Middlebrow Matters

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CHAPTER SEVEN

Realism, Romance and Self-reflexivity

Twenty-first-century Middlebrow

What do women read in twenty-first-century France? If reading has declined in the face of competition from an increasing number of alternative media (Donnat, 2011, 2), it still remains a widely shared leisure activity: a 2014 national survey by the Centre National du Livre showed that 70 per cent of the French population reads at least one book per year, a figure unchanged since 1973 (Donnat, 2011, 3), and that 26 per cent of the French population reads more than 20 books per year, a 9 per cent rise in this category since 2008 (Donnat, 2008, 6). Sixty-one per cent of these ‘big readers’ (‘gros lecteurs’) are women. Women read more than men, and they show a much stronger taste for literary fiction: although detective novels figured in the top five book categories for both sexes, it was only on the women’s list that ‘contemporary novels’ appeared as a preferred genre. Women said that they read primarily for leisure and relaxation, as well as ‘to discover other worlds and points of view’: this suggests fiction, whereas a majority of the men surveyed named ‘extension of knowledge’ as their primary motivation for reading. Women, according to a 2010 survey (‘Qui lit quoi?’, 2010), make up over two-thirds of France’s fiction-reading public.

Of course women’s reading tastes are not limited by the author’s nationality or sex. France is one of Europe’s leading publishers of translations and among these almost 60 per cent are literary (Literature across Frontiers, 2010); any list of bestsellers confirms that the French reading public happily accepts novels in translation. Women read male authors, as their strong taste for policiers confirms: the detective novel remains a largely male-authored genre despite its many female stars from Agatha Christie to France’s Fred Vargas. It nonetheless remains true that women read women, and the substantial number of women authors in
contemporary France who combine serious, topical themes with accessibly pleasurable narrative – and thus qualify as middlebrow – is testimony to this, many of these attracting warm appreciation from women readers (in blogs, online discussion boards, at book-signing events) and, in equal measure, indifference, suspicion or condescension from critics. For despite all the progress made on gender equality, including the inscription of gender parity in the law of the land,¹ there is a continuing disparity between the feminised reading public and the intermediaries who judge, promote and publicise literature, as the previous chapter on literary prizes shows. Glaring proof of this embarrassed the left-leaning weekly *Le Nouvel Observateur* in December 2012, when their list of 12 ‘must-read’ French novels of the year contained not a single book by a woman author. Their *mea culpa* article responding to complaints from (women) readers also acknowledged the discrepancy between the books they and the rest of the press review (26 out of the 30 most reviewed in 2012 were written by men) and the interests of readers themselves: online reviews by ‘ordinary’ readers showed virtual parity between books by men and by women (Caviglioli, 2012).

Fiction written and largely read by women continues to be identified with sentimentality, facility, reading for therapeutic rather than properly aesthetic and philosophical purposes, so that for the serious-minded critics of the ‘quality’ media, like their academic counterparts, much female-oriented literature simply fails to fit with the criteria for greatness. Thus Anna Gavalda, author of some of the bestselling novels of the early 2000s, is asked by authoritative TV journalist Patrick Poivre d’Arvor (a household name as ‘PPDA’) if her work functions essentially as ‘blotting paper’ for the emotions of her women readers (Gavalda, 2008); elsewhere she is accused of moral blandness, predictability and a sentimental emphasis on happiness (Lançon, 2004; Martin, 2004). The legions of young women who enjoy reading Amélie Nothomb (a consistent favourite of readers since her first novel in 1992) are repeatedly referred to (as are Gavalda’s readers) as her ‘fans’ (Lee, 2010, 66–67); that is, as emotionally committed, potentially hysterical, the very opposite of that ‘critical, judicious, and masculine’ reader that Rita Felski defines as

¹ In 2000 a law designed to promote parity of political representation was passed in France, with supplementary measures added in the following years. In terms of members of the Assemblée nationale, this has had limited success (over 75 per cent of députés were still men in 2015) but state commitment to the principle is significant.
the ideal recipient of the authentically literary text from modernism on (2003, 33). Nothomb, in fact a highly versatile and formally complex novelist, also stands accused of producing ‘romans de gare en série’ or formulaic romance fiction (Landrot, 2011).

Does it matter if critics patronise and marginalise women writers, since readers seem to simply ignore them and, thanks to new media, now have the public forums in which to express alternative views? The problem is that critical silence or opprobrium makes it particularly difficult for a woman author to aspire to both literary recognition and a wide readership, which is surely a legitimate goal for any writer. If blogs and reading groups – both ‘live’ and online – have spread to France, there has been no equivalent there of the Oprah Winfrey (USA) or Richard and Judy (UK) phenomena, televised book shows that provided ‘warm, reader-oriented public spaces’ (Driscoll, 2014, 62) for literary discussion. Both of these programmes, and their media offshoots, assert the value of the sort of plot- and character-driven page-turners derided by professional critics, but also propose more demanding texts as available for middlebrow reading (Winfrey, for example, selected Steinbeck’s classic East of Eden, while Richard and Judy presented A.S. Byatt’s complex historical novel The Children’s Room as well as Cormac McCarthy’s bleakly dystopian The Road). Both programmes redefine and democratise the concept of literary value by proposing a canon for their times that is essentially middlebrow, in that its criteria are those of pleasurable, immersive reading and engagement with social and moral issues. In France, the closest equivalent is La Grande Librairie (The Big Bookshop), a 90-minute, prime-time book programme – successor to Bernard Pivot’s long-running Apostrophes – that began in 2008. Decidedly more ‘highbrow’ than Oprah or Richard and Judy, La Grande Librairie nonetheless addresses a broad reading public, features a wide variety of authors and popularises contemporary literature very effectively – extending its presence on the national scene with stands at Paris’s annual Salon du livre, and features (including ‘books to take on holiday’) filmed in provincial bookshops. The programme’s success

2 See above, Chapter 1.
3 Richard and Judy’s list of 100 great ‘books of the decade’ (2011) contains three French novels: Muriel Barbery’s The Elegance of the Hedgehog, Delphine de Vigan’s No et moi and Irène Némirovsky’s Suite française. These can all be described as middlebrow in terms of the criteria I propose here.
suggests some recent opening up in France of that narrow, inhospitable middle ground where elite and popular fiction overlap.

So far in the twenty-first century there is no Colette, no Némirovsky or Sagan who may be said to dominate the female middlebrow market. Rather, there is a constellation of authors, some with a single bestseller and others with a repeated pattern of success, who occupy the conflicted territory between acknowledged literary value and popular acclaim. Their novels largely deploy realist narrative techniques to create three-dimensional imaginary worlds in which the reader travels driven by desire to know what happens next, and by empathetic curiosity about characters and their fates. More ‘literary’ or highbrow contemporary French fiction favours less immersive reading, where the reader is disoriented (albeit often rewardingly) by a text that oscillates between realism and the fantastic (Marie NDiaye, Marie Darrieussecq), or between fiction and autobiography (Camille Laurent, Christine Angot, Catherine Millet, Nina Bouraoui), and the very form of the text is sufficiently unexpected, shocking or linguistically complex to demand attention and impede an immersive reading. Fully popular fiction, on the other hand (for example Harlequin romance, Marc Levy, Guillaume Musso, Katherine Pancol) shares the immersivity of the middlebrow, but does not pretend to a realist rendering of the readers’ world, opting unashamedly for a stylised, idealised representation of what are nonetheless real desires and fears. Middlebrow novels satisfy a human – it would seem particularly feminine – desire for stories, and at the same time a thirst for knowledge and self-development. To capture the contemporary female middlebrow both in its continuity with the past and its specificity, I propose to consider a small, exemplary and diverse corpus of twenty-first-century novels, connected by very high sales and (online reviews suggest) a warm reception from a mainly female public, and by their blending of thematic heft with pleasurably page-turning immersivity. The central corpus (for brief reference will be made to other novels) covers the middlebrow spectrum from its borderline with the popular to the point where the middlebrow/literary divide blurs: starting from the ‘popular’ end, the novels are Anna Gavalda’s Ensemble c’est tout (2004), Tatiana de Rosnay’s Elle s’appelait Sarah (2006), Muriel Barbery’s L’Élégance du hérisson (2006), Catherine Cusset’s Amours transversales (2004) and Un brillant avenir (2008), Amélie Nothomb’s Barbe-bleue (2012) and Nancy Huston’s literary bestseller Lignes de faille (2006). I begin with what might be designated the ur-text of contemporary middlebrow: Anna Gavalda’s massive 2004 bestseller Ensemble c’est tout.
Anna Gavalda and Ensemble c’est tout (2004)

