Middlebrow Matters

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Les prix sont des oxymores: à la fois valeur marchande et symbolique’ (Ducas, 2013, 217)

(Prizes are oxymorons: their value is at once commercial and symbolic)

Literary prizes are a prime site of the middlebrow, for they occupy the space that connects literature defined as a high art form with literature as marketable product. Thus many of what are still the major literary awards were founded in the Belle Époque, when the expansion of publishing and literacy laid the ground for the development of middlebrow reading. If the Nobel Prize for outstanding contributions to literature was first awarded in 1901, the concept of an annual prize for a single novel began in France in 1903 with the Prix Goncourt, founded by the last will and testament of the writer and critic Edmond de Goncourt. Each December the Goncourt Academy, composed of ten respected figures from the literary world, meets to select the year’s winning novel, which is then hugely publicised through the media and goes on to sell several hundred thousand copies. Since the Goncourt, literary prizes in France have proliferated to the point where one recent study estimates that over two thousand now exist (Ducas, 2013, 5–6), and the model of the annual book award has been adopted across the world, not least in the UK where the Booker Prize (1968, since 2002 the Man-Booker), and the Orange Prize (1996, since 2014 the Baileys Women’s Prize for Fiction) have become vital mechanisms of the book industry and significant markers and shapers of reading tastes.
Prizes belong in that middle ground where Bourdieu’s field of restricted production and field of large-scale production intersect.\(^1\) On the one hand, they subscribe in principle to the ideal of a disinterested reward for pure literary quality, an annual identification and celebration of the very best writing; on the other, prizes are often founded and financed by publishers or other players in the book industry, and the judging process is frequently assumed to be skewed by commercial interests. From one perspective, prizes may be seen as devices that enable the dissemination of the finest writing to a wide public who, without the mediatisation of both author and text, might never consider themselves to be its audience, thus raising literary sensibility across the nation.\(^2\) Yet the convergence of literary evaluation with the dynamic of the marketplace may also be seen as a degradation of real literary value, exerting a downward pull towards mediocrity.

Given French culture’s historically rooted belief in an authentic art of the word that transcends both contingent concerns and the pleasure-seeking tastes of a mass public, prizes are particularly suspect in France. Long before the twentieth-century vogue for literary awards, Flaubert expressed his mistrust of even the most brilliant writers whose work managed to please a popular audience: ‘Il y a des génies énormes qui n’ont qu’un défaut, qu’un vice, c’est d’être sentis surtout par les esprits vulgaires, par les cœurs à poésie facile’ (1973, 363; ‘There are great geniuses who suffer from a single vice, that of being appreciated above all by vulgar minds and sentimental hearts’), and his sentiments are echoed in the widespread belief that, as Sylvie Ducas puts it, prizes (in this case the Goncourt) represent ‘une sorte de tribunal bienfaisant du lisible sanctionnant une littérature accessible pour le plus grand nombre’ (2004, 181; ‘a sort of well-meaning system of awards for literature that is easy-to-read, an endorsement of books accessible to the majority’). Thus if prizes have proliferated, it is partly because however oppositional and progressive its original goals, each prize rapidly becomes identified with aesthetic timidity and a desire to flatter the marketplace, so that another, alternative prize is founded to reward what its sponsors believe to be authentic, non-commercial literature. The Goncourt was founded in response to the perceived conservatism of the Académie Française, which in its panoply of awards ignored the novel as a genre ‘considéré comme

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\(^1\) See above, p. 100.

populaire, hybride et mineur’ (Ducas, 2004, 170; ‘considered popular, hybrid and minor’). The Goncourt would reward and consecrate this maligned literary form and promote a more innovative, challenging aesthetic: its founder wished it to be a prize ‘destiné aux tentatives hardies de la forme et de la pensée’ (Goncourt’s testament, quoted in Ashley, 2004, 24; ‘that would reward formal and intellectual daring’). But soon the Goncourt itself came to be perceived as an institution dominated by the major publishing houses and tending towards safe, marketable choices: the Prix Renaudot was founded in 1926 by a group of journalists who generally disagreed with the Goncourt jury’s choices, and the Prix Médicis in 1958, ‘en réaction aux choix conformistes des autres grands jurys littéraires’ (‘as a reaction against the conformist choices of the other major literary juries’) according to its official site. The chain production of anti-conformist alternatives to existing prizes continues, with the Prix novembre (1989, from 1999 renamed the Prix décembre) established with the explicit aim of rewarding formally radical writing as opposed to what its founders see as the staid, conservative choices of other juries.

From an author’s point of view, winning a literary prize is thus something of a poisoned chalice. To win the Goncourt, for example, ‘tient à la fois du banc d’infamie et de la légion d’Honneur’ (Ducas, 2004, 183; ‘is at the same time a mark of shame and a badge of honour’). On the positive side, a major prize means a huge increase in income, for sales of the winning novel soar, profits increase still further when it is republished in paperback, and any other publications by the winning author also benefit. The work also reaches a much wider readership, including, through translation, at the international level – and to become a recognisable public name guarantees further book contracts. But celebrity and material rewards are incompatible with the powerful image of the authentic writer as free spirit, rebel and gadfly committed only to the truth of his (or her) art: the successful author knows that they risk not only the loss of the privacy they need to write, but also that of peer esteem. Consecration by juries who are frequently cast as inherently conservative in taste or as puppets of the book industry, and by a mass audience assumed to lack discrimination, may damage rather than enhance an author’s reputation. Literary prize winners thus often greet the news of their success with a discourse of indifference or downright displeasure, like Jacques Borel who won the 1965 Goncourt for L’Adoration and declared that as a result, his ‘hostility to literary prizes … had only grown’: ‘Il y a des gens qui, je
suppose, achètent chaque année les prix littéraires. Mais ça ce sont les gens qui n’entrent qu’une fois par an dans une librairie!’ (‘I suppose there are people who always buy the prize-winning novels. But they’re the sort of people who only go into a bookshop once a year!’ Heinich, 1999, 28). What Borel expresses is the fear of being associated with that middlebrow audience credulous enough to believe in prizes, whose reading of his novels will somehow debase them, reducing them to the status of a cultural duty or a merely pleasurable fiction. Even more positive responses to literary awards tend to stress not the honour conferred, but the unsophisticated nature of the readership that prizes bring. Thus Michel Houellebecq, winner of the 2010 Goncourt for La Carte et le territoire and previously a cynical critic of the prize system, welcomed the larger public the award would provide but stressed the untutored nature of these readers:

Il y a des gens qui ne sont au courant de la littérature contemporaine que grâce au Goncourt, et la littérature n’est pas au centre des préoccupations des Français, donc c’est intéressant. (‘Le Goncourt’, 2010)

(There are people who are only aware of contemporary literature thanks to the Goncourt, and since literature does not count for much in most French people’s lives, this means that it matters)

James F. English sees the ‘antiprize rhetoric’ that accompanies awards as a knowing ‘part of the discursive apparatus of the prizes themselves’ (2005, 212).

