage remains solid despite his infidelities, both Gilles’s depression and his impotence are cured by the seductive power of Nathalie’s immense ‘bonté’ in Un peu de soleil. Though not literally mothers (running against the tide of a pro-natalist era, Sagan defines female identity almost without reference to motherhood), the good women clearly possess qualities identified with the maternal, and both Cécile and Dominique experience the desire to sink into the role of daughter and be nurtured and protected by strong older women: ‘j’aurais aimé m’effondrer contre elle, ce grand corps généreux, lui expliquer que j’aurais voulu qu’elle soit ma mère’ (1956, 123; ‘I would have liked to fall into her arms, into that warm, generous body, and tell her that I wished she could have been my mother’). However this temptation is
to be avoided. Self-reliance and emotional autonomy are the rules of survival in the world Sagan depicts: her plots tend to show that the ideals represented by good women have little place there. Anne and Nathalie, loving men whose narcissism will always be stronger than their capacity to return that love, both commit suicide, maintaining a discreet goodness to the end by disguising this as accidental death. Françoise soldiers on, a steady rock in her husband’s sea of existential doubt and ephemeral love affairs. The good woman is never the focaliser in Sagan’s fiction: she is always viewed from the outside, from a perspective at once warmly admiring and determinedly separate.

Part of the appeal of Sagan’s fiction, then, seems to lie in its articulation of a female subjectivity in tune with its era: newly tough and independent, pleasure-seeking, sceptical of romance, yet deeply unsatisfied and reluctantly nostalgic for the moral certainty and other-directed warmth of a more traditional femininity. Some feminist readings of Sagan (St-Onge, 1984; Miller, 1988; Morello, 1998; Holmes, 2006) have drawn on the work of psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow and psychologist Carol Gilligan to see in Sagan’s bleak endings a distinctively feminine sense that the ideal of the autonomous self is inadequate for human fulfilment. Chodorow and Gilligan draw attention to the ways in which girls’ development, at least within traditional Western models of childrearing, produces less individuated subjects whose primary sense of identity is that of the ‘self-in-relation’. Both the difference in the Oedipal process between girls and boys and the social construction of gender lead to a masculine tendency to see the self as separate and distinct, and a feminine sense of self as ‘including a fundamental definition of self [as] in relationship’ (Chodorow, 1999, 169). Thus a deracinated, footloose mode of being typifies the Sagan heroine, but ultimately leaves a sense of hollowness, betraying an ‘intuitive sense that autonomy’ – or at least autonomy alone – ‘is not the desired state’ (St-Onge, 1984, 10).

To resituate this tension within women’s history, Sagan’s peak period as a middlebrow star coincided with an in-between stage of French feminism. Rejection of a passive, dependent model of feminine identity – enshrined till 1944 in women’s exclusion from ‘universal’ suffrage – was evident in the 1950s and early ’60s in widely publicised opinion surveys, in the fashionable women’s press, in the cinema of the Nouvelle Vague with its assertive, restive heroines played by new kinds of female

---

star (Jeanne Moreau, Anna Karina), and in more explicitly political initiatives, notably the movement for contraception and abortion rights established in 1956 under the title ‘Maternité heureuse’ (‘Happy Motherhood’, which became the Mouvement pour le Planning Familial in 1960). But it would be another decade before Second-Wave feminism, in France under the broad title of the Mouvement de Libération des Femmes, would signify women’s collective mobilisation in opposition to their status as the ‘second sex’, and the reinterpretation of what had felt like solitary personal struggles as collective, political issues. Sagan’s implicit claims for equal rights to individualism, hedonism and sexual freedom articulate a nascent spirit of female contestation. But the underlying sense of desolation, like her heroines’ reluctant but intense desire to bond with the ‘good woman’, bespeak an as yet inchoate dissatisfaction with the alternative models of self-fulfilment on offer in an androcentric culture, and the absence, as yet, of any broader context of female solidarity. Post-1968 feminism would lead to a more confident questioning of male-defined ideals of selfhood.

The ethical value of a purely self-centred lifestyle is nonetheless a question that haunts these ‘frivolous’ novels. Cécile in Bonjour Tristesse imagines herself and her father as members of ‘la belle race pure des nomades’ (‘the pure, noble race of nomads’), but fears that a more honest description might be ‘la race pauvre et desséchée des jouisseurs’ (‘the poor, dried-out race of pleasure-seekers’). This fear is also embodied in a third category of female figure, the mistress, for whom Elsa (Bonjour Tristesse) is the prototype. Like the heroine, the mistress sets little store by economic independence and is happy to be wholly or partly kept by a lover; where she does have a job, this is an alternative way of marketing her physical assets. Elsa rather vaguely ‘faisait de la figuration dans les studios et bars des Champs-Élysées’ (‘hung out in the studios and bars of the Champs-Élysées’); Gilles’s live-in girlfriend Éloïse in Un peu de soleil, and Matthieu’s kept mistress Sonia in Un Chagrin de passage, are fashion models; Maisy in Aimez-vous Brahms is a ‘starlette’. The mistress differs little from the heroine in