In the final story of Anna Gavalda’s first published book, the story collection *Je voudrais que quelqu’un m’attende quelque part* (*I Wish Someone Were Waiting for Me Somewhere*, 1999), a thirty-something aspiring author manages to submit her completed manuscript to a respected publisher, despite the obstacles of lack of time (she is a working mother), the mockery of husband and friends, and her own severe lack of self-belief. She dreams of a future as a fêted writer, fantasising about book fairs and book-signings, international tours and adoring readers, working on a public image that will be suitably sombre and imposing (‘elle a son statut d’artiste maudit à travailler’ [144; ‘she has to work on her “artiste maudit” image’]) – but her hopes are finally dashed when her short-story volume is rejected. Funny and self-reflexive, the story playfully acknowledges the difficulty of being taken seriously as a woman author located in the domestic and the ‘ordinary’ (‘what are your stories about?’ asks the assistant at the printers. ‘All sorts of things’, she replies, ‘but mostly love’, 144), and acknowledges with unusual honesty the appeal of fame, fortune and a large responsive readership. It proved prophetic: five years later, after the substantial but unexceptional success of *Je voudrais* and the first novel that followed it (*Je l’aimais*, 2003), Gavalda hit the top of the bestseller charts with *Ensemble c’est tout* (2004). A film adaptation featuring ‘face of the moment’ stars Audrey Tautou and Guillaume Canet followed in 2007, sustaining the novel’s popularity throughout the decade.

Though it belongs at the popular end of the category, *Ensemble* is a quintessentially middlebrow novel. It is substantial in size, providing what Janice Radway, writing of the middlebrow preference for long novels, calls ‘a sense that the world is an enormously rich, multi-layered and complicated place’ (1997, 314). It is romantic, the attraction between two central characters forming a crucial narrative thread, and optimistic, with a narrative arc that leads through pain, poverty, loneliness and misunderstandings to conclude in happy resolution. But it is also realist, in the sense that the story deals with social issues that are very much of their time: the problems of housing and unemployment for young singles alone in the city, what to do with an ageing population, how to live with others as the traditional family starts to disintegrate. Beyond these – by now familiar – attributes of middlebrowness, *Ensemble c’est tout* contains a dimension particularly marked in twenty-first-century middlebrow: a self-reflexive irony about the cultural hierarchy and its own intermediate space within it.
Short chapters, the text generously spaced, introduce the four main protagonists: three young, one old. Camille is an artist, supporting herself in Paris by underpaid work as an office cleaner, excessively thin because loneliness and depression suppress her appetite. Philibert is the scion of an impoverished aristocratic family, an eccentric but erudite and warm-hearted throwback to a pre-republican age, all at sea in modern life. Franck is a trainee chef and a biker, brusque and surly because always exhausted as he tries to combine long working hours with caring for a beloved grandmother, Paulette, who lives many hours from Paris and whose health is declining. These four gradually come to form a household, a sort of surrogate family in a world where the biological family is shown to be largely dysfunctional. Their cohabitation includes the inevitable misunderstandings, quarrels and material problems, but fulfils the basic needs of each for warmth, shelter, food (Franck’s cooking, however ungraciously presented, restores Camille’s appetite and health), friendship and in Paulette’s case escape from the awful alternative of a regimented old people’s home (ironically called, after Proust, *Le Temps Retrouvé*). The plot follows their separate trajectories – Camille’s strained relationship with her mother, warm solidarity with her workmates and rediscovery of her artistic talent, Franck’s apparently unrequited love for Camille and growing skill as a chef, Philibert’s search for a place to belong in an alien world, Paulette’s brave but failed attempts to remain independent – and weaves these together to the satisfying conclusion, albeit tinged with sadness, of Paulette’s peaceful death surrounded by love, and the collaborative opening of a restaurant by the other three. The dénouement combines that most traditional of French forms of well-being, good cuisine, with twenty-first-century entrepreneurship and a celebration of love, intergenerational legacy (Paulette’s is both material and emotional) and friendship.

If readers consistently praise the plausibility and engaging quality of the protagonists – and reviews on Babelio, France’s largest online book club, are almost unanimous on this – this is partly due to Gavalda’s skilful plotting (we want to know what happens to them) and partly to narrative techniques that both bring the characters to life and inspire empathy. Dialogue is used extensively since much of the action is concerned with developing relationships, and verbal style is an important element of characterisation (Philibert’s quaintly formal, Franck’s slangy and scatological). Free indirect style merges the narrator’s voice with her characters’ own tone and register: ‘Un baratin pour la forme et elle
serait dehors’ (17; ‘A bit of bullshitting to the doctor and she’d soon be out again’) thinks the anorexically thin Camille as she undergoes a health check-up at work. The sense of complicity between narrator and protagonists, into which the reader is invited, also takes the form of dialogue: ‘Eh ben alors?’ says the narrator to the lovelorn Franck in *Ensemble*, ‘Qu’est-ce qui ne va pas, mon grand?’ ‘Euh … je commence par où?’ (255; ‘What then? What’s the matter, big guy?’, ‘Euh … where shall I start?’). The reader’s empathy, as Suzanne Keen in *Empathy and the Novel* suggests may occur (2007, 82), attaches not only to individual characters but also more broadly to the narrator, whose warm, upbeat but often ironic worldview informs the story as a whole. Empathy with a compassionate but discerning attitude to life, validated by the novel’s upbeat resolution, is pleasurable, all the more so because the social reality depicted closely connects the textual to the extra-textual world.

For the France of *Ensemble* is the France (at least French) readers know: its implicit critique of low pay, the threat of homelessness, inadequate or soulless provision for the old, and its posing of the question of how to live together beyond a family model that no longer fits – all of this resonates with the real France of the new millennium. Moreover, woven into the engaging story of the four protagonists are many of the themes central to the more ‘literary’ female-authored fiction of recent years: negotiating the family, mothers and daughters, the body and sexuality, gender roles. Camille struggles with anorexia, and to overcome memories of an earlier abusive relationship and respond actively to Franck’s expressed desire. In her recognition of the beauty in Paulette’s ageing body – her paintings of Paulette, including nudes, are instrumental in reviving Camille’s sense of herself as an artist – there is also a contestation of the dominant view of women’s post-menopausal bodies as aesthetically uninteresting because outside the norms of sexual attractiveness. Like the middlebrow bestsellers of earlier periods, *Ensemble* represents its society mainly, but not exclusively, from a female perspective, and adopts a tacitly feminist stance. Its solutions are certainly personal and moral rather than political – the novel scarcely engages with the economic structures and ideologies that underlie social inequality – and the depiction of French society is largely restricted to the white population, with only Camille’s friend and workmate Mamadou evoking the presence of France’s large ethnic minorities. But there is no claim here to present a complete twenty-first-century ‘comédie humaine’, nor to embrace any overtly political agenda. The overall logic of the novel is that the precariousness and isolation of
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contemporary life can be managed and remedied through generosity, cross-generational cooperation, imagination and creativity, and identification with the text’s optimistic philosophy constitutes one of its chief pleasures, as readers abundantly confirm on Babelio: ‘un livre qui vous réconcilie avec la vie’ (‘a book that reconciles you to life’); ‘un livre qui vous donne de l’espoir’ (‘a book that gives you hope’).