This ambivalence about the value of literary awards is less evident among women prize winners, who make up a small minority of the laureates. Women’s legitimacy in the cultural field having been fragile and contested throughout history, female winners tend to welcome the recognition conferred by a prize both as individuals and as representatives of their sex. Simone de Beauvoir, winner of the 1954 Goncourt for Les Mandarins, shared in the resistance to media stardom of her male counterparts – ‘à mon avis, les rapports que l’écrivain soutient avec la vérité lui interdisent de se plier à ce traitement’ (1963, 338; ‘in my view, a writer’s relationship with truth means they should not give in to this sort of treatment’) – but acknowledged her exhilaration at gaining a wide

3 In 2000 Houellebecq had declared in a televised interview (with Thierry Ardisson on France 2) that ‘le Goncourt s’achète’ (‘the Goncourt can be bought’), attributing the failure (so far) of his own novels to win the prize to his publisher’s lack of a ‘special budget category for prizes – to pay the jury’.
and enthusiastic readership thanks to the publicity the prize afforded: ‘dans les moments où s’accomplit le rêve de mes vingt ans – me faire aimer à travers les livres – rien ne me gâche mon plaisir’ (338; ‘at times when the dreams I had as a twenty-year-old come true – to be loved for the books I have written – nothing can spoil my pleasure’). Annie Ernaux echoed this delight in being widely read when she won the Prix Renaudot for *La Place* in 1984. Interviewed by Nathalie Heinich for her study of the prize system, *L’Épreuve de la grandeur*, Ernaux acknowledged the material and symbolic importance of the prize for an author who, as a woman from a working-class family, had begun writing with a double lack of cultural legitimacy. The prize brought financial autonomy and popular success with readers from the milieu she had left behind: ‘C’est une victoire personnelle, mais ça a aussi été une revanche de type féministe pour moi, c’est sûr […] une petite réparation, au moins dans l’ordre du symbolique, ou du littéraire’ (100; ‘It’s a personal victory, but it also felt like a feminist victory, no doubt about it […] some small reparation, at least at a symbolic and literary level’). Marie NDiaye’s 2009 Goncourt for *Trois femmes puissantes* was also received with characteristic composure as a cause for happiness – she described herself as ‘très contente et très calme’ (‘very happy and very calm’) – and an ‘encouraging sign’ for women as a whole: yes, she replied to her interviewer on TV5’s news journal on 3 November 2009, it did matter that the prize had gone to a woman, ‘c’est très important, ce n’est pas insignifiant’ (it’s very important, it really matters).

For the history of annual literary prizes in France has had a strongly gendered dimension from the start. It was the refusal of the all-male Goncourt jury to take seriously the sole female contender for the inaugural prize (Myriam Harry with *La Conquête de Jérusalem*) that led in 1904 to the founding of the Prix Femina. As we have seen (Chapter 2), Belle Époque France had a considerable number of widely read and moderately eminent women writers, who joined together to establish the new prize out of indignation at the Goncourt’s overt sexism and a shared desire to carve out a female space in the nation’s overwhelmingly male culture. The Femina jury would be entirely composed of women, its first incarnation comprising 22 writers and intellectuals, including Daniel Lesueur and Marcelle Tinayre. The inaugural prize went to Myriam Harry’s spurned contender for the Goncourt. With the single exception of Judith Gautier, jury member from 1910 to 1917, the Goncourt Academy continued to exclude women from both juries and prizes until the end of the Second World War, when Elsa Triolet became
the first Goncourt Laureate (*Le Premier Accroc coûte 200 francs*) in 1944 and Colette joined the Academy (1945).  

The Femina makes no distinction of sex in the writers it rewards, thus asserting the place of women in the whole national process of literary evaluation and canon formation; it nonetheless has a far more egalitarian record than other prizes in terms of the authors it has crowned. By 2016, 42 out of 105 Femina prizes, or over 40 per cent, had gone to women, as opposed to 12 out of 113, or under 10 per cent, for the Goncourt. Unlike the Goncourt, established through the legacy of an esteemed literary figure, the Femina has its roots in middlebrow culture, for the prize was initially funded and promoted by two commercially successful women’s magazines, both aimed squarely at an educated middle-class market, *Vie heureuse* and *Femina*. The association between ‘feminine’ prizes and women’s magazines was echoed and amplified many decades later in 1969, when *Elle* magazine – also an upmarket, glossy women’s journal – set up the Grand Prix des Lectrices de *Elle*, which has since become another significant annual event on the literary calendar. The involvement of women’s magazines in the two major women-centred prizes both reinforces the suspicion of literary awards as market-led and demeaningly middlebrow and, within the more positive definition of the term adopted here, suggests that literary prizes represent a particularly valuable locus of the French feminine middlebrow.

This is the case in two slightly different senses, both of which I want to explore through the study of particular prize-winning texts. On the one hand, the major annual prizes may facilitate a different, middlebrow reading of a text initially conceived and received as literary in the more ‘restricted’ sense, as the cases of two female-authored Goncourt winners will show. On the other hand, it is also worth examining in more detail what kinds of text the female juries (Femina and *Elle*) reward, since their origins and close association with a wide female readership support the view that these will exemplify at least some aspects of female middlebrow taste.

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4 Given the collaborationist record of several Goncourt jurors at the time – four out of ten were on the blacklist of the Resistance – the award of the prize to a strongly pro-Resistance text in 1944 might also be considered strategic. The sudden opening up to women can also be viewed cynically as an attempt to divert attention from the jury’s political embarrassment (Ducas, 2013, 153).

5 The Femina was not awarded in the years 1914–16 or 1940–43.
As we have seen, since its inception only 10 per cent of Goncourt-winning texts have been written by women. Of these, some of the most commercially successful have been by authors whose dominant image is distinctly more high- than middlebrow, but who have reached a wide ‘non-specialist’ public thanks to the publicity surrounding the prize. In this category one might include recent winners such as Lydie Salvayre, whose novel *Pas pleurer* won the Goncourt in 2014, or Marie NDiaye, who won in 2009 with *Trois femmes puissantes*. Historically, though, perhaps the most striking cases of ‘middlebrow-isation’ through the Goncourt have been Simone de Beauvoir’s *Les Mandarins* (Goncourt 1954), and Marguerite Duras’s *L’Amant* (1984). Both of these novels rapidly sold hundreds of thousands of copies and joined less highbrow contemporaries on the bestseller lists for the relevant year. Their sales continued into the millions in French alone, with total readership achieving dizzying numbers though extensive translation. Before the Goncourt, Beauvoir’s status as a philosopher and politically engaged intellectual, and Duras’s association with ‘difficult’ avant-garde style, had restricted their primary readership to a cultural elite. And indeed both *Les Mandarins* and *L’Amant* are complex in form, highly serious in theme and demand a lot of their readers. Both, however, also foreground themes of particular relevance to a female audience, and are open to that immersive, emotionally powerful, page-turning reading that characterises middlebrow fiction.

By 1954 Beauvoir had already published two novels, *L’Invitée* in 1943 and *Le Sang des autres* in 1945, and both had been – on the whole – critically well received. Her more public celebrity began with her powerful, groundbreaking feminist essay of 1949 *Le Deuxième Sexe*, and the polarised responses of acclaim and scandalised hostility that greeted it. Beauvoir herself recognised the gendered nature of this reception, and despite her initial intention to be, as the culture demanded, a ‘serious and therefore necessarily male-identified’ writer (Fallaize, 1995, 53), she now began to revise her view of the value of a primarily female readership. In her memoirs she records what Elizabeth Fallaize describes

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6 Colette christened herself a ‘Goncourt’ when she joined the jury or ‘Goncourt ten’ in 1945 (Colette, 1973, 139). I borrow the term to mean (also) female Goncourt winners.
as the Damascene moment\(^7\) when she recognised and challenged the hegemonic view that serious writing meant writing for men:

On m’aurait surprise et même irritée, à trente ans, si on m’avait dit que je m’occuperais des problèmes féminins et que mon public le plus sérieux, ce serait des femmes. Je ne le regrette pas. Divisées, déchirées, désavantagées, pour elles plus que pour les hommes il existe des enjeux, des victoires, des défaites. Elles m’intéressent; et j’aime mieux, à travers elles, avoir sur le monde une prise limitée mais solide, que de flotter dans l’universel. (Beauvoir, 1963, 211)

(At thirty, I would have been surprised and even irritated if anyone had told me that I would write about women’s problems, and that my most important readership would be women. But I do not regret this at all. Women are divided, conflicted, disadvantaged, so that there is more at stake for them than for men and life means a series of victories and defeats. Women interest me, and I would rather, through them, have a defined but solid grasp on the world than float around in the universal.)