8 Sagan played her part in Second Wave of feminism, most notably by signing the famous ‘Manifeste des Salopes’ in which 343 well-known French women claimed to have undergone illegal abortions and challenged the law to prosecute them. But she was uncomfortable with the earnestness of militant politics, and her contribution to women’s cause was chiefly through her fiction’s effective articulation of what her huge readership suggests was a widespread state of mind and feeling.
terms of material self-interest – Sagan’s heroines accept the financial support of lovers without qualms – but has none of her redeeming lucidity. Elsa, Éloïse, Sonia and their kind are self-deluding, dressing up relationships that are by nature transitory and materialistic as romantic passions, employing a clichéd discourse of love to dignify passing affairs. As Matthieu (in Un chagrin de passage) reflects, faced with Sonia’s declarations of love: ‘Bref, elle n’aimait qu’elle. Elle, et depuis deux ans, Matthieu, parce que ça l’arrangeait de l’aime’ (107; ‘In short, she only loved herself. Herself, and for the past two years Matthieu, because it suited her to love him’). The future of the mistress is glimpsed in older women like the widowed Claire Santré in La Chamade, one of ‘cette vaillante petite cohorte de femmes quinquagénaires qui, à Paris, se débrouillent, et pour vivre et pour rester à mode’ (19; ‘that valiant little cohort of fifty-something Parisian women who somehow manage to stay alive and in fashion’): no longer desired by the rich men who have kept them, maintaining a role in fashionable circles as hostesses, go-betweens, confidantes, but lonely, manipulative, seen in their own circles as sometimes useful but a little ridiculous. In terms of Sagan’s ethics, the difference between the mistress figures and the heroine is central: they are self-deceiving where she is resolutely clear-sighted, sentimental where she refuses all romanticism, willing to play the ‘jeune femme soumise et désirable’ (1969, 160; ‘submissive, desirable girl’), where the heroine knows that she is men’s equal. But in terms of the milieu they frequent, their hedonistic lifestyle and inability to sustain relationships, mistresses and heroines are terribly similar, and these characters – present in most of the novels – dramatise the heroine’s fear of belonging, no matter how lucidly, to the ‘race pauvre et déséchée des jouisseurs’.

If Cécile is the prototype for the Sagan heroine, Anne for the good woman and Elsa for the mistress, Cécile’s father Raymond provides the blueprint for Sagan’s men. He is a selfish but charming ‘homme à femmes’ – an untranslatable French expression that designates without blame the ‘man who loves women’ or the Don Juan. Narcissistic, profoundly egocentric, Raymond is never unkind or exploitative by design, but simply assumes that others, and notably women, will accommodate his desires: he is (briefly) devastated by the realisation that Anne has been deeply (indeed mortally) wounded by his passing infidelity with Elsa. Thus too the Luc of Un certain sourire – handsome, eloquent, elegantly world-weary – embarks on a brief and passionate affair with the much younger Dominique, and leaves her, not without sympathy, to
face her solitude, returning to the reliable comfort of his wise and loving wife. Roger (*Aimez-vous Brahms*) is seductive in his restless energy and appetite for life, but these same attributes lead to his infidelity, his neglect of his long-term lover Paule and his complacency in assuming (rightly) that she will always take him back. It is their sense of freedom, self-belief and confident desire that makes these men so appealing to Sagan’s women, and indeed it is that which the latter emulate in their own lives. Refusing to be victims, the heroines take full responsibility for the choices they have made and acknowledge their lovers’ right to an emotional autonomy to which they also aspire: ‘Mais enfin quoi? J’étais une femme qui avait aimé un homme’.

It is apparent, though, in Sagan’s world that the dice are unevenly loaded in favour of male freedoms. Charismatic as they are, her male protagonists enjoy social privileges that support narcissism, facilitate self-belief and authorise an instrumental attitude to others. Unlike most of the women characters (though Anne is a fashion designer and Paule an interior designer), they have glamorous, well-paid and exciting careers which provide solid sources of self-esteem, as well as material security. Since their social status and power of seduction depends less on youthful beauty, the spectre of social redundancy – represented by the ‘brave little cohort’ of middle-aged women socialites – does not haunt them to the same extent, and the existential anxiety, the desire for something beyond frivolity that runs like a dark seam through Sagan’s world is largely felt by women.