Readers’ reviews also register the divide between their enthusiasm and the derogatory judgements of most professional critics. As one contributor (pen name GribouilleLechat) put it:

Quand je pense que j’ai failli ne pas l’acheter car j’avais lu quelque part que c’était dégoulinant de bons sentiments, mièvre et tout et tout … Comme quoi, il ne faut pas se fier aux critiques et toujours se forger sa propre opinion.

(When I think that I almost didn’t buy it because I’d read somewhere that it was soppy, full of drippy sentimentality and all that … The lesson is don’t trust the critics and just make up your own mind)

And as the prescient story of the would-be author showed, Gavalda’s fiction itself alludes self-reflexively to the hierarchical view of culture that condemns texts such as hers to the inglorious rank of the female popular. In Ensemble, she uses the opposed class backgrounds and cultural tastes of her two lovers (Camille and Franck) to comment on the high-low divide. Camille, more educated and from a more affluent background than Franck, has a taste for ‘high’ culture (Vivaldi, nineteenth-century painting, a wide range of literature) whereas Franck’s cultural life stops at popular music, and his view of elite culture is mockingly hostile: ‘Oh! les petits oiseaux et les jolis papillons […] Oh! non! ne redescendez pas, ça pue trop en bas!’ (260; ‘Oh! look at the little birds and the pretty butterflies! […] No, don’t come back down to earth, it stinks down here!’). Camille – and the novel is clearly with her – refutes the stratified model of culture both through her actions, not least that of falling in love with Franck, and through eloquent argument. Using the slangy, elliptical style of everyday speech, she explains to Franck why her passion for Vivaldi’s Nisi Dominus is entirely compatible with her love of Marvin Gaye’s Sexual Healing album (one of Franck’s favourites), and refutes his reduction of ‘intello’ tastes to mere snobbery by casting them as a form of the commonly shared desire to ‘s’instruire, être curieux, attentif, admirer, s’émouvoir, essayer de comprendre comment tout ça tient debout et tenter de se coucher un peu moins con que la veille’ (260; ‘learn, to be curious, to pay attention, to admire, be moved, try to
understand how it all hangs together and to go to bed a bit less stupid
than you were yesterday’). Franck’s own knowledge and practice of
great cuisine, she insists, are another form of response to this human
impulse to understand, create and share. The novel in fact articulates
a middlebrow philosophy: humanist, reverential towards ‘high’ art but
contesting the denigration of majority culture, defending a view of art
as whatever forms of culture, in Todorov’s words, ‘make us understand
the world better and help us to live’ (2007, 72).

Narrative arcs

The optimism of Ensemble c’est tout arises from its redemptive structure
– a virtual journey through cold, hunger, loneliness and insecurity to
warmth (both literal and metaphorical), plenty, friendship and love –
and from its communication of a belief that individual moral goodness
can make life better. The world out there is harsh but not intractable,
we can also own and modify at least our corner of it for ourselves and
others: through virtual experience, fiction becomes Winnicott’s transi-
tional space of an external reality that is solidly, sometimes painfully
there but over which we have some inner control. As we have seen, for
the fictional illusion to work and set off that pleasurable entrancement
that makes readers want to read and reread, there must also be a dose of
Kermode’s ‘chaotic, viscously contingent reality’ (1967, 145) – to which
we will return – but the middlebrow successes of the new millennium
largely share Ensemble’s optimistic narrative arc. Huge varied in their
narrative techniques, they feature the recurring structure of the quest
rewarded, the destination reached, love in some way fulfilled.

Tatiana de Rosnay’s Elle s’appelait Sarah (Sarah’s Key, 2007) is an
eminently middlebrow bestseller in the sense that it deals seriously with
the traumatic experience of the Holocaust but through a page-turning,
satisfying narrative that was also (like so many middlebrow texts)
adapted successfully for cinema (Paquet-Brenner, 2010). Its dual
narrative structure alternates between the story of a ten-year-old French
Jewish girl, Sarah Starzynski, arrested with her parents in 1942 and
sent to the now notorious Vélodrome d’Hiver (Vél d’Hiv) whence most
French Jews were taken to extermination camps, and the contemporary
(2002) story of Julia Jarmond, an American journalist married to a

4 See Chapter 1, pp. 27–29.
French man and living in Paris, whose assignment to report on the fiftieth anniversary of the events of 1942 becomes a passionate personal quest to uncover the truth of French complicity in the Holocaust. The plotlines are connected by the discovery that after the 1942 raids, the Starzynski’s apartment passed to Julia’s family-in-law, who still own it; furthermore, in the urgent moments before the police took them, Sarah had hidden her four-year-old brother in the secret cupboard in the wall of their bedroom – returning briefly months later, after her escape, she discovers that the little boy was never found and died there alone. Julia’s quest thus becomes personal and she seeks to discover Sarah’s fate; Sarah’s story can clearly not end happily, and indeed it transpires that though she escaped the French camp and went on to marry and have a child in the USA, she killed herself in 1966. However Julia’s quest for truth is fulfilled, and the personal story of her unhappy marriage and late pregnancy (in her forties) not only ends happily with the birth of a daughter but also suggests a sort of symbolic redemption: she names the new baby Sarah. I will return to the relationship between the two plotlines – but Sarah despite its harrowing subject confirms the pattern of an optimistic narrative arc.

So too does philosophy lecturer Muriel Barbery’s surprise bestseller of 2006, *L’Élégance du hérisson* (The Elegance of the Hedgehog), a novel that combines the ‘high’ of its narrators’ reflexions on philosophy, aesthetics and the finer points of French grammar with the ‘low’ of romance, humour and narrative resolution. *Hérisson* is another double-stranded narrative. It is composed of the alternating diary entries of its two heroines, both resident in an upmarket apartment block in central Paris, both concealing intellectual brilliance and a fiercely critical view of their fellow inhabitants beneath a camouflage of ‘normality’. Renée is the building’s middle-aged caretaker, whose prickly performance of the stereotypical concierge (gruff and plebeian) masks a fine, self-taught brain and a discerning set of aesthetic tastes. Twelve-year-old Paloma, the second narrator, masquerades as the ‘normal’ daughter of her affluent bourgeois family to conceal a critical intellect well in advance of her years; her disgust at the shallow, predictable lives of her parents and

5 The novel rapidly sold a million, remained for 102 weeks on the bestseller lists, won several national and regional prizes, and was adapted for the screen in 2009 as *Le Hérisson*, directed by Mona Achache and starring Josiane Balsako as Renée. The novel also had considerable success in the UK and was serialised in the BBC’s Woman’s Hour/early evening drama slot.
their kind is such that she plans to kill herself on the eve of her thirteenth birthday. The two ‘hedgehogs’ recognise each other as kindred spirits and become friends. Since their voices form the narrative, the reader is positioned with Renée and Paloma against the majority of their fellow residents, who are shown to be snobbish, materialistic and – despite their pretensions to cultural distinction – profoundly philistine.

The plot is set in motion by the death of one of the flats’ owners and its purchase by the Japanese Monsieur Ozu. Japan figures here as the contrasting ‘other’ of contemporary French culture, for it is credited with a refined, minimalist aesthetic, a discretion and sense of proportion that are ‘éternel et divin’ as opposed to ‘vieux et prétentieux’ (98; ‘old and pretentious’). Ozu (who shares the name of Renée’s favourite film director) immediately sees through Renée’s camouflage and delicately draws her out through invitations to indulge their shared enjoyment of music, film and the discussion of ideas. Seduced by an aesthetic that permeates M. Ozu’s tastes, behaviour and speech, Renée seems set to emerge from her hedgehog spikes and accept a friendship that has strong overtones of romance. Even though the anticipated dénouement is deflected by the surprise of Renée’s sudden death, the narrative arc remains optimistic: her repressed intelligence and sincere passion for beauty have been recognised and rewarded, and Paloma lives on, convinced by the friendship she has enjoyed with Renée and M. Ozu that life contains some ‘toujours dans le jamais’ (‘always among the never’) and that there is (in the novel’s closing words) some ‘beauté dans le monde’ (356; ‘beauty in the world’). The social inequality that has limited Renée’s life chances remains firmly in place, but the novel pits authentic intelligence and sensitivity against the veneer of culture provided by class-based affluence, and has the former triumph.