It seems fair to assume both that a female readership was in Beauvoir’s mind as she wrote *Les Mandarins* and that when the Goncourt brought the book to the attention of a wider public, and sales rose sharply from Gallimard’s original print run of 11,000 to 200,000, a good proportion of these new readers were women. The text bears this out, for Beauvoir interweaves a highly topical plot of ideas and political activism in post-war France with a courageous tackling of the most intimate topics from a female point of view: sexuality, the ageing body, passionate love are all central to a novel that is also deeply engaged with the public politics of the post-Liberation years.\(^8\)

Whilst many critics read *Les Mandarins* primarily as a roman à clef, or a lightly fictionalised version of Beauvoir’s own life among the left-wing intelligentsia of post-war Paris, others such as the author Gérard d’Houville\(^9\) found it above all ‘passionnant’ (‘a compelling

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\(^7\) Fallaize describes this passage as ‘a real road to Damascus declaration for Beauvoir’ (1995, 54).

\(^8\) After *Les Mandarins*, this holistic view of experience as inseparably public and private would continue to attract a large female readership through Beauvoir’s multivolume memoirs, parts of which were pre-published in *Elle* magazine. Her last two fictions, *Les Belles Images* (1966) and *La Femme rompue* (1967 – also serialised in *Elle*), deal even more explicitly with both the social and personal dimensions of women’s lives.

\(^9\) D’Houville was the pen-name of Marie de Régnier (1875–1963), poet and
‘Une fois que le lecteur a commencé la lecture du roman, il ne peut le quitter’ (Larsson, 1988, 147; ‘Once the reader has begun, he [sic] can’t put the novel down’). Beauvoir was undoubtedly committed to the concept of the novel as mimetic and immersive: in 1946, her article ‘Littérature et métaphysique’ (in Les Temps modernes) affirmed the view that good fiction should enable the reader to ‘effectuer des expériences imaginaires, aussi complètes, aussi inquiétantes que les expériences vécues’ (quoted in Dugast-Portes, 1992, 66; ‘have imaginary experiences that are as real and as disquieting as experience that is lived’), and she would later reject New Novelist Nathalie Sarraute’s advocacy of the delicate ‘tropisms’ of subjectivity as the most appropriate matter for narrative, with a vigorous defence of plot, character and the panoramic treatment of the historical and the social:

Les collectivités, les événements, les foules, les relations des hommes aux autres hommes, et aux choses, tous ces objets bien réels, et irréductibles à nos palpitations souterraines, méritent et exigent l’éclairage de l’art. (Beauvoir, 1963, 291)

(Social groups, events, crowds, man’s relationships with others and with things, all of these realities that are irreducible to the inner flutterings of consciousness deserve and need illumination through art)

And the novel puts this credo into practice, constantly connecting the large-scale ‘social groups, events and crowds’ with personal relationships that are shown to be shaped and inflected by the specificity of the social moment, but are also portrayed in all their felt immediacy for the protagonists. The plot and the political and ethical debates in which the characters engage are narrated through the specific, embodied consciousness of fictional protagonists rather than from the ‘god’s eye’ view of an omniscient narrator: in alternating chapters, Beauvoir

novelist, one of the Belle Époque generation of well-known women writers and the first woman to win the Académie’s ‘prix de littérature’ in 1918. She reviewed Les Mandarins after the award of the Goncourt, in the Revue des Deux Mondes (November–December 1954).

10 Sarraute, one of the principal theorists and practitioners of the nouveau roman, attacked the mimetic, plot-driven, politically engagé type of fiction exemplified by Beauvoir’s novel as outmoded and untrue to the psychological complexity of real human experience, in her article ‘Conversation et sous-conversation’. This was first proposed to Les Temps modernes, and Beauvoir probably read it first in manuscript form. Rejected by Sartre’s journal, it was finally published in the Nouvelle Revue Française in January and February of 1956 (Auclerc, 2006).
focalises her narrative from the points of view of Henri Perron and Anne Dubreuilh, the latter through a first-person narrative voice. The novel begins at Christmas 1944, shortly after the Liberation. Henri, writer and Resistance hero, sees the world through a strong sense of moral responsibility balanced with an ardent appetite for life’s pleasures. Anne, psychoanalyst and married to an older, eminent intellectual (Robert), struggles for a sense of purpose and belonging in the face of the terrible human suffering that the Occupation has brought, the aftermath of which she now treats in her clinical practice. Through both characters, we face the complex moral issue of dealing with wartime collaborators, the erosion of any sense of the victors’ moral superiority as the atom bomb is dropped on Hiroshima and the US backs despotic regimes in Europe, and the difficulty of defining a progressive left politics as the Cold War hardens and the truth of Stalin’s regime is revealed. Through Henri, the reader is engaged in the difficult negotiation between personal integrity and strategic political choices, but also in the intimate ethics of love and desire as he tries to extricate himself from a once-passionate, now oppressive relationship with Paule, and pursues very different models of love with the beautiful but damaged Josette and sullen, forthright Nadine, Anne’s daughter. Anne’s narrative dramatises the war’s legacy of pain, but also carries the story away from France and braids romance into the plot as she embarks on a study trip to the USA, falls passionately in love with an American writer, Lewis Brogan, and must weigh the welcome intensity of their reciprocal desire against the secure identity, professional satisfaction and responsibilities she has left behind in Paris.

At well over five hundred pages, and dealing with the intricate politics of post-war France, *Les Mandarins* contains a considerable amount of potentially dry dialogue and reported debate on political and ethical issues. If the novel can nonetheless be read in the mode of what Marie-Laure Ryan calls ‘entrancement’, this is thanks to Beauvoir’s capacity to shape ideas into dramatic event and to crystallise issues and conjunctures into resonant tableaux. Typical of the latter is the opening scene, where most of the main characters gather to celebrate a Christmas of joyful liberation deeply shadowed by the absence of all their dead. Abundant food, gifts, wine and dancing express a shared jubilation that has a bitter undertone of guilt and apprehension: ‘Voici les bougies, le houx, le gui qu’ils ne voient pas; tout ce qui m’est donné,
The novel’s central tension is established here and must have resonated strongly with contemporary readers: the elation of personal life and happiness recovered, of new beginnings and the opening up of the future, held in painful balance by the war-bequeathed knowledge of human brutality and the gathering threat of the Cold War. On the cycling holiday in the Ardèche shared by Anne, Robert and Henri, the horror of war is written on the landscape in the burnt-out ruins of a village whose inhabitants have been massacred by the retreating Nazi forces, and news of the atom bomb dropped on Hiroshima casts a terrible shadow; yet all three protagonists also display a rediscovered, visceral capacity for pleasure in living that survives the pain, as they freewheel down mountains on rusty, war-weary bicycles, sleep in the open air, are transfixed by the colours of a waterfall – ‘les détails de ces jeux de vapeur et d’écume, ces métamorphoses, ces évanes- cences, ces menus maelstrôms’ (220; ‘the details of this play of steam and foam, these metamorphoses, these tiny storms’). The plot is often played out through dramatic events, the moral question of whether and how to punish those who collaborated with the Nazis, for example, becoming intensely personal for Henri when he discovers the unsavoury wartime past of his lover Josette and her mother, leading to a dramatic showdown, a revenge killing and the urgent, furtive disposal of a corpse when one of the Resistance fraternity turns out to have betrayed the Jews he purported to save.