When the ‘homme à femmes’ becomes a novel’s main focaliser, though, the reader is invited to empathise with a male subjectivity that shares, after all, that ‘ethic of frivolity’ prized by her heroines. *Un peu de soleil dans l’eau froide*, published in 1969, is one such male-centred narrative. Gilles, chief protagonist and focaliser throughout, is a successful 35-year-old journalist with a left-wing magazine, leading a fast-paced life of work, late-night debates with colleagues in bars and nightclubs, cohabitation with a glamorous model: ‘bon physique, métier amusant, succès de toute espèce’ (13; ‘in good physical shape, interesting job, success on all fronts’) as he sums it up to himself. But if he feels the need to spell out the advantages of his life, this is because its sweet taste has suddenly been soured by a bout of depression: he is both paralysed by misery and humiliated at finding himself subject to so common a complaint. Unable to function professionally or socially, Gilles seeks refuge at his sister’s house in the countryside near Limoges, and there meets Nathalie, a married woman of his own age who falls rapidly and
irrevocably in love with him. Nathalie’s beauty and her goodness – she is intelligent and cultured, and also astute, passionate and sincere – captivate him and cure his depression and the sexual impotence that has accompanied it. Nathalie is lucid about the man she has fallen in love with but chooses nonetheless to leave her husband and return with Gilles to Paris. What will she do? asks Gilles: ‘Te suivre peut-être, le temps que tu m’aimes. Après, je verrai’ (124; ‘Follow you, perhaps, for as long as you are in love with me. After that, I’ll see’). They are happy together for a time, until Gilles reverts to type, to resentment of the constraints of a committed relationship, and to infidelity as an assertion of his freedom.

What makes the narrative voice effective is Gilles’s own clarity about his motives, which both sustains a degree of readerly empathy even as he behaves with brutal egoism and produces an acute critique of the sexual inequality underlying romantic relations. Using a mixture of inner monologue and free indirect style – the latter articulating Gilles’s half-formed thoughts and sensations – Sagan narrates how his appreciation of Nathalie’s intelligence and integrity turns to resentment and nostalgia for a simpler life where his male superiority was assured, where instead of Nathalie’s eloquent contributions to conversation, he and his male friends could ‘parler pardessus la tête de jeunes filles soumises et désirables’ (161; ‘talk to each other over the heads of submissive, desirable girls’). The recognition that his lover is ‘fondamentalement plus forte que lui’ (178; ‘fundamentally stronger than him’) leads him to resort to cruel, resentful infidelities, and when Nathalie overhears him telling a friend that he often longs not to be judged, or forgiven, but to be ‘seul et libre, comme avant’ (189; ‘single and free, like before’), she goes to a hotel and as discreetly as such an act permits, takes her own life. The moral victory is all Nathalie’s, and she is a sympathetic character, but Sagan forces a shamefaced identification with Gilles’s recoil from being judged and found wanting, with his desire for a selfish, simple, footloose life in tune with the febrile world that surrounds him. It is obvious too that this is a very male world, and that what he resists is also the threat to male self-confidence posed by a strong, articulate woman. It is perhaps pertinent that this novel appeared soon after May 1968, on the cusp of the new wave of feminist thinking and activism.
Place and space

For if Sagan’s ‘little world’ deals with the enduringly human questions of love, ethics and how to lead a fulfilled life, its charm for both contemporary and later readers depends too on its sharp evocation of a particular milieu and period. Central to this is a strong sense of place: ‘fiction’ in Marie-Laure Ryan’s formulation, ‘is a mode of travel into textual space’ (1991, 5), and Sagan’s texts carry the reader to a France of which the beating heart is Paris, and roads travel south through dull if pleasant provinces to the hot sun and blue sea of the Mediterranean coast. For most readers, then and now, French or foreign, there is an intrinsic pleasure in vicariously inhabiting a city so resonant with images of love, art, revolution and romance, gleaned more from films, songs, magazines and novels than from first-hand experience. Focalised by her protagonists, this Paris becomes the world of everyday living: rather than an external topography of the city that de Certeau terms ‘place’, Sagan depicts Paris from within, as the taken-for-granted space of quotidian experience. Protagonists live in apartments on streets in the Latin Quarter that can be located on any map of the city: rue de Tournon (Dans un mois), rue de Poitiers (La Chamade), rue Monsieur-le-Prince (Un peu de soleil). On their way to work or to a rendezvous they casually cross historic bridges over the Seine, or walk down the Champs-Élysées; they meet in cafés around the Boulevard St-Michel that stay open even in the small hours for lovers to sit and talk or gaze at each other. The sense of what Ryan calls ‘entrancement’ is heightened by the familiarity of these landmarks of Parisian life, and the glamour they connote.