The same buoyant trajectory shapes most serious but popular fiction, as two further, very different, examples will show. Catherine Cusset’s historically realist bestseller Un brillant avenir (A Brilliant Future, 2008, winner of the Prix Goncourt des lycéens), follows the life course of its Romanian heroine Elena through girlhood, marriage, motherhood and professional success into old age, moving with her across continents and the history of the mid-twentieth century, from life under the Soviet bloc to contemporary America and France. It concludes with the loss and sadness of widowhood, but these are redeemed by the warm relationship the heroine has developed with an initially resented daughter-in-law and, above all, by her small, beloved granddaughter, who illuminates Elena’s old age and represents life’s cyclical renewal.
Although Amélie Nothomb’s fiction diverges considerably from the middlebrow aesthetic that characterises most of my contemporary corpus, her novels too provide the vicarious experience of resolution, of personal agency affirmed, or sense made of a (in Nothomb’s case, ludically) complex world. Nothomb occupies the middle ground of the French literary scene because her self-reflexive, stylised, generically diverse (from sci-fi to fantasy to auto-fiction) novels, published at the rate of at least one per year, display distinct elements of the ‘high’ avant-garde, but her very prolificity and immense popularity with a loyal female readership situates her among the popular, with all the critical suspicion that this brings.\(^6\)

The reasons for Nothomb’s success with readers are many, and will be returned to below, but the satisfying shape of her narratives is certainly one relevant factor. *Barbe-bleue* (2012), for example, retells the story of the wife-murdering Bluebeard, setting it in contemporary Paris and pitting an unsentimental, tough-minded heroine, aptly named Saturnine Puissant (Saturnine Powerful), against Don Elemirio, the Bluebeard figure. Saturnine, desperate to find housing in the city, accepts a tenancy in Don Elemirio’s magnificent residence, despite the fact that all his previous female tenants have mysteriously disappeared. The novel ends with Saturnine’s victory: with neat poetic justice, she locks the murderer in the dark, freezing room that houses portraits of all his murdered ‘wives’, then quaffs champagne and (for Nothomb is not averse to a touch of magic realism) ‘turns into gold’.

The victory of good over bad, life over death is thus a consistent feature of the successful middlebrow, and it is this satisfyingly upbeat narrative arc that attracts the scorn of most professional critics. Philippe Lançon in *Libération* (2007), for example, mocks Hérisson’s too-comfortable positioning of the reader with the good ‘little people’ against a snobbish world, seeing in the former’s predictable triumph a ‘glazing of Anna Gavalda’. Many readers though – like GribouilleLechat, quoted above – object to the assumption that an optimistic ending is synonymous with ‘drippy sentimentality’: several, for instance, see in Hérisson not triteness and complacency but humanity and elegance. Rather than being morally facile, these novels could be said to affirm individual (and female) moral agency, and the possibility of making sense of existence in the face of a world experienced as harsh and incoherent. In Baroni’s

\(^6\) For Nothomb’s literary stardom and its place in her reception as a ‘serious’ writer, see Holmes (2016).
abstract but useful formulation, narrative fiction can work to ‘créer un espace à l’intérieur duquel l’indétermination du futur et du monde s’inscrit dans l’harmonie et l’intelligibilité d’un discours’ (2007, 406; ‘create a space within which the unpredictability of the future and of the world itself is set within the harmony and intelligibility of discourse’).

Realism: across time and space

From the Belle Époque on, middlebrow women’s fiction has made pleasurable reading out of the real circumstances and social and moral concerns of its readers’ lives. If the overall narrative arc is generally a hopeful one, the most successful of middlebrow novels also accommodate that ‘lingua franca of reality’ which, Frank Kermode argues, must be present if fiction is to achieve the ‘basic human task of imaginative self-invention’ (1967, 146).7 These are novels of manners that chart, explore and critique the social mores of their day, but often they are also, however unostentatiously, ‘state of the nation’ or even ‘state of the world’ novels that register, more or less critically, the historical and political contexts that shape contemporary existence.

Fiction allows us to travel in time, and if contemporary novels favour stories set in their own era, they also return to the past, and particularly to those periods that retain a strong imaginative hold on the present. In France, the years of the Nazi Occupation (1940–44) are still acutely present three-quarters of a century on, in the form of street names, monuments, long-standing family scissions, linguistic and symbolic echoes of national traumas8 – and fictional recreations. Ensemble is an intensely contemporary novel, but Paulette’s status as the source of a positive legacy – at once emotional, as the only source of love in Franck’s childhood, and practical, as his initiator into the art of good cooking and as Camille’s artistic inspiration – is significantly reinforced by the discovery after her death of the small but heroic role she played just

7 See Chapter 1.
8 For example, the far-right National Front party was led until 2011 by its founder, Jean-Marie Le Pen, whose popularity with some voters and abhorrence of others rested in part on his denial of the Holocaust and sympathetic stance towards the collaborationist Vichy regime. Marine Le Pen, who succeeded her father as leader, was taken to court in 2010 for a speech in which she termed Muslims’ use of public spaces for collective prayers an ‘occupation’: the word is still highly evocative and emotionally powerful.
after the Liberation. In the immediate post-Occupation era, the settling of scores with those who had collaborated with the Germans included the ugly, humiliating practice of shaving the heads of women accused of relationships with occupying soldiers. Paulette, out of solidarity with a *tondue* (shaven) friend no longer able to face the world, had her own head shaved and a smiling photo taken of the two of them. ‘C’était quelqu’un ma mémé, Hein?’ (552; ‘She was quite something, my granny, wasn’t she?’) says Franck, through his tears. More than half a century on, the Occupation years remain a touchstone of national morality and figure extensively in popular and middlebrow culture, from Sagan’s Occupation novels discussed in Chapter 5 to Régine Deforge’s bestselling multivolume saga *La Bicyclette bleue* (1981–2007, also adapted for French television in 2000), to the success of Némirovsky’s posthumously discovered *Suite française* (2004), to Jonathan Littell’s Goncourt-winning *Les Bienveillantes* (2006).

The Occupation period is most strikingly central to *Elle s’appelait Sarah*, a novel that exemplifies the strengths of middlebrow’s mission to inform and edify through compelling narrative, whilst also highlighting its potential weaknesses. On the positive side, the novel’s depiction of the Vichy police’s active and brutal role in the deaths of French Jews is harrowingly true to reality, and the scenes set in occupied France are acknowledged to be ‘admirable in their historical accuracy’ (Sobanet, 2013, 129). Making Julia a journalist justifies her purposeful reconstruction of the facts and thus their exposition to the reader. De Rosnay also incorporates into her story some of the more recent scholarship on the longer-term effects of traumatic experience on survivors and subsequent generations, notably through the character of Sarah’s son (whom Julia manages to trace), what has been named ‘postmemory’, or the passing on of the trauma of memory to the children of Holocaust survivors (Hirsch, 1997, 21–22). Though French (and not just German) responsibility for the deaths of French Jews has been more fully recognised in recent decades,9 accessible fictions also have a role to play in setting the record straight, for fiction can make theoretical knowledge concrete, salient, emotionally interesting. As a highly successful novel (and film), *Elle s’appelait Sarah* helped to

9 In 1995 the then President Jacques Chirac officially recognised the responsibility of the French state and especially the police in the French dimension of the Holocaust (or Shoah); Shoah memorial museums were inaugurated in the Marais (historically the Jewish quarter) in 2005, and at Drancy in 2012.
generalise awareness of active French complicity in the Holocaust and its long-term effects.