Narrative voice, pace and action open *Les Mandarins* to the ‘page-turning’ reading praised by d’Houville. The novel’s success with women readers, though, was surely also due to its capturing of tensions in female experience that had a particular intensity in the post-war years, and to its unusually frank treatment of love and sexuality from a woman’s perspective. The year 1944 at last saw French women gain the right to vote, and for the first time the new Republic enshrined the equality of the sexes in the nation’s constitution. However, deeply embedded beliefs in women’s secondary status retained their force, and policies aimed at regenerating a humiliated nation stressed the need for reproduction, reaffirmed the primacy of the couple and maternity, and

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12 Kristin Ross charts a ‘massive post war French reaffirmation of the couple as standard-bearer of the state-led modernization effort and as bearer of all affective values as well’ (1995, 126). This primacy of the couple, and the split reality of
glorified youth, particularly through cultural emphasis on the young and beautiful female body. Beauvoir creates a cast of minor characters who embody particular aspects of women’s situation. Nadine, Anne’s daughter, is a sullen, angry teenager of the generation whose adolescence was blighted by the war and Occupation. Sexually adventurous in a way that evokes both Némirovsky’s heroines of the late 1930s and Sagan’s contemporaneous Bonjour Tristesse, Nadine finds sex both pleasureless and meaningless, and searches restlessly for a possible future. Josette, one of Henri’s lovers, is a starlet managed by an ambitious – and ex-collaborationist – mother, a vulnerable figure rewarded for her looks rather than her talent, as France moves into the age of the mediatised femme-image: ‘C’est humiliant d’être belle’ (279; ‘It’s humiliating to be beautiful’), she replies to Henri’s compliments on her laboriously maintained beauty.

The two principal female characters though are women who are leaving youth behind, and who confront the choice between that most traditional form of female fulfilment, passionate romantic love, and a harder, lonelier yet (in the novel’s terms) more ethically sound alternative of assuming their own freedom. With Paule, Beauvoir tackles in fictional form the case of the ‘woman-in-love’ (l’amoureuse) that she had analysed in Le Deuxième Sexe:13 Paule’s inability to confront the loss of Henri, whose love has lent her life shape, purpose and vicarious glory for more than a decade is both moving and painful to read, and brings the philosophy of freedom and self-responsibility graphically to life. Through Henri’s mix of sympathy and weary irritation, and through Anne’s empathetic first-person narration, Paule is at once condemned and understood. ‘Cured’ of her obsessive love for Henri, Paule is unable to reinvent herself without the validation of his desiring gaze: ‘elle serait comme moi’, thinks Anne, ‘comme des millions d’autres: une femme qui attend de mourir sans plus savoir pourquoi elle vit’ (420; ‘[without Henri] ‘she would be like me, like millions of others: a woman waiting to die without knowing any more what she is living for’).

Anne herself ends the war frozen by grief, unable to feel or to envisage a future. It is in an attempt to re-connect with her own body and emotions women’s situation in post-war France, is equally relevant to the fiction of Françoise Sagan. See Chapter 5, p. 128, n. 2.

13 Beauvoir analyses the woman who invests her life and identity in love as ‘L’Amoureuse’, and defines her dependence on the man she loves as a form of (socially encouraged) mauvaise foi (‘bad faith’).
that she accepts an invitation to go to bed with the cynical Scriassine, in
a scene that stages with rare precision uncomfortable aspects of women’s
experience of sex. No other ‘serious’ writers of the period dealt, for
example, with the discomfort of vaginal sex in the absence of desire –
penetration for Anne produces a feeling like ‘l’acier du dentiste dans une
gencive engourdie’ (74; ‘the dentist’s drill in a numbed gum’) – nor the
strategic dishonesty of an orgasm faked to bring an end to an awkward
situation: ‘Cependant j’étais vaincue: j’acceptai de soupirer, de geindre;
not very convincingly, I imagine, because he asked: “Didn’t you
come?” “Yes, yes I did”). The first encounters with Lewis Brogan, the
question of whether or not to make the first move (conventionally the
male prerogative) and the relief when reciprocity is confirmed, the sense
of a body brought back to life by the other’s desire, 14 these are preludes
to the passionate love affair that Beauvoir also depicts with an explicit
sensuality that earned her accusations of obscenity from conservative
critics (Larsson, 1988, 138): 15 ‘J’embrassai ses yeux, ses lèvres, ma bouche
descendit le long de sa poitrine; elle effleura le nombril enfantin, la
fourrure animale, le sexe où un cœur battait à petits coups’ (327–28; ‘I
kissed his eyes, his lips, my mouth moved down his chest, brushing the
childlike navel, the animal fur, his sex where I could feel the rapid beat of
his heart’). The Anne-Lewis story is also the occasion for an unqualified
valorisation of the experience of romantic love – ‘Lewis était tout entier
dans mes bras, moi dans les siens, nous ne désirions rien d’autre: nous
possédions tout pour toujours’ (328; ‘Lewis was in my arms and I in
his, we wanted nothing more: we had everything, for ever’) – that
earned Beauvoir the incredulous scorn of some feminist critics. 16 Anne

14 After their first kiss, Anne describes herself entering a bar ‘en titubant comme
dut tituber Lazare ressuscité’ (317; ‘reeling and staggering like Lazarus just brought
back to life’).
15 Les Mandarins was placed on the Catholic Church’s index of prohibited
books in 1956.
16 See for example Evans, who writes: ‘Rather like the heroines of Barbara
Cartland or Denise Robbins, Anne finds herself “transformed” by male sexual
desire [...] Like lovers in romantic fiction, Lewis and, particularly, Anne, sink into a
rosy haze of delight’ (1985, 82–83). But Beauvoir seems to me to be doing something
more interesting here, in acknowledging the extreme pleasure of reciprocal desire
(also celebrated in romantic fiction) as one element in an existential and political
drama.
finally renounces a love that would mean exchanging the professional, political and family life she has built in Paris for a life centred solely on her relationship with Lewis. The novel nonetheless explores with great sympathy the sensual and emotional intensity of romantic love, weaving the genre of romance into the novel of ideas, and representing ethical issues of freedom and responsibility in terms of the tension between old and new models of female fulfilment.

A 579-page novel about politically engaged intellectuals was not the most obvious candidate for popular success, but Goncourt publicity made Les Mandarins available for the immersive, identificatory, emotionally charged reading that its narrative also offers, particularly to women readers given its distinctive focusing of philosophical and political issues through female as well as male experience. The massive post-Goncourt readership achieved by L’Amant, some thirty years later, was surprising for different reasons: Duras was perceived as ‘difficult’ not because she was a heavyweight intellectual, but rather because she was associated with the formally rarefied avant-garde trend of the nouveau roman. Her sparsely poetic novel Moderato Cantabile had won the short-lived Prix de mai in 1958, with a jury chaired by the founder of the prize, Alain Robbe-Grillet, and including Roland Barthes, Georges Bataille and Nathalie Sarraute. Published by the Éditions de Minuit, whose elegant white volumes immediately connote demanding modernism rather than easy reading, L’Amant was not expected to appeal to a mass audience. However this semi-autobiographical tale of a passionate liaison between a teenage French girl and an older Chinese man, set in French colonial Indo-China of the 1930s, outstripped forecast sales even before its victory at the Goncourt, particularly after Bernard Pivot devoted an edition of his popular TV book programme Apostrophes to Duras and her novel in September 1984. The award of the Goncourt magnified sales beyond all expectation, and L’Amant has remained, as one critic put it, ‘Duras’s Titanic’ (Garcia, 2005).