Yet Paris is also more than this: its physical beauty and rich historical texture make the city a vivid correlative for emotional states. Sagan’s depiction of Paris is suffused with her characteristic ethic of freedom and frivolity, and with the lucid acknowledgement of mortality that shadows it. Josée (Les Merveilleux Nuages), returning to Paris after a period abroad, rediscovers with joy ‘ce petit monde pourri, factice et creux’ (‘this rotten, artificial, hollow little world’) that is also ‘le petit monde le plus vivant, le plus libre et le plus gai de toutes les capitales de la terre’ (1961, 75; ‘a little world that is also the most alive, the most free, the most joyful of all the capital cities in the world’), and this duality is present throughout the novels’ representation of the capital. Characters who traverse the familiar city casually from day to day suddenly notice its loveliness or find their state of mind to be reflected in the atmosphere of the streets, or in a particular view. Wandering the Latin Quarter,
Dominique (Un certain sourire) finds a sense of moral freedom that matches her own: ‘Paris m’appartenait. Paris appartenait aux sans scrupules, aux désinvoltes’ (33; ‘Paris belonged to me. Paris belonged to the unscrupulous, the reckless’), but as she watches the dawn break over the Seine with Luc, her older lover, the city connotes not joyful amorality but the painful effort to transcend the reality of death and transience: ‘le ciel était blanc et gris aussi; il montait vers le jour, par-dessus les maisons mortes, les ponts et les ferrailles, lentement, obstinément, dans son effort de tous les matins’ (29; ‘the sky was white and grey too; the sun rose to meet the day, above the dead houses, the bridges and scrapyards, slowly, doggedly, with the same effort it made each morning’). Antoine (La Chamade), alone and fearing he has lost the woman he loves, experiences the city as painfully beautiful: ‘Paris devenait d’une beauté déchirante, bleue, blonde, alanguie’ (97; ‘Paris became heartrendingly beautiful, blue, blonde, languid’), whilst Gilles (Un peu de soleil), in a state of depression, notes that ‘Paris était ravissant, bleu à pleurer en ce début de printemps’ (21; ‘Paris was ravishingly lovely, so blue on this early spring day that it brought tears to the eyes’). The colour blue recurs again and again in Sagan’s internally focalised portrayals of Paris, evoking poignancy, a beauty tinged with sadness, the fugitive nature of time as day drifts towards night and seasons change. In harmony with the mood of Sagan’s world, the city figures the intense if fleeting joy of the lived moment, what in Un Chagrin de passage she terms the ‘somptueuse précarité de la vie’ (30; ‘life’s magnificent precariousness’).

If Paris is Sagan’s heartland, the primary locus of her plots, she also carries her readers beyond the capital and even, in some novels, beyond France, notably to the USA (for example in Les Merveilleux Nuages, where Josée, whose story began in Dans un mois, dans un an, now lives with her American husband). The key recurring locations, though, are the French provinces, what we might term ‘middle France’, and the Côte d’Azur. Provincial France figures as a place of retreat from existential and romantic dramas, and is often associated with the past and with childhood. Dominique (Un certain sourire) withdraws to her parents’ house by the Yonne in central France to escape her boyfriend Bertrand and wait for Luc’s next approach. Bernard (Dans un mois, dans un an) hides away in a charmless hotel in Poitiers (‘la ville la plus morte qu’on pût imaginer’ [76; ‘the deadest town imaginable’]) to escape the tensions of an unhappy marriage and his unrequited love for Josée. Gilles (Un peu de soleil), suffering from anxiety and depression, takes refuge with his sister at their childhood home in the Limousin. The provinces are
places of serene boredom, of restorative mildness and tedium: they offer a gentle landscape (1969, 122; ‘paysage tendre’) and in summer a milder heat than the searing sun of the Mediterranean (1969, 122), physical features reflected in the tempering of human relations by good manners and old-fashioned discretion. In plot terms, the provinces always represent an interlude, a pause in narrative rhythm. Dominique describes her few weeks at home in the Yonne, between her student life in Paris and the trip with Luc to the Mediterranean coast, as ‘une énorme tache jaune et fade’ (1956, 67; ‘one great faded yellow blur’); Bernard and Gilles soon return from voluntary provincial exile to their lives in Paris, and when Nathalie (Un peu de soleil) brings her gentler, less ego-driven values to the capital, she is destroyed.