At the same time, the novel reveals the dangers that attend the translation of sensitive historical topics into accessibly pleasurable narrative form. Andrew Sobanet, who praises de Rosnay’s careful accuracy, also finds the book (and the film) ethically problematic. In her bid to authenticate Julia’s self-appointed role as a retrospective witness to a traumatic moment of French history, and to ‘mimic the urgency of testimonial [...] narratives’ (Sobanet, 2013, 133), de Rosnay interweaves the struggle of a highly privileged woman to save her marriage and her pregnancy with the almost unspeakable horror of Sarah’s story, implying some small redemption of the latter by Julia’s discovery of its full truth, and by the birth of a new Sarah. Though the page-turning quality of the narrative certainly benefits from the meshing of Julia’s personal dilemma (her French husband rejects her unexpected pregnancy so that she must choose between him and keeping the baby) with her eventful quest to uncover Sarah’s fate, the discrepancy between the moral weight of the two experiences is uncomfortable, and weakens the empathetic relationship with Julia that is clearly intended. American Julia’s right to bear witness and to commemorate Sarah by the naming of her own daughter can also be seen as an appropriation of the position of real second-generation ‘survivors’. Because it is emotionally powerful and persuades the reader to confront the painful past, the novel does help to raise consciousness of France’s historical responsibility, and of human beings’ capacity to dehumanise others: compellingly accessible fiction has its part to play in processing traumatic history. The danger that Sarah exemplifies, though, is that of narrative efficacy overriding moral complexity: an excess of Kermode’s *chairos* can deny the brutal reality of *chronos* or, to adapt his glossing of the term, of just one appalling thing after another.10

The Second World War is again a central narrative element in Nancy Huston’s 1999 *L’Empreinte de l’ange* (Grand Prix des Lectrices de *Elle*), and in her equally widely read *Lignes de faille* (Prix Femina 2006), the multigenerational, continent-crossing saga of a troubled family that traces the roots of conflicted identity and failed parental/filial relationships to the Nazi policy of *lebensborn*. This policy meant the enforced removal of Aryan-looking children from their parents in occupied countries to swell the ethnically ‘pure’ population of the Third Reich. Divided into

10 See Chapter 1, pp. 22–23.
four sections, *Lignes de faille* is narrated by four six-year-old narrators from successive generations of the family. Kristina, the final narrator and great-grandmother to the youngest, was taken from her Ukrainian family as an infant and raised by a Hitler-respecting German family: her shocked discovery of her lost identity will determine her adult story and resonate through those of her daughter, grandson and great-grandson.

Huston’s novels weave personal stories and historical fact into narratives that are both compelling and informative, demonstrating her view that, as the narrator of *L’Empreinte de l’ange* puts it, ‘Nous avançons grotesquement, à cloche-cloche, écartelés: un pied dans nos petites histoires et l’autre dans l’Histoire du siècle’ (196; ‘We stagger awkwardly through time; one foot firmly in our own little stories and the other planted in the History of the century’). More multilayered, polyphonic and ethically nuanced than de Rosnay’s novel, Huston’s historical fictions largely avoid the subjection of ethical complexity to diegetic coherence, though their warm reception by ‘non-professional’ readers is testimony to their immersive force – ‘la force de ce texte m’a emportée de pages en pages’ (‘the sheer power of this book carried me on from page to page’) is a typical Babelio comment – and to their maintenance of hope despite the grimness of the history they address. Love and the transcendent power of imagination resist the pain of mortality and the wounding historical scale of human cruelty throughout Huston’s fiction.

Catherine Cusset’s *Un brillant avenir* (Prix Goncourt des lycéens, 2008), another cross-generational portrayal of the second half of the twentieth century, also extends readers’ awareness of history, this time that of the Soviet era in Eastern Europe and the mingled pain and relief of voluntary exile to the West, through a woman’s story that concludes on a muted note of hope for the future.

One of the great pleasures of fiction is that – in the words of another of Nancy Huston’s narrators, in *Instruments des ténèbres* – it allows writer and reader to ‘voler à travers non seulement le temps mais l’espace, l’espace sans fin’ (12; ‘fly not only through time but also through endless space’). Many of the novels that gain a wide enthusiastic readership reflect a contemporary sense of a globalised world of cross-planetary connections and permeable borders. As Chapter 6 shows, Leonora Miano’s *La Saison de l’Ombre* addresses colonial legacies, gendered power and the experience of exile though a story set in seventeenth-century Central Africa. Nancy Huston’s own transnational status as a writer – she is an anglophone Canadian whose career has
been made primarily in French and in France, though she also publishes most of her books in English – is evident in the geographical scope of her fiction. Catherine Cusset and Tatiana de Rosnay are both French writers who have spent long periods resident in the USA, and situate much of their narrative in American cities, the USA figuring both as a more extreme model of the technological modernity and fast-moving consumerist culture that also characterises contemporary Europe, and as France’s ‘other’ – in Elle s’appelait Sarah a more liberal-minded, open and forward-looking other, since France is associated with ageing and death, and with the silence of repressed memory. Japan recurs too as a significant ‘other’ to France, figuring extensively in the fiction of Amélie Nothomb (who spent part of her childhood there) both as a culture of rigidly enforced hierarchies (Stupeur et tremblements, 1999), and as one of delightful subtlety and sensuality (for example in Métaphysique des tubes, 2000, and Ni d’Eve, ni d’Adam, 2007). L’Élégance du hérisson, as we have seen, echoes this use of Japanese culture to represent a life-enhancing aesthetic that is simply woven into the everyday.

In Catherine Cusset’s Amours transversales, as in Marie NDiaye’s Goncourt-winning bestseller Trois femmes puissantes, the acutely contemporary issue of poverty-induced migration becomes central to plots set in countries far from France. The fourth of Amours transversales’ linked stories concerns the strained and finally tragic encounter between Luis, an economic exile from his rural village trying to make a living in a luxury tourist hotel on the Mexican coast, and Camille, a young French woman staying in the hotel with her rich and largely absent businessman husband. Camille’s mild guilt about her life of aimless luxury leads her to take a well-intentioned interest in Luis, but the story shows the dangerous chasm between their experience and hence their visions of the world, most acutely in the culminating scene of the pair’s night-time tryst on the beach, where Camille’s expectation of illicit but casual sex clashes with Luis’s desperate hope of using ‘la gringa’ to improve his life chances. Alternating focalisation has the reader empathise with each of these incompatible desires, and feel the escalating tension that explodes, in a startling dénouement, into violence. Fiction sets immediate experience in a wider temporal and spatial context, and proposes a different kind of knowledge from that gleaned from the news media or factual sources – one gained through the vicarious, intensely imagined experience of situations and scenarios,

11 See the conclusion to this book.
Matriarchal realism

As in earlier periods, though, it is the here and now of readers’ lives that forms the setting for the majority of mainstream fiction. In the introduction to her 1992 study of post-war women’s writing, Lorna Sage coined the concept of ‘matriarchal realism’. What women writers enjoy in representation (mimesis), she noted, is ‘precisely what Plato hates – its local, partial, illusionist tricks; everything that makes the quotidian world of passion, habit, conflict and muddle seem “real”’ (Sage, 1992, x). Sage connects this (unfashionable) attachment to mimesis to the underlying feminist politics of so much women’s fiction: representation of the ‘quotidian muddle’ is central to the ‘utopian uses women have found for fiction’ (1992, x). This holds true for twenty-first-century middlebrow: rarely explicit in their feminism, bestselling women’s novels nonetheless tackle issues of gender, love, sex, family, work and domesticity – issues that make up the fabric of most readers’ lives – in a way that validates female perspectives and desires and takes the ‘quotidian world’ seriously. Part of the pleasure of fiction read for entertainment and relaxation comes from its shaping of the complicated texture of the everyday into narrative form – for form itself provides some degree of hope and sense of agency.