The reasons generally cited for this are the novel’s apparently confessional nature and its deployment of the script of romance. Aged 70 when the novel came out, Duras was a well-known figure in France: a member of the wartime Resistance, a vocal supporter of the then President of the Republic, Francois Mitterrand, and a prolific if ‘restricted field’ author some of whose writing had already placed her own biography in the public arena. Though L’Amant makes no explicit promise of autobiographical sincerity, alternating between first- and third-person narration to designate its young protagonist and retaining her anonymity
throughout, the text certainly invites an autobiographical reading. The old narrator who looks back on her past is a writer whose appearance and life story exactly match those of the author, and who promises to reveal more than hitherto about her life: ‘Ici je parle de périodes cachées de cette même jeunesse’ (14; ‘Here I speak of hidden periods of my youth’). Since what is revealed is a story of transgressive sex and familial violence threaded through with incestuous desire, the novel undoubtedly provoked a curiosity that was as prurient as it was strictly literary. Its depiction of interracial relationships during the colonial period, like its brief evocations of Occupied France, also chimed with extra-literary preoccupations in 1980s France. This was a decade that saw the beginning of a retrospective fascination with the colonial years, evidenced in the creation of museums and memorials as well as in literature and cinema, and a renewed interest in the Occupation period, triggered in part by high-profile trials of ageing war criminals. *L’Amant* resonates with national memory, both guilt-ridden and nostalgic.

It is also a novel that sets in play the familiar narrative pleasures of the romance. Already the title announces the centrality of love, and the key components of the classic love story structure the text: the first encounter, on the ferry across the Mekong; the realisation of mutual desire, in the lover’s apartment deep in the city’s native quarter; the separation, as the girl embarks on an ocean liner that will return her to France. A final scene set in the novel’s present time echoes romantic belief in the life-changing, life-long nature of love. Years later, ‘après la guerre, après les mariages, les divorces, les livres’, the Chinese lover comes to Paris and calls the narrator: ‘Il lui avait dit [...] qu’il l’aimait encore, qu’il ne pourrait jamais cesser de l’aimer, qu’il l’aimerait jusqu’à sa mort’ (141–42; ‘after the war, the marriages, the divorces, the books [...] He told her [...] that he still loved her, that he could never stop loving her, that he would love her till he died’). Valérie Bainsnée’s analysis of *L’Amant* attributes the novel’s commercial success to the fact that ‘in popular reading’ it becomes ‘no more than a romance in an exotic setting’ (1994, 160).

It seems safe to say that the novel’s compelling version of the love story plays a part in its mass appeal, as does the setting, exotically distant for most readers in both time and space. Other elements, though, contribute equally to the enchantment of reading *L’Amant*, and explain its median place on the boundary between canonical literature (it has inspired countless scholarly studies) and popular reading. For although in several respects *L’Amant* displays the formal features of a
challengingly experimental text, stretching language and genre beyond their familiar shapes, its specificity is that these features work towards, not against, the reader’s engrossment in the story. Generic ambivalence, for example, is often a marker of the formally experimental text, and L’Amant hovers indeterminately between the categories of novel – the genre implied by the award of the Goncourt – and autobiography. But Duras’s narrative framing of the story within what is recognisably her own life serves less to disrupt than to thicken the plot of what can easily be read as narrative fiction. As readers we are immediately absorbed into the mental world of a woman ageing and remembering: ‘Un jour, j’étais âgée déjà, dans le hall d’un lieu public, un homme est venu vers moi’ (9; ‘One day, I was already old, in the foyer of a public building, a man came up to me’); with her, we then move in and out of the past. Normal practice in autobiography is to affirm the identity of present and past selves by sustained use of the first person, but Duras refers to her adolescent self as both ‘je’ and ‘elle’, or as ‘la petite’ (‘the [female] child’), switching between these sometimes within a single passage. Because this corresponds to the structures of memory, in which the older self at once identifies with the younger and sees her as other, distanced by time, it can be assimilated into an immersive reading: the reader both enters the narrator’s remembering consciousness and is transported as an observer onto the scene of events. The play of focalisation also actualises one of the book’s persistent if unostentatious themes, namely the way in which identity is conferred by others as well as the self: ‘la petite’ signals focalisation of the principal protagonist from the perspective of the lover, the mother and at times the French colonial community – ‘Chaque soir cette petite vicieuse va se faire caresser le corps par un sale Chinois millionnaire’ (109–10; ‘Every evening that little slut goes to have her body caressed by a dirty Chinese millionaire’). As readers for pleasure, rather than literary analysts, we can move seamlessly in and out of these shifting lenses of memory and identification.

Duras’s elliptical, incantatory prose style also fuses highly ‘literary’ writing with the textual transparency that favours rapt engagement in the fictional world:

Que je vous dise encore, j’ai quinze ans et demi.
C’est le passage d’un bac sur le Mékong.
L’image dure pendant toute la traversée du fleuve.
J’ai quinze ans et demi, il n’y a pas de saisons dans ce pays-là, nous sommes dans une saison unique, chaude, monotone, nous sommes dans la longue zone chaude de la terre, pas de printemps, pas de renouveau. (11)
(Let me say again, I’m fifteen and a half. It’s on the ferry crossing the Mekong river. The image lasts throughout the whole river crossing. I’m fifteen and a half, there are no seasons in that country, we are in a single hot, monotonous season, in the earth’s long hot zone, with no spring, no renewal)

Syntactically and lexically, the style could scarcely be simpler: the tense is the present, component units (clauses or phrases) are connected only by commas, words are familiar from everyday use. Reading flows, without textual asperities that demand attention. Yet multiple levels of emotion are communicated: the narrator’s address to the reader (‘que je vous dise encore’) is at once urgent and intimate; the use of the simple verb ‘C’est’ (‘it is’) renders the potency of a remembered moment fixed in time (‘C’est le passage …’); the sense of an oppressive fixity of time and place weighing the girl down (‘une saison unique’, ‘pas de renouveau’) is countered by the signs that she is poised to cross literal and metaphorical boundaries (‘quinze ans et demi’, ‘la traversée du fleuve’). The abandonment of causal or sequential relationships, normally designated by connecting or subordinating words (‘and’, ‘but’, ‘so’, ‘then’ and their equivalents) or by punctuation, conveys a refusal of standard logic and the sense of an emotional intensity irreducible to rational language. Ellipsis highlights all that remains outside discourse, ‘as though syntax itself is on the point of giving way under the pressure of the task’ as Leslie Hill puts it (1993, 120). The sense of being immersed in a dramatic fictional world is intensified rather than interrupted by a narrative voice that foregrounds the bare adequacy of language to render forceful emotion.