The Côte d’Azur has a quite different function. In terms of the quest for pleasure and the emotional conflicts that drive the plots, the Côte is an extension of Parisian life, though in material terms it is very different and brings intense colour and sensation into the text. The lasting appeal of Bonjour Tristesse lies in part in its vivid evocation of lazy days in the Mediterranean sun: Cécile muses that the most important thing about that summer was simply ‘la présence de la mer, son rythme incessant, le soleil’ (22; ‘the presence of the sea, its ceaseless rhythm, the sun’), and in a sense this is equally true of the novel. The story’s geography, as Heather Lloyd points out (1995, 46–49), has a theatrical simplicity, its key dramatic sites the white villa, with its stage-like terrace where vital confrontations occur, the pine forest that borders the villa and becomes the scene of sexual encounters and their discovery by others, and the beach – where the sun delights the senses and numbs the brain, and the sea offers an enchanting sensory contrast. The potency of sensation provides Sagan’s characters with relief from thought and moral anxiety: in La Chamade it is to the Côte – ‘la chaleur du soleil, la fraîcheur de l’eau, la douceur du sable’ (88; ‘the heat of the sun, the coolness of the water, the softness of the sand’) – that Lucile flees when her love for Alain threatens her carefree life with responsibility for another’s happiness, and Dominique spends her happiest period with Luc by the sea near Cannes, where the inebriation of the senses can dull any thought of the future. Dominique does not escape awareness of her ultimate solitude, but it is perceptible through the senses rather than as an articulated thought, and can be suspended when the sensation ends. Watched by Luc from the beach, Dominique stands poised to dive from a high board mounted on a raft, and sees ‘la mer complaisante qui m’attendait. J’allais tomber en elle, m’y enfour; j’allais tomber de très haut et je serais seule, mortellement
seule, durant ma chute' (82; ‘the indulgent sea awaiting me. I would fall into it, dive into its depths; I was about to fall from a great height and I would be alone, mortally alone, as I fell’). The sea in Sagan’s universe stands for what Lloyd calls ‘the deepest and most lasting impulses in the human psyche’ (1995, 49): the water offers the animal pleasure of sensation and a refuge from the tensions of relationship, but its depths also connote solitude, oblivion and death.

The geography of Sagan’s world thus carries much of its particular mood and values. Her style is temperate, unostentatious. In line with her heroines’ recoil from sentimentality or melodrama, she dissolves her philosophy into the fiction itself rather than expound it, and favours a transparent, low-key mode of narration: a sparing use of adjectives; short, clearly structured sentences; a predominance of internal focalisation that minimises the evidence of narratorial voice. The surface limpidity of the texts, the ease with which they can be read, help to explain their popularity. If an ethic can be identified in her work, it is one of valuing the transitory pleasures of an ultimately meaningless world, refusing to denigrate these in the name of more dignified but abstract values. The Sagan ethic also involves a facing up to mortality and the ultimate solitude of the self, yet at the same time an imperative – often attempted but rarely realised by her characters – to treat others with respect and warmth, and even love. Sagan’s narratives communicate both the appeal and the inadequacy of a philosophy of individual autonomy, and imply a need to rethink a model of ruthless self-fulfilment that was particularly prominent in the post-war era of accelerating neoliberalism and complacent patriarchy. Her ethic of sceptical frivolity suffuses her fiction and helps to explain its success. It is there in the charge of elation felt by protagonist and reader when sunlight warms the skin – ‘il me semblait qu’il faisait affleurer mes os sous la peau’, says Cécile in Bonjour Tristesse (102; ‘it seemed to bring my bones to the surface of my skin’) – or lovers wake next to each other in La Chamade, aware of desire for the other’s body before even reaching consciousness (110); it is also there in the felt certainty that these are moments ‘d’un bonheur fragile, provisoire, jamais acquis’ (110; ‘of a fragile, provisional, happiness that cannot be taken for granted’), again in La Chamade. Indeed their intensity depends precisely on their ephemeral nature. The ending of love, or of life, like the sadness that Cécile encounters in Sagan’s first novel, must be lucidly acknowledged without undue drama or the inelegance of self-pity.
Beyond the little world