Though marriage no longer figures as an inexorable female destiny, the quest for love and choice of a life partner continue to drive narratives along, and to shape protagonists’ stories. Gavalda’s Camille in Ensemble c’est tout has known the seductive thrill of the ‘poète maudit’ lover, the rebel genius with a tortured soul who still stalks the pages of popular romance (most recently in E. L. James’s record-breaking international bestseller Fifty Shades of Grey, 2011), inspiring in its heroines both a passionate desire to save the wounded hero from himself and an agreeable conviction that they are singled out by his desire from the ranks of their ordinary sisters. ‘Une vraie image d’Épinal’, Camille recalls of her own Heathcliffian lover, ‘chevelu, torturé, génial, souffreteux’ (461; ‘The perfect stereotype […], long-haired, anguished, a damaged genius’). Camille almost wrecked her own talent by becoming ‘la sœur, la muse, la grande femme derrière le grand homme’ (462; ‘his sister, his muse, the great woman behind the great man’); her resulting wariness of romance
defers the consummation of the evident mutual desire between herself and Franck, but their relationship can succeed, and contribute to the novel’s happy ending, because it is shown to be equal, based both on mutual fascination with the other’s difference and on friendship. The romance plot, and lightly satirical treatment of the seductive ‘bad boy’ (and the need to resist him) also appears in Nothomb’s *Barbe-bleue*. Its heroine Saturnine is a no-nonsense, highly articulate young woman who nonetheless finds herself falling for her sinister landlord – “Je suis une idiote comme les autres” enrageait-elle (73; ‘I’m just an idiot like all the others’, she fumed’). Her will to save her own life and avenge the deaths of her predecessors remains intact – to acknowledge Bluebeard’s magnetism is not to condone his crimes – but the love plot enhances the comic poignancy of her murder-by-freezing of the serial killer.

The thrill of reciprocal desire and curiosity, and the life chances this opens up, are imagined and explored in much widely read fiction. *Un brillant avenir* makes meeting, courtship and a long, happy marriage central to Elena’s story: it is part of Elena’s strength as a heroine that in order to marry the Jewish Jacob she overrides the anti-Semitism of her family and society. In *Hérisson* too, although the affinity between Renée and Kakuro Ozo is primarily intellectual and aesthetic, the basic structure of romance is observed. Monsieur Ozu erupts into Renée’s life and changes its direction, immediately seeing through her ‘habit de concierge semi-débile’ (141; ‘semi-moronic concierge disguise’), courting her with invitations to dinner and conversation, making her laugh and getting to the heart of her lifelong fear of self-revelation. In response, Renée not only sheds her hedgehog prickles in his company, but also discovers a new interest in her own appearance, trying out hairstyles, dresses and make-up like any heroine of the popular love story. The couple’s last dinner together takes place in an atmosphere Renée describes as ‘brillante, pétillante, racée, feutrée, cristalline. Magnifique’ (335; ‘brilliant, sparkling, distinguished, discreet, crystalline. Magnificent’), and concludes with Kakuro’s open-ended statement that ‘Nous pouvons être amis. Et même tout ce que nous voulons’ (341; ‘We can be friends. And anything else we wish to be’). If Renée’s sudden death withholds the expected happy ending, the novel nonetheless references the familiar structure of romance, from meeting through mutual attraction and self-revelation to the possibility (realised or not) of a shared future.

That future too becomes part of many narratives. Cusset’s novel follows romance far beyond its ‘happily ever after’ promise into old age, Jacob’s dementia and death, and Elena’s widowhood; De Rosnay’s Julia
faces up to divorce and a return to single living in her forties; Barbery’s Renée has had a long, companionate if passionless marriage before the plot of *Hérisson* begins. Heterosexual love predominates, though Nancy Huston’s *Erra* (Kristina in her earlier life) follows a series of sexual and amorous relationships with men by a durably happy love affair with a woman, Mercedes. Same-sex desire and romance were for so long taboo topics that their matter-of-fact appearance in mainstream fictions is still relatively rare, and lesbian love has been more extensively represented in stylistically experimental writing such as that of Anne Garréta or Nina Bouraoui, or in the radical porno-trash style of Virginie Despentes.

If heterosexual life partnerships – with or without marriage – figure strongly in middlebrow narratives, sex is also explored beyond the context of romantic love, and women’s sexual agency assumed or explicitly affirmed. When Camille and Franck finally make love, it is Camille who takes the initiative, climbing into his bed as he sleeps – ‘Lestafier, je vais te violer’ (475; ‘Lestafier, I’m going to rape you’) – and insisting that he remain completely still as she takes him inside her and reaches orgasm. Franck responds happily – ‘C’était trop beau pour être vrai’ (477; ‘It was too good to be true’). Sexually as well as emotionally, the novel’s main romance is an egalitarian one. Catherine Cusset, in particular, writes sex graphically from a woman’s point of view. In the third story of *Amours transversales*, ‘Numéro Quatre’, Myriam finds herself alone in a Prague hotel on her fortieth birthday: she is an actress on tour, happily married to Xavier with whom she has two children, but his plan to fly from Paris to join her for a birthday celebration fails. Myriam phones Hans, an ex-lover, in Berlin and takes the train there, booking into a hotel before her rendezvous the next day, and going out to explore the city without

12 There have been occasional exceptions, such as Jocelyne François’s *Joue-nous España* (Prix Femina, 1980) and Hélène de Montferrand’s *Les Amies d’Héloïse* (Prix Goncourt 1990), which – not least thanks to the prizes – sold well and (we can assume) were quite widely read. In *Lesbian Desire in Post-1968 French literature* (2002), Lucille Cairns studies the extent to which her corpus offers ‘the pleasures of mimetic fiction’ (4) and appeals to a wide readership, but she uncovers few cases of middlebrow commercial success.

13 Known for sexually graphic, violent works such as *Baise-moi* (2000), Despentes’s more recent fiction (*Apocalypse bébé*, 2010; *Vernon Subutex*, 2015–17) combines shock and violence with highly readable narrative and compelling characterisation, which has taken her onto the bestseller charts. She has won a number of literary prizes and been elected to the Académie Goncourt. Despentes may well be *en route* to middlebrow status.
any clear intention, but quietly open to chance. The story follows her through three brief sexual couplings: with a stranger encountered in the street and invited back to her room, with a young student met at the hotel breakfast table and finally with Hans. Two of these are unsatisfactory, even distasteful – Hans in the present turns out to be surly and selfish, smaller and tubbier than she remembered, when he undresses ‘Son sexe pendait entre ses cuisses, long et blanc’ (136; ‘his penis hung between his thighs, long and white’) – but the encounter with the student, urgently consummated in the moments before his taxi leaves for the airport, is positive: ‘Pas l’amour. Pas la passion. Mais quelque chose de bon et de doux’ (120; ‘Not love. Not passion. But something good, something sweet’). There is no life-changing drama, no agonizing guilt or emotional revelation. Myriam goes to sleep that night feeling mildly disgusted by the Hans episode – ‘Rien ne pouvait faire qu’elle n’ait pas été cette femme allongée sur le dos, les cuisses ouvertes, les pattes en l’air comme un gros cafard’ (139; ‘Nothing could change the fact that she had been that woman lying with her legs open, feet in the air like a giant beetle’) – and physically sore, but wakes ‘de bonne humeur, sereine’ (140; ‘in a good mood, feeling serene’) and goes to an exhibition where she sees a video installation (a real one, by the artist Pipilotti Rist) in which a woman walks down a street carrying a huge red flower with which she gracefully, joyfully smashes the windshields of a whole row of cars; a police officer appears and seems about to arrest her but instead gives her a complicit smile and walks on – revealing a ponytail, and her identity as not a policeman but a police woman. Myriam laughs, watching the video repeatedly, delighted. Thus the story ends on a note of sexual impunity – Myriam’s adulteries have not changed her life but simply brought a gain in experience and one mutually enriching exchange – and of serene, good-humoured resistance to male power signified by the cars, those ‘jouets virils’ (141; ‘virile toys’). The law threatens but is disarmed by the two women’s smiling solidarity.¹⁴

Types of relationship, both romantic and sexual, are thus modelled, examined, rejected or celebrated. ‘Matriarchal realism’ also extends more literally to the representation of motherhood: mother-daughter relations remain a recurring theme across the ‘brows’ of women’s writing,¹⁵ both in the sense of blood ties and in their broader, metaphorical form.