Raphaël Baroni describes the compelling appeal of immersive fiction as the ‘conversion, through plotting, of existential tensions into narrative tensions’ (2007, 408). L’Amant, with its commanding, intimate narrative voice and illusory simplicity of style, carries the reader down the familiar path of the love story and interweaves this with the more disturbing, violent drama of the narrator’s family: dead father; depressive, half-mad mother; one brother, ‘the assassin’, brutal and death-dealing; and the other, ‘le petit frère’, his gentle victim. It is through what Bachelard (1971) calls ‘the material imagination’ that these interlocking ‘narrative tensions’ are rendered sensuous and immediate for the reader. Rather than through dialogue or discursive narrative, emotion is frequently conveyed through physical imagery, as in the adolescent girl’s wonderfully polysemic outfit at her first
appearance in the text: a faded, hand-me-down silk dress of her mother held in at the waist by her brother’s leather belt; a broad-brimmed man’s hat; worn high-heeled gold lamé shoes; little-girl plaits but face powder and red lipstick. The girl is poised between childhood and womanhood, her identity entwined with that of her mother yet shifting determinedly towards separation, the androgyny of adolescence present in the eclectic mix of gender signs. The lovers’ first meeting takes place during a river crossing, with all its signifying force of passage, transition, coming of age – and also classical echoes of crossing the Styx to the land of the dead. The river itself is a rich, multifaceted image of passion, the force of life that also flows irresistibly towards death, and perhaps too of writing (for the girl already knows she wants to write) that can capture and carry whatever reality it encounters:

j’ai peur que les câbles cèdent, que nous soyons emportés vers la mer. [...] Le courant est si fort, il emporterait tout, aussi bien des pierres, une cathédrale, une ville. Il y a une tempête qui souffle à l’intérieur du fleuve. (18)

(I am afraid that the cables will give way, that we’ll be swept out to sea. [...] The current is so powerful, it could carry everything away, rocks, a cathedral, a whole town. Within this river, a storm is raging)

And water functions throughout the text as a profusely evocative image, until the remembered story ends with the girl crossing the ocean and leaving behind Indo-China, her family and her lover. Water represents the flow of desire, the lover expressing his erotic yet quasi-maternal tenderness for the girl by washing her gently after their first love-making; the narrator likening sexual pleasure to ‘La mer, sans forme, simplement incomparable’ (50; ‘The sea, formless, simply incomparable’). It also marks the contrast between daughter and mother: for if the girl surrenders herself to the ebb and flow of river and ocean, to the flow of desire for the lover and the flow of language through writing, the aridity of the mother’s life is figured in her despairing attempts to block the sea that invades the land she has been tricked into buying by corrupt officials: ‘La mère n’a pas connu la jouissance’ (50; ‘The mother has never known sexual pleasure’). Yet the girl’s determined separation from her mother is also countered by love – ‘la saleté, ma mère, mon amour’ (31; ‘that bitch, my mother, my love’) – and in one jubilant scene the mother is pictured washing the house in the dry season, scrubbing the floors and flooding the whole domestic space until water flows out over the lawns, and the mother laughs and dances and ‘chacun
pense et elle aussi la mère que l’on peut être heureux dans cette maison défigurée qui devient soudain un étang …’ (77; ‘everyone thinks and the mother thinks too that it is possible to be happy in this house suddenly transformed into a pond …’).

The mother-daughter plot, the tension between the daughter’s needs to separate and to remain connected, represents a vital narrative thread of *L’Amant*, and with the theme of coming of age, and the tension between romantic love and independent self-realisation, marks this novel, like *Les Mandarins*, as one that plays out existential questions in the feminine. In terms of appeal to a female readership, this is also a novel that affirms female agency. The girl resists all pressures to conform to a passive, other-directed model of colonial womanhood: ‘Elles attendent’, she writes of the colonial wives: ‘Elles s’habillent pour rien […] Certaines deviennent folles’ (27; ‘They wait. They dress up for no purpose […] Some of them go mad’). In some senses taking her mother as model, but also resisting her, she takes control of her life: knowingly assuming the role of prostitute in which the family have cast her to bring much-needed money from her Chinese lover into the household; at the same time, pursuing her own exploration of desire and love by transgressing her society’s laws on race and gender; moving determinedly towards writing in the face of her mother’s opposition. And the narrator too is a forceful female voice, her ambition to write fully realised, undaunted by age – the image of her ‘devastated’ face is ‘celle qui me plaît de moi-même, celle où je me reconnais, où je m’enchanté’ (9; ‘the image of my face that I like, the one in which I recognise myself, that delights me’) – and able to transport her reader into a powerfully realised world in which emotion takes sensuous material form.

These two ‘Goncourtes’ are arguably the most striking examples of the way a major national prize can open up texts initially perceived as addressed to a ‘restricted’, highbrow market to middlebrow reading. If *Les Mandarins* and *L’Amant* were exceptionally successful in broadening their readership, this is because both novels – the one solidly realist, the other lyrically elliptical in form – possessed the qualities needed for a pleasurably immersive or ‘entrancing’ read: a compelling sense of place and time that anchors plot within a believable fictional world; characters who invite interest and empathy; a thematic density that resonates with readers’ existential and topical concerns. Both stand out from the majority of Goncourt-winning texts in the sense that they focalise the world through the lens of female experience.
The women’s prizes: Femina and Elle

Set up in response to the male bias of French literary culture, the Femina prize was clearly if not explicitly designed to reward novels with appeal for a female readership. The title of the Grand Prix des Lectrices de Elle speaks for itself: there is something mildly provocative in making the readers of what is normally perceived as a fashion and beauty magazine the judges of a literary ‘Grand Prix’, though this of course provided fuel for the negative view of prizes as market-led and encouraging a prosaically unadventurous type of literature. Sylvie Ducas, in her scholarly and largely sympathetic work on literary prizes in France, sees the tendency of juries to prefer a ‘réalisme accessible au grand public’ to what she calls a ‘littérature transformatrice, productrice de textes nouveaux susceptibles de déplacer les catégories du lisible’ (2003, 72–73; ‘widely accessible realism […] transformative literature that produces texts capable of shifting the categories of what is considered readable’) as particularly marked in the case of the ‘feminine’ prizes. Often, she says, content takes precedence over form so that books that feature strong heroines are favoured over those that seek to challenge the masculine bias of narrative form and language itself (Ducas, 2003, 74).

This claim is supported to some extent by the evidence of past decisions. Certainly, the most avant-garde or formally experimental women writers, such as Nathalie Sarraute, Hélène Cixous, Chantal Chawaf or Duras herself, have failed to figure in the prize lists. With hindsight, Françoise Mallet-Joris’s sub-Balzacian L’Empire céleste seems an odd Femina choice for 1958, the year that saw the publication of Duras’s Moderato Cantabile and of Christiane Rochefort’s angry, deeply ambiguous take on the love story Le Repos du guerrier. Isabelle Hausser’s La Table des enfants surely won the Elle prize in 2002 more for its subject matter – the story of a woman struggling to come to terms with the death of her daughter – than for its ploddingly omniscient narrative style. But counter-examples are more numerous: the Femina
has introduced to a wider public work by Claire Etcherelli (Élise ou la vraie vie, 1967), Marguerite Yourcenar (L’Œuvre au noir, 1968), Jorge Semprun (La Deuxième Mort de Ramon Mercader, 1969), Jocelyne François (Joue-nous ’España’, 1980), Anne Hébert (Les Fous de Bassan, 1982), Sylvie Germain (Jours de colère, 1989), Camille Laurens (Dans ces bras-là, 2000), Marie NDiaye (Rosie Carpe, 2001) and Nancy Huston (Lignes de faille, 2006), to pick out only a selection of novels that are (in most cases) highly readable, but are also thematically and formally challenging. The Elle prize includes translations and has rewarded a number of English-language middlebrow bestsellers such as William Boyd’s compelling Any Human Heart (A Livre ouvert, 2003), Khaled Hosseini’s The Kite Runner (Les Cerfs-volants de Kaboul, 2006) and Kathryn Stockett’s The Help (La Couleur des sentiments, 2011). It has also promoted francophone writers such as Simone Schwarz-Bart (Pluie et vent sur Télumée Miracle, 1973), Gisèle Pineau (La Grande Drive des esprits, 1994) and Nancy Huston (L’Empreinte de l’ange, 1999), all of whose novels deal with difficult themes of colonial oppression and its aftermath, violence both political and domestic, gendered power relations, and do so through innovative forms of narrative. The Elle prize in particular, thanks to its reader-based evaluation process and the huge female audience reached by the magazine,\(^19\) has the capacity not only to respond to but also to widen the tastes of ‘ordinary’ readers.