In 1972 Sagan published a strange little text, marketed as a novel but in fact a blend of autobiography, essay and fiction, under the revealing title *Des bleus a l’âme*, literally ‘bruises’ – but translated for the English edition as ‘scars’ – on the soul. Arguably, like France itself, Sagan seems to have emerged from the violent cultural conflict of May ’68 changed and bruised: she pictures herself in retreat from her beloved Paris, holed up in her isolated, down-at-heel manor house in Normandy, struggling against ill health and depression to compose a new novel. This is to be the continued story of Sébastien and Éléonore, the aristocratic Swedish siblings who featured in her 1960 play *Château en Suède*, but her attempts to narrate their fortunes in contemporary Paris repeatedly stall, faced with the author’s own physical and moral weariness, with the disabling awareness that her fictions are widely perceived as mere frivolous tales of the idle rich, and with a sense that fiction itself in the sense of empathetic investment in imagined lives is now devalued and considered irrelevant. The book is deeply self-reflexive: Sagan’s protagonists seek to pursue their elegant, parasitical lives by charming or seducing rich acquaintances into paying for their pleasures, but their story is persistently interrupted – ‘Mais voyons: voilà deux mois que je ne me suis pas occupée de Sébastien ni d’Éléonore’ (26; ‘Let’s see: two months now since I paid any attention to Sébastien and Éléonore’) – while their creator struggles to regain faith in her ‘petit monde oisif et blasé’ (13; ‘idle, blasé little world’) against the earnest commitment of the *soixante-huitards* whose values, broadly speaking, she nonetheless shares and whose cause she has publicly espoused. *Des bleus à l’âme* ultimately constitutes a defence of fiction, including Sagan’s own ‘milieu imaginaire et chimérique où l’argent ne compte pas’ (34; ‘imaginary, fanciful milieu where money is nothing’), on the grounds that a solemn focus only on the most politically deserving social groups is patronising and insulting (she fulminates against the leftists’ reduction of distinct individuals to the collective noun ‘le peuple’ [7]), and that the careful narration of fictional lives that reflect and interpret readers’ own provides not only a welcome form of escape, but also protection against those ‘bruises to the soul’ signalled by her book’s title. The defence of fiction is also enacted through the dogged return from digression to story: despite repeated interruptions, Sagan pursues the adventures of her charming immoralists until the suicide of one of their benefactors suddenly darkens their nonchalant lives with a sense
of moral responsibility, and fiction and meta-fiction blend as the author herself invites her two protagonists to share her rural refuge.

*Des bleus à l’âme* is not a middlebrow novel: its generic hybridity, insistent self-reflexivity and tone of defensive anger almost certainly discouraged many habitual Sagan readers, although some no doubt followed her on to this new territory. But it demonstrates Sagan’s awareness of her own critical reputation and her willingness to defend the value of immersively ‘frivolous’ fiction, as well as her recognition that the times had changed, and with them the ability of her ‘petit monde saganesque’ to capture the contemporary mood. In the latter decades of her career, Sagan returned to the affluent, mildly bohemian Parisian milieu with which her name has remained associated, but also demonstrated her literary talent and versatility by venturing into other genres, from the crime novel (the bleak *Le Chien couchant*, 1980, set in a grim northern mining town, has distinct echoes of Simenon), to historical fiction (*Un Orage immobile* [1983] is virtually a pastiche of a certain type of nineteenth-century novel), to three novels situated in the Second World War, under the German Occupation. *Un Sang d’aquarelle* (1987) is the highly original, often very funny story of a German film director, Constantin von Meck, returned from Hollywood to make a film in Nazi-controlled Paris. Von Meck’s amorous adventures and incautious, volatile responses to Nazi oppression create a colourful plot, but the novel ends with his recognition of the true horror of Nazi brutality and a choice that leaves comedy far behind. *Les Faux-fuyants* (1991) also deploys humour in the story of a group of Parisian sophisticates fleeing Paris in the exodus of June 1940, only to find themselves stranded on a rustic farm in deepest France, struggling with the vast divide between two cultures. Prejudices on both sides create the comedy but are also partially confounded by experience, and again the novel ends on a more serious (and violent) note. Though Sagan’s sales and readership never again matched those of the 1950s and ’60s, these later novels maintained Sagan’s presence on the literary scene and achieved substantial sales in French and in translation, by carrying the narrative efficacy and page-turning quality of her earlier work into new spatial and temporal settings.

---

9 It is notoriously difficult to obtain sales figures, particularly for France, but the consensus is broadly that Sagan always sold well. Her obituary in the *Guardian* (29 September 2004) attributed to her sales of ‘more than 30m in France, and millions more worldwide’ (Corbett, 2004).
Of the three novels set in the Occupation years, *De guerre lasse* (1985) is the one that most clearly rearticulates Sagan’s distinctive worldview, and best exemplifies the entertainingly serious category of the ‘middlebrow’. That is, it is a novel that achieves fully the ‘enchantment’ of immersion in a fictional world, and deals with weighty issues lightly, by dissolving them into pleasurable story. It also views a dramatic period of national history predominantly from a woman’s perspective. Resituated in a period that etched ethical choices more sharply and made them, at least in retrospect, unavoidable, *De guerre lasse* represents the underlying values of Sagan’s world with particular clarity, through a narrative that is both sensual and compelling.