¹⁴ At the time of writing, the installation Ever is Over All could be viewed online, for example at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a56RPZ_cbdc.
¹⁵ See for example Hirsch (1989); Giorgio (2002); Rye (2009).
Camille’s fraught relationship with her own depressive, self-absorbed mother in *Ensemble c’est tout* is countered by the warmth of her friendship with Paulette, who provides a legacy of approval and quasi-maternal love. In *L’Élégance du hérisson*, Renée’s role in Paloma’s life – her endorsement of the girl’s critical intelligence and aesthetic sensibility – could also be described as maternal. In *Un Brillant avenir*, the relationships that take centre stage are those between mother and son (one of the title’s multiple meanings is the brilliant future Elena imagines for her son, Alex) and mother and daughter-in-law. Elena struggles to like the young French woman, Marie, who she feels has usurped her place in Alex’s heart, and the two women’s slow, faltering achievement of a good relationship is traced through the novel with its syncopated temporal structure that shifts between different periods of Elena’s life: girlhood, as a daughter herself, young adulthood and maternity, middle and old age. Nancy Huston too deals with the chain of generations, the elements of inheritance in individual identity and the maternal-filial relationship seen from both sides, as *Lignes de faille* moves from each protagonist’s childhood to – in the following section – that of their parent. Erra/Kristina, for example, is first met as six-year-old Sadie’s erratic, neglectful and often absent mother, the source of her daughter’s suffering – ‘Si seulement je pouvais me fondre en elle’ (294; ‘If only I could merge into her’), Sadie thinks – then, through her own story, she is explained and to some extent justified: Erra’s own initially happy childhood was brutally stolen from her, both literally (at Germany’s defeat, she is dispatched to an adoptive family in the USA) and emotionally (by the revelation of her real origins).

The changing structure of families, the extension of the family defined by kinship to more complex units determined by remarriage or simply choice, is also reflected – often positively – in contemporary narratives. Gavalda’s *Ensemble* proposes a utopian solution to the solitude and the housing problems of her four protagonists in their establishment of what they call the ‘famille Bras Cassés’ (‘the Loser family’): ‘Nous quatre, ici, maintenant […], libérés, ensemble, et que vogue la galère’ (378; ‘We four, here and now […], free, together, come what may’). In de Rosnay’s *Sarah*, the traditional happy ending of romance is reversed as the contemporary plotline concludes positively with Julia’s divorce and cheerful setting-up of a single-parent household with her two daughters. The chain of inherited trauma in Huston’s *Lignes de faille* means that nuclear families are consistently represented as painful, strained or damaging environments for the novels’ six-year-old narrators, though
in Kristina/Erra’s German childhood, before the truth is revealed, the possibility of emotional warmth and enabling security in the traditional family gleams briefly in the parents’ and grandparents’ tenderness towards the child, in the grandfather’s storytelling – ‘Je n’aime rien au monde autant que d’être lovée sur les genoux de mère […] à écouter grand’père raconter une histoire à toute la famille’ (377; ‘There is nothing in the world I love more than being snuggled up on mother’s lap […] listening to grandfather tell a story to the whole family’) – and in Kristina’s delight as she swings high into the night sky and whirls on the roundabout in the snowy playground close to the family home, safe in the thrill of sanctioned danger.

In Lignes de faille the child’s sense of freedom and joyful possibility depends on that (soon to be destroyed) sense of belonging, of a home – whatever form that may take. Though these novels display fully fiction’s enchanting power to carry us through space as well as time, the central importance of Sage’s ‘quotidian world’ is also reflected in the prevalence of domestic spaces as the emotional heart of these stories. If, at one level, the centrality of images of home confirms Bachelard’s thesis in La Poétique de l’espace that houses in the human imagination represent ‘la topographie de notre être intime […] notre coin du monde […] notre premier univers […] cosmos’ (1958, 24; ‘the topography of our most intimate self […] our own corner of the world […] our first universe […] cosmos’), it also has a particular relevance for women writers and readers. Though gender roles have certainly become less polarised, women remain responsible for the lion’s share of domestic labour and nurturing (in France as elsewhere).16 No wonder, then, that houses and the relationship between house (material) and home (emotional) should figure largely in the ‘matriarchal realism’ of women’s fiction.

In Ensemble, the decaying, once-elegant apartment belonging to Philibert’s family (and on temporary loan to Philibert) provides a spacious if shabby refuge for the ‘famille Bras-Cassés’, and Paulette’s small, homely house and garden form part of her legacy to Franck and to the rootless Camille, who has dreamt since her (unhappy) childhood of a house ‘vieillotte, discrète, silencieuse, envahie par la vigne vierge et les rosiers grimpants’ (70; ‘old, tucked away and silent, covered with

16 A 2015 study by the Caisse Nationale des Allocations Familiales confirmed that while large proportions of men never iron, cook, etc., 93 per cent of women do most of the housework and cooking – a disparity that increases with the birth of children. See Bigot, Hoibian and Daudey (2015).
climbing vines and roses’). In *Sarah*, the key space is the apartment belonging to Julia’s family-in-law into which, for reasons she does not at first understand, she is reluctant to move with her husband and daughter. Her research reveals that it was from there that Sarah and her parents were taken to the Vél d’Hiv, and there that the little brother died, locked inside the wall cupboard for his safety. The apartment becomes a haunted space that figures the unlaid ghosts of Occupation history still present beneath the elegant surface of bourgeois Paris, and connects this inability to confront painful realities with Julia’s husband and her growing dissatisfaction with their marriage.

*Hérisson* takes place almost entirely within the Parisian apartment block where Renée and Paloma – and later Kakuro Ozu – live, Renée’s shabby ground-floor lodge with its concealed signs of her real self (philosophy books well-hidden while the television is left permanently on) representing both her dual persona and her lowly place in the class hierarchy. *Barbe-bleue* too is located in a single domestic building. The story opens with Saturnine’s homelessness and resulting first visit to Don Elemerio’s Parisian *hôtel particulier*, takes place almost entirely in the kitchen where each night he cooks her dishes ‘d’une perfection intimidante’ (14; ‘of an intimidating perfection’) accompanied by champagne and declarations of love, and concludes with her final departure. Throughout, the sinister threat behind Don Elemerio’s eloquent charm is signified by the locked, forbidden darkroom. And if both Cusset and Huston tell stories that cross countries and continents, their stories return again and again to the setting up of homes. Some of these are temporary and painfully abandoned: as a child, Cusset’s Elena (*Un brillant avenir*) is obliged by political circumstance to move repeatedly with her family, and three of Huston’s child narrators (Randall, Sadie, Erra/Kristina) are also uprooted from domestic settings that have come to mean security and warmth. Other homes are Bachelard’s ‘espaces heureux’ (1958, 17), sites of happiness that can transcend material poverty or the unhappiness that prevails outside their walls, like Elena and Jacob’s single room where they begin their life together and where at the birth of their child ‘leur lit s’agrandissait pour inclure un berceau’ (235; ‘their bed grew to include a cradle’), or Erra and Mercedes’s well-lit, colourful loft in the Bowery. It is there that Randall, the son of Erra’s difficult, often absent daughter, experiences the magic of music and stories, and the delights of good food served as an improvised picnic in an ‘ambiance spéciale à cause du ciel dehors, gris sombre comme un vieux château, et à cause de la pluie qui fouette
le vitres comme une queue de dragon’ (172; ‘an atmosphere that was special because of the sky outside, a sky the dark grey of an old castle, and because of the rain lashing the windows like a dragon’s tail’). Light, warmth and playfulness within, cold rain lashing the windows – there could scarcely be a better example of Bachelard’s representation of the house as the primary image of all that ‘maintient l’homme à travers les orages du ciel et les orages de la vie’ (1958, 26; ‘sustains man through the storms of the sky and of life itself’).

**Self-reflexivity**

Though self-reflexivity – the use of textual devices that foster awareness of the medium itself – is normally associated with highbrow literature and the legacy of modernism, it also has its place in the middlebrow. *Ensemble c’est tout* (like much of Gavalda’s fiction) explores the question of its own literary status within the diegesis, notably through Camille’s reflexions on the cultural hierarchy of taste. This self-awareness, as Marie-Laure Ryan points out, can coexist quite happily with immersion (2001, 352): we continue to suspend disbelief in Camille’s reality even as she invites us to reflect on the status of the novel we are reading. Indeed we have seen (Chapter 4) that novels from the interwar heyday of British women’s middlebrow frequently alluded self-reflexively to their own low cultural status, sharing with readers that mixture of respect and mild derision that characterises a middlebrow view of high culture, and defending, through their realist form as well as discursively, a literature that deals with that ‘world of necessity and compromise […] with which [everyone must] ultimately reckon’ (Kennedy, 1924, 280). As, even in France’s hierarchical literary culture, the lines start to blur between the ‘authentic’ and the commercial under the pressure of online amateur book reviewing, the proliferation of prizes, the unavoidable commodification of ‘high’ as well as ‘low’ texts and authors, self-reflexivity about where the boundaries are drawn is also becoming more evident in French middlebrow fiction.

*L’Élégance du hérisson* is less concerned to challenge the superiority of an established canon than it is to challenge the function of this canon in maintaining class privilege. The affluent, socially esteemed inhabitants of Renée’s apartment block assume opera, philosophy, avant-garde art

17 See Chapter 4, p. 95.
and literature and refined gastronomy to be their domain: when Paloma’s family discover the fashionable, culturally rich holiday venue of Tuscany they are at once convinced (says their cynical younger daughter) that ‘La “Tôscâne” leur appartient au même titre que la Culture, l’Art et tout ce qu’on peut écrire avec une Majuscule’ (255; “Tuscany” belongs to them in the same way that Culture, Art, and everything written with a capital letter belongs to them”). Culture is what constitutes their ‘distinction’ in the Bourdieusian sense. The novel contrasts their mere display of these cultural signifiers with Renée’s concealed but profound pleasure in intellectual rigour and subtlety and in the beauty of form. Renée’s origins in a rural, low-income family shaped the expectations she met at school and hence her life chances: her access to culture has been clandestine and entirely self-propelled, and the novel implicitly argues for a democratised access to high culture rather than disputing the distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’. Renée’s tastes, though, do not stop at the canonical: her reading extends to the enthusiastic consumption of crime novels, and in cinema her love of Hollywood blockbusters matches her passion for the auteur cinema of Ozu. Proud of her self-taught singularity, Renée is dismayed to hear an esteemed sociologist on the radio say that her eclecticism fits a broader trend in the evolving cultural practices of the intellectual classes, ‘désormais pôles de syncrétisme par où la frontière entre la vraie et la fausse culture se trouv[e] irrémédiablement brouillée’ (78; ‘nowadays the boundary between authentic and false culture is becoming hopelessly blurred’). Renée is of course the heroine of a novel that contributes to this very phenomenon – though the passage suggests that even cultural eclecticism can be recuperated as a further mark of distinction.

Amélie Nothomb’s lasting popularity in France also confirms the coexistence in contemporary middlebrow of immersive storytelling and ‘interactivity’, or attention to – and pleasure in – the literary medium itself. Nothomb’s willing, artful complicity with celebrity culture – she is a frequent media presence and very much in control of her own image – both incurs the disdain of literary critics and fuels the sustained enthusiasm of her vast, mainly female and to a large extent young readership.18 But her ‘literary rock star’ (‘Amélie Nothomb’, 2016; Frey, 2014) quality alone cannot account for the extraordinarily high sales (normally 200,000 within months of publication) of her prolific output.

18 On the relationship between contemporary middlebrow fiction and literary celebrity, see Holmes (2016).
(at least one novel per year). Short – Barbe-bleue, typically, reaches 124 pages of generously spaced text – generically diverse, overtly crafted, often featuring the intra-diegetic appearances of the author herself, Nothomb’s novels are far from the expansive, page-turning realism of the other twenty-first-century novels discussed here, even though (as I have argued above) they share middlebrow’s satisfying narrative arcs, deployment of romance and (often) engagement with the everyday realities of readers’ lives, from housing to the beauty imperative. Their appeal surely rests too on the interesting and manifest relationship between content (the story told) and style (the text’s formal structure and voice). Indeed, though Nothomb’s readers express similar appreciation to those of Gavalda – ‘elle s’intéresse aux gens’ (‘she’s interested in people’) recurs in readers’ online comments; ‘elle est sidérante d’intelligence et de finesse’ (‘she’s amazingly intelligent and subtle’; ‘Biographie d’une lectrice’, 2013) – they also place more emphasis on her stylistic qualities, or what one reader terms her ‘écriture unique et incroyable’ (‘Biographie d’une lectrice’, 2013; ‘incredibly unique style’).

The self-awareness of Nothomb’s fiction takes several forms. Sometimes she adopts a story or a genre that is already familiar, then knowingly overturns its conventions: Blue Beard is not the only fairy story to be subjected to this treatment,19 and elsewhere Nothomb plays with the forms of the autobiography, futuristic science fiction and the love story. Often her plots, as in Barbe bleue, take the form of a duel that is primarily verbal (even if it concludes in physical violence), so that the reader’s attention is drawn to the combative fluency of the protagonists’ language. The adversaries are in most cases a young heroine and an older, more powerful man who exercises a certain seductive charm (even when, as in Nothomb’s first novel, Hygiène de l’assassin, he is hideously ugly) through his wit and eloquence, but is also potentially lethal. Within the diegesis, it is the heroine – who, thanks to internal focalisation, becomes the reader’s textual avatar – who triumphs: Saturnine (in this she is typical of many other Nothombian heroines) is superlatively equipped for victory, not only ‘la plus jeune et la plus jolie’ (8; ‘the youngest and prettiest’) of all Don Elemirio’s tenants, but also cool-headed, resourceful and superbly articulate. There is clearly an immersive, identificatory pleasure here: battling an older, socially more

19 See for example, Perrault’s Riquet à la houppe, 2016. Even where no specific fairy tale is revised, Nothomb’s fiction abounds in murderous ogre figures, beautiful young heroines, castle-like dwellings, islands and forests.
powerful yet worthy opponent and winning is something few of us (one can surmise, and I am thinking particularly of women) often achieve, and is thus enjoyable at a vicarious level. The pleasure, though, depends on appreciation of a linguistic dexterity that is both the heroine’s and the author’s.

The question of control resonates through Nothomb’s narratives, at the levels of both theme and form, and appears to resonate too with readers. Nothombian heroines are creatures of contained appetites: if love plays a part in several plots, sex rarely motivates action, and heroines are highly selective in their relationship to food. Saturnine devours Don Elemirio’s food and drink, but this is because his cooking and the champagne he offers her are of the most exquisite quality, ‘d’une perfection intimidante’ (14): as she tells her host, she ‘ne mange pas n’importe quoi’ (32; ‘she doesn’t eat just anything’). To eat indiscriminately means to gain weight, and excess flesh is always a sign of abjection in Nothomb, for it escapes the immediate control of the subject’s will: her heroines are slender, mobile, almost prepubescent in shape; one of the more extreme cases, the anorexic dancer Plectrude in Robert des noms propres (2002), starves herself till her ‘légèreté insultait aux lois de la pesanteur’ (75; ‘lightness defied the laws of gravity’). Sex too implies adult femininity with its encumbrances of breasts, hips – and the possibility of maternity, all of these largely ignored or explicitly avoided in Nothomb’s world. And this imagined exercise of control over a daunting reality is mirrored at the level of form: Nothomb’s narrative voice is crisp and ironic, her dialogues (which constitute a large portion of the narratives) are strategically articulated, perfectly coherent: as Shirley Jordan says, ‘In Nothomb’s fictional universe people do not say things like “pass the salt”’ (2003, 97). The narrative arcs are not merely harmonious, they are tightly patterned towards a stylised form of closure; their trajectories are spare and purposeful, unadorned by the humanising complexity that more often characterises middlebrow. Nothomb’s texts are in the strict sense performative: they perform, textually, that mastery of the world (the body, others, material reality) staged by their plots. Theatrical, witty, never off-guard (rather like their author’s own star persona), Nothomb’s novels give narrative form to pervasive anxieties about the female body, in an