It is thus hard to generalise about the type of novel promoted by women’s literary prizes, novels which through the mechanism of the awards reach a broad swathe of ‘ordinary’ readers and become – briefly or more durably – part of the middlebrow canon. Two very different examples of twenty-first-century winners will help to delineate the field and demonstrate both the variety and the common features of contemporary feminine middlebrow. Claudie Gallay’s Les Déferlantes won the Elle prize in 2009, a novel that exemplifies what might be – and has been – termed the good holiday read:\(^20\) with a vivid sense of place, a plot that combines the investigative pleasures of the detective genre with quietly intense romance and the narrative voice of a dour but

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19 At the height of its success in 1965, Elle was apparently being read by one in eight French women; circulation figures for 2012–13 were close to 400,000.

20 Josyane Savigneau’s review in Le Monde des livres (3 August 2008) describes the book: ‘Bien qu’il soit gros, donc un peu encombrant, c’est le roman qu’il faut emporter en vacances’ (‘It’s a big book to fit in the luggage, but it’s still the one to take on holiday’).
likeable heroine, aged around forty and at a turning point in her life, *Les Déferlantes* (translated as *The Breakers*) became a huge bestseller, has been translated into numerous languages and was adapted for television in 2013. Leonora Miano’s *La Saison de l’Ombre* (*The Season of Shadow*) was the first novel by a francophone African writer to win the Femina in 2013 – Miano is Cameroonian, though resident in France. Set in pre-colonial Cameroon, focalised by protagonists whose worldview is radically unfamiliar, not least in their merging of the natural and the supernatural, Miano’s novel is far from the ‘littérature de convention, peu audacieuse’ that Ducas associates in particular with women’s prizes (2003, 56). It nonetheless uses an accessible form of narrative realism to tell an engrossing story.

The unnamed narrator/heroine of *Les Déferlantes* begins the novel in a state of utter grief caused by the death of her lover some months previously. She has adopted a place – the small port of La Hague on the tip of the Cotentin Peninsula in Normandy – that mirrors the emotional bleakness she feels: ‘C’est une affaire de peau, La Hague. Une affaire de sens’ (138; ‘It is a matter of skin, La Hague. A matter of the senses’). La Hague is ‘un endroit comme un bout du monde’ (11; ‘An end-of-the-world sort of place’), exposed to the elements, with its wild, desolate shoreline and raging seas. But La Hague is also the site of a human community, into which one day there arrives an apparent stranger, Lambert. Through a well-tried and familiar narrative device, the stranger sets off the novel’s two interwoven lines of plot: a love story, through which the narrator will slowly and painfully return to life, and a mystery, for the new arrival is gradually revealed to be a man whose past is closely entwined with La Hague and with the lives of its inhabitants. As a series of clues turn into revelations, the truth of the past comes to light and the possibility of a future for the narrator is gradually realised. Suspense and curiosity produce the desire to turn the pages, and so too does the reader’s identification with a narrator petrified by sadness but increasingly attentive to the presence of others and particularly of this new ‘other’ whose significance for the plot is immediately signalled in the novel’s opening words: ‘La première fois que j’ai vu Lambert, c’était le jour de la grande tempête’ (9; ‘The first time I saw Lambert was on the day of the big storm’). Narrative closure is achieved both through the unravelling of the mystery of the past and the realisation of what has become gradually apparent to the reader, that is, the unspoken but mutual warmth and desire between the narrator and Lambert. Love, like the revelation of truth, has a clearly redemptive quality: as the two
embark on a shared life, they also return from private grief to form part of the wider human community: ‘Lambert a pris ma main. C’était une main large, chaude et confiante. [...] Ensemble on a rejoint le monde des hommes’ (539; ‘Lambert took my hand. He had a big, warm trusting hand. [...] Together we went back into the human world’).

The dull, clipped sparseness of the narrative voice is, I think, an essential part of the novel’s wide appeal. The narrator’s short sentences, abstention from imagery and all but the most generic of adjectives – ‘le ciel était noir, très bas’ (9; ‘the sky was black, and very low’) – together with the condensing of dialogue into tersely summarised indirect speech – ‘Il a parlé des mains de sa mère’ (15; ‘He spoke of his mothers’ hands’) – echo Duras’s haunting ellipses and combine to place the reader inside a state of emotional anomie, from which slow emergence then becomes pleasurable. We are invited to occupy another subjectivity, and as the narrator’s numbed impassivity gradually gives way to curiosity, empathy and desire, so the small world of La Hague comes alive and the stories of individual characters mesh to produce a coherent if multistranded narrative, and also a network of themes and imagery. If the proximity of death remains present throughout, with repeated motifs of loss, drowning, shrouds and burials, the themes of rebirth, revival and reclamation typify the fundamental optimism of the middlebrow. The heroine’s renaissance is echoed in a discreet but insistent set of images: many of the houses in La Hague are constructed from wood reclaimed from shipwrecks; damaged animals – a starving rat, a wounded seagull, stray cats and homeless horses – are saved and restored; wounds heal; one character succeeds in restoring and launching a derelict boat; the sculptor Raphael creates beauty through figures that represent extremes of human suffering, enacting an artistic credo of ‘faire du juste avec l’injuste, de la passion avec la misère’ (191; ‘making justice from injustice, passion from poverty’). Raphael introduces a quietly self-reflexive theme into the novel: plot-driven and grounded in the familiar genres of the romance and the family drama, Les Déferlantes also unostentatiously reflects on the redemptive possibilities of art and language in a number of ways. One of these is the referencing of two French writers, Jacques Prévert and Françoise Sagan: both had houses in the Cotentin area which have become shrines for their readers since their deaths, and both combined serious literary purpose with mass popularity.21

21 Jacques Prévert (1900–77) was a poet and screenwriter. His scenarios made the poetic-realist films of Renoir and Carné some of the most significant and widely
It will already be apparent that the depiction of place is also crucial to the success of *Les Déferlantes*. The novel provides a compellingly graphic portrayal of a very particular landscape, concentrating the action within a small location besieged by the elements and threatened too by human intervention through the looming profile of the power station just along the coast, and the narrator’s work as a conservationist studying the seabirds threatened by environmental change. The sense of immersion in the fictional world is created in part through the representation of a landscape and seascape that are both mimetically accurate and metaphorically powerful: La Hague has been chosen by the narrator because it corresponds to her inner sense of desolation and wounded vulnerability. As she regains some small sense of agency and desire, so the narrative space opens beyond the single village: she travels a little way up the coast with Lambert, goes to Caen to discuss a return to normal work and at the end the couple make a trip south to a very different part of France. The all-consuming intensity of the place ‘like the end of the world’ is relativised within a wider canvas.

*Les Déferlantes* uses a laconic style, classic narrative tropes and transparently familiar imagery including the pathetic fallacy to transport the reader to a powerfully realised fictional world, both geographic and emotional. Through its gripping story of detection and romance, it invites a vicarious living through of common emotions, and situates the personal within a wider social world that is unmistakably also the reader’s own.