It is in keeping with Sagan’s spare, non-expansive style that her plots should adopt a condensed time-frame, from the single summer of *Bonjour Tristesse* or *Un certain sourire* to the spring-to-autumn structure of *La Chamade* or, at the extreme, a single day, in *Un Chagrin de passage*. The main plot of *De guerre lasse* takes place in a single week in May, with the following five months – critical as they are to the novel’s meaning – compressed into six pages. The story opens on a warm evening in May 1942, in the garden of a shabbily comfortable old house owned by Charles Sambrat, owner of a local shoe factory, a handsome ‘homme à femmes’ whose experience as a soldier in the weeks leading up to the Armistice has left him furiously determined never again to fight in any form of war. His guests are Jérôme, a childhood friend who has suddenly reappeared, and Alice, Jérôme’s companion and lover. Thanks to Sagan’s habitual technique of internal, shifting focalisation, the reader learns – but Charles does not – that Jérôme and Alice are active in the Resistance, and that the real goal of their visit is to use Charles’s house, just 25 kilometres south of the *ligne de démarcation* (the frontier between occupied and ‘free’ France) as a base for their activities. The plot deftly merges love story and Resistance drama: Charles and Alice almost immediately experience an intense if unspoken mutual attraction, and when Alice must suddenly depart for Paris on an urgent Resistance mission, Charles volunteers to accompany her, providing her with the camouflage role of his pampered mistress. In Paris, Alice meets the Jewish escapees left in peril by the arrest of a Resistance comrade and organises their rescue; she and Charles also become lovers. They return to face Jérôme’s anger and misery at the loss of Alice, and spend an idyllic few months together before news of Jérôme’s arrest leads Alice to quietly depart to rejoin the struggle, and Charles, faced with the arrest and probable deportation of his Franco-Jewish foreman and his family,
also accepts the necessity of commitment. The novel ends with the words, ‘De guerre lasse, Charles Sambrat s’engagea dans la Résistance’ (220; ‘Weary of war, Charles Sambrat joined the Resistance’).

What happens in the course of the novel is that a strongly asserted ethic of frivolity reveals its unavoidable counterpart of responsibility to others. The defence of pleasure, the high value accorded to simple well-being and sensory enjoyment so evident in the earlier work, is particularly eloquent here. If Alice is so intensely attracted to Charles, this is because his body and his whole manner communicate a pleasure in living, an attentiveness to the immediate that contrasts vividly with the ugly austerity, the fear and anxiety that have filled her recent life. Seen through Alice’s eyes, what arouses desire is not just that Charles is robustly handsome, that he has dark long-lashed eyes ‘un peu fendus’ and ‘la bouche pleine’ (12; ‘slightly almond-shaped […] a full mouth’), but that he radiates ‘santé […] plaisir à vivre’ (12; ‘health […] vitality’) and an uncomplicated kindness and appetite for life. His house and the land that surrounds it are extensions of himself, welcoming, dedicated to well-being rather than elegance and characterised (or so it seems to Alice) by the soft graceful lines of curves and circles rather than the sharp angles and linear purpose of a more austere and dutiful existence. Sagan discreetly but unmistakably references Colette, her precursor in the sensual description of male bodies and in the aesthetic and philosophical preference for the round over the straight, the cyclical over the linear, as Charles’s ‘cou si rond’ makes Alice think of ‘ces fameux cous décrits par une femme sensuelle dans des romans exquis’ (16; ‘his rounded neck makes her think of those famous necks described by a sensual woman in her exquisite novels’). The roundness of life chez Charles contrasts with the ‘images toujours à angles aigus’ of the dark, dreary streets, the drab hotels and station platforms of Alice’s recent travels in occupied France. What ignites her desire – for Charles, but also for life – is the way he embodies the right to happiness, against the honourable austerity of the thinner, more angular and anxious Jérôme. And as Jérôme ruefully reflects, Alice is transformed by this love for Charles from a woman ‘sensible, effrayée, secrète et douce’ (103; ‘sensitive, a little scared, secret and gentle’) into one who is ‘audacieuse, gaie, ironique et indépendante’ (103; ‘bold, gay, ironic and independent’). If she stays with Charles after the Paris episode, it is because after a long period of depression and anxious passivity she regains the sense of her own desires: ‘pour la première fois, c’était parce qu’elle en avait envie qu’elle allait faire quelque chose’ (177; ‘for the first time, she was going to do something simply because she wanted to’).
Charles’s trajectory from determined neutrality to commitment is also the result of intensely felt desire and tenderness for another individual. Jérôme’s love for Alice is at once selfless – he has cared for her through her separation from her Jewish husband and her ensuing depression – and possessive, but Charles’s desire for Alice is a desire for happiness. As Alice perceives it, ‘cet homme si plein, si délié, si achevé, si stable [...] avait besoin d’elle non pas pour vivre, mais pour être heureux’ (217–18; ‘this man who was so solid, so loose, so complete, so stable [...] needed her, not in order to stay alive but in order to be happy’). His immediate attraction to Alice leads to the Paris trip, where his feeling of protectiveness towards her widens into awareness of the inhumanity of the occupiers and their allies. His final choice is triggered by outrage at the fate of the Jewish family close to him, but also by the probable fate of his old friend Jérôme and the resulting loss of Alice. Living out the assertion and fulfilment of desire leads to defence of that right for others.

This sense of personal pleasure and happiness as expressive of life’s value permeates the text of De guerre lasse. The material world is vividly evoked: if Alice rediscovers a lost certainty that life is worth living, it is through the sensory details not just of the man but of his house – the ‘grosses fleurs roses, poussives et pâles’ (19; ‘the plump, lazy, faded roses’) of the wallpaper in her bedroom, the ‘grand feu violent brûlant dans la cheminée’ (19; ‘big fire roaring in the fireplace’) – and the pleasures they provide, from plentiful food contrasting with the deprivation of the occupied zone, to cycle rides to the river, icy cold swims and sun on the skin, and the agreeable sight of Charles’s body with its ‘aisance physique’ (‘easy fluency’) and ‘souple et rapide mécanique’ (88; ‘supple way of moving’). Laughter, that most physical of mental responses, also plays an important role. If Alice’s first bout of uncontrollable laughter, provoked by a clumsy remark by Charles, is so intense a discharge of accumulated tension that it ends in tears, in later episodes shared laughter reaffirms humanity and releases constraint. Thus during Alice’s strained attempts to reassure the dozen Jewish people awaiting escape from their Parisian hideout, awkward words suddenly give way to a gale of slightly hysterical, but nonetheless welcome shared hilarity (130). Thus too the awkwardness of an uncontrollable erection when Charles dances with Alice in a Parisian nightclub is defused when she gets a fit of helpless and finally contagious giggles. Humour is an important element of the novel despite the grimness of its context and, in the end, of its plot: Charles’s political naïveté and inability to conceal desire, Alice’s
rediscovered pleasure in small absurdities texture the narrative with an affirmative sense of fun.

One key scene dramatises the novel’s assertion of desire and pleasure as a form of resistance to inhumanity. Leaving the nightclub after curfew, Charles and Alice stroll arm-in-arm down the deserted Champs-Élysées towards their hotel. But at the Place de la Concorde they suddenly find themselves surrounded by German soldiers, headlights and machine guns, and witness the arrest and brutal treatment of a résistant. Suspected of being his accomplices, they are embarked in a lorry and taken to headquarters, where an officer interrogates them. When the officer makes insulting remarks to Alice about her Jewish ex-husband, Charles loses his temper and lunges for his throat – he is course beaten up by the guards. On the pretext of suspecting that Charles is Jewish, the officer tells the guards to remove his trousers and invites Alice to compare Charles with her husband. The two have not yet become lovers: Alice registers Charles’s intense humiliation and finds a response. Calling his name ‘avec, dans la voix, toute la séduction dont elle se sentait capable’ (156; ‘in the most seductive tone she could’), she catches his eye then looks down, deliberately and slowly, at his exposed body, before nodding approvingly and with ‘un regard rempli de la considération la plus crue’ (‘a look of the crudest appreciation’) she smiles, ‘un sourire radieux, ravi, débordant des promesses les plus précises’ (157; ‘a radiant, delighted, smile, full of the most explicit promises of what was to come’), leaving Charles embarrassed and delighted and his captors shocked and uncertain how to proceed. Alice’s expression of uninhibited desire becomes a gesture of resistance. The ethic of frivolity, in these extreme circumstances, is redeemed.

Conclusion

Sagan’s work exemplifies the literary middlebrow in its mingling of stylistic dexterity and serious themes with a popular verve that extended her readership far beyond a highly educated elite. She captured the particular sensibility of a historical moment, especially for women, and crafted its mood of frivolity shadowed by existential doubt into quickly read, seemingly flimsy tales of love and glamorous living, tales that also spoke of self-doubt, loneliness and death. The tone of her fiction is uniquely and unmistakably ‘saganesque’, but it also provides a clear example of what I have suggested is a middlebrow aesthetic. Its charm
depends on a vivid evocation of place, on slight yet compelling plots, a cast of credibly conflicted and imperfect characters, and a skilfully transparent narrative style. A sharply perceptive view of contemporary society and an affirmation of certain ethical values are strongly present but dissolved into the narrative. The ethic and aesthetic of ‘anxious nonchalance’ made Sagan the most successful female middlebrow writer of the 1950s and ’60s; affirming the ‘somptueuse précarité de la vie’, her fiction acknowledged too both the dark undercurrents of that period and many women’s dissatisfaction with the masculine models of self-fulfilment to which a qualified emancipation had granted them greater access. In her last works, and most notably _De guerre lasse_, a fictional return to a period defined (at least in retrospect) by clearer ethical and political choices, enabled Sagan to depict a causal connection between the intense appreciation of life’s pleasures, however transient, and an ethical commitment to the right of others to enjoy the same ‘splendid, precarious’ privilege.