*La Saison de l’ombre*, on the other hand, stands in a far more oblique relationship to the contemporary reader’s own experience. Miano’s novel is set in Cameroon, Central Africa, in the early days of the transatlantic slave trade, seen from the point of view of ‘ceux dont on ne dit jamais rien’ (Simon, 2013; ‘those who are never spoken of’) or the Africans who lost loved ones to slavery. Told from the perspective of the Mulongo, a small clan living at some distance from the coast, for whom the world extends no further than the neighbouring Bwele tribe a day’s travel across the bush, *La Saison de l’ombre* recounts the disappearance of ten Mulongo boys and two adult men after a raid on the village, and the subsequent search to recover them that takes the mother of one of the lost boys as far as the hitherto unknown ocean. The mystery of the boys’ disappearance viewed of the late 1930s; his poetry collection *Paroles* (1946) entered the bestseller charts, many of the poems also being adapted to become famous and much-loved songs. For Françoise Sagan, see Chapter 5.
sets off journeys beyond the Mulongo’s known world, and leads at last to the discovery of their fate, sold to slavers and now either transported or, in the case of those who resisted, dead. But the event also triggers a questioning of the clan’s structures of power and authority, including the ways in which these are gendered. Although the clan’s mythology makes its founder a queen, Emene, the chief and elders are now always and only men, with only the oldest women – ‘Celles qui ne voient plus leur sang depuis de longues lunes’ (11; ‘Those who have ceased to bleed many moons ago’) – considered to be in any way ‘les égales de l’homme’ (‘men’s equals’). When the boys disappear, this is assumed to be in some mysterious way the fault of the mothers, and the ten women are isolated in a single hut to mourn together at a safe distance from the community. But the narrative foregrounds the perspective of women, from the midwife and female elder Ebeise, more alert to the signs of historical change than the ‘bande de vieux filous’ (48; ‘bunch of old scoundrels’) who govern the clan, to Eyabe, the mother who defies the clan’s laws, supported by Ebeise, and sets out across unknown territory to seek her son.

The reader enters the fictional world not through a single subjectivity, as in *Les Déferlantes*, but through a varied system of focalisation that sustains the sense of a world whose parameters are very different from our own. Apart from Ebeise and Eyabe, the novel’s perspectives are mainly those of the Mulongo’s chief, the wise and courageous Mukano who also takes the road to seek the lost boys, and his wily, dissolute brother Mutango, whose capture and torture by the clan’s enemies, in league with the slavers, will lead to his moral regeneration. Different as these protagonists are in values and emotions, they share a vision of reality that fuses the material and the spiritual, so that it is in dreams that Eyabe hears the voice of her son, Mukate, and learns that he has been taken to the coast, a place for which the Mutongo language has no words: ‘Mère, il n’y a que de l’eau. Le chemin du retour est effacé, il n’y a plus que de l’eau’ (68; ‘Mother, there is nothing but water. The road back home has disappeared, there is only water’). She has no need of maps or stars but is led by love for her son to find the kidnapped boys, and those who are already dead (including Mukate) return to life in the ghostly form of the orphaned child Bana, who accompanies Eyabe on a part of her search then vanishes again when her quest reaches its conclusion. The integration of the supernatural into the natural, the absence of any sense of a larger map of Africa or the world – these are elements that carry readers out of their familiar sense of reality; love and loyalty, friendship, the obstinate quest to find a missing child connect
more directly with a contemporary sensibility. In a way that bears some
comparison with *Les Déferlantes*, the bleakness of a story that opens on
to loss, destruction and bereavement, in this case on a massive historical
scale, is offset by imagery of hope, human resourcefulness and renewal.\(^2\)
The clan’s women accede to a stronger sense of their own agency as the
story proceeds. On the road to the coast, Eyabe (if there is a heroine it
is she) is given refuge by the Bebayedi, a heterogeneous community of
runaways and refugees from the slavers, its members coming from many
different and hitherto separate tribes and cultures. This new community
is in the process of creating a new culture and form of social organi-
sation out of the ruins and traces of what has been lost:

Bebayedi est une génèse. Ceux qui sont ici ont des ancêtres multiples,
des langues différentes. Pourtant, ils ne font qu’un. Ils ont fui la fureur,
le fracas. Ils ont jailli du chaos, refusé de se laisser entraîner dans une
existence dont ils ne maîtrisaient pas le sens, happer par une mort dont ils
ne connaissaient ni les modalités, ni la finalité. Ce faisant, sans en avoir
précisément conçu le dessein, ils ont fait advenir un monde. (131)

As the Mulongo clan disappear from history after a further raid on the
village sees the remaining inhabitants massacred, their culture will be
integrated into this composite new tribe, and also into the world of the
slaves carried across the ocean:

Là où il ont été emmenés, ils font comme nous. Même à voix basse, ils
parlent notre langue. Lorsqu’ils ne peuvent pas la parler elle demeure le
véhicule de leur pensée, le rythme de leurs émotions. (227)

\(^2\) Suzanne Clark’s description of Alice Walker’s prize-winning *The Color
Purple* (Pulitzer and National Book Award for Fiction, 1983), also condemned
by some critics as irredeemably middlebrow, could apply in some respects to *La
Saison de l’Ombre*. Clark writes of an ‘overlapping of freedom and domesticity’
that ‘generates a rereading of desire [to] include erotic love, but also maternal and
spiritual love and community’ (1991, 184). Walker’s happy ending, she points out,
contributed to the novel’s dismissal as ‘sentimental’ for ‘it violates the irony usually
required of modernist narratives’ (182).
(In the place to which they have been taken, they do as we do. Even if softly, they speak our language. Even when they cannot speak it, it remains the vehicle of their thought, and the rhythm of their emotions)

La Saison de l’Ombre employs the classic narrative dynamic of the quest to tell a story of maternal love and tenacity, and of the dissolution and rebirth of a microcosmic human community. It illuminates a rarely told aspect of history, that of the peoples whose worlds were torn apart by the arrival of the early slavers. It is a violent, sometimes painful text to read, but through Ebeise and Eyabe’s discovery of their own strengths, and through the affirmation of the human power to adapt and create the new from the ashes of the old, it shares the redemptive quality of Gallay’s text – now mapped onto a global historical canvas.

Conclusion

Middlebrowness, we have seen, is not simply a set of textual qualities but is also a matter of ‘audience and accessibility’ (Roberts, 2011, 121). Literary prizes thus play an important part in the construction of a shifting, mutable middlebrow canon of literary fiction, for they designate certain novels ‘good’ and ‘interesting’, and thus suggest that a non-professional reader in tune with their times might find pleasure and instruction in reading them. Prizes nudge or mentor readers to try the winning texts, even where these might appear too difficult (avant-garde or intellectually weighty) to give pleasure.

Where ‘difficult’ prize-winners do reach and touch a chord with a ‘general’ audience, this is often because this less specialised readership is open to dimensions of the text ignored or considered irrelevant by academic and professional critics: the page-turning quality of a plot, the arousal of empathetic emotion, the affirmative worldview that can emerge from even the saddest or most harrowing story. It is these qualities – implicitly gendered feminine – that make for a broadening of audience and commercial success, but at the same time they threaten the prize-winner’s high cultural status, so that many laureates (more men than women) who self-identify as avant-garde and above the market are as dismayed as they are delighted by their award and its attendant promotion of their text as a potential ‘good read’.

The cultural legitimacy bestowed by a prize is even more compromised in the case of the women’s awards (in France the Femina and Elle prizes), given the close association between ‘middlebrow’ and ‘feminine’.
However, these annual prizes play a role that goes beyond the purely commercial. Given that women writers still form only a small minority of national award-winners, the more gender-balanced record of the female juries goes some way to rectifying the under-representation of women’s writing on the national scene. Judged by female juries, they reward and draw attention in roughly equal measure to male- and female-authored works, increasing the public presence of novels that represent women’s experience and perspectives. The prizewinning novels discussed here might each be said to display in their different ways what Suzanne Clark, in her study of modernism’s powerful discrediting of sentiment, calls ‘maternal irony’: ‘the irony which undermines the heroic’, ‘the reproductive irony that ordinary death but also ordinary life simply keeps going on: the domestic, the minimal, the maternal, the sentimental’ (1991, 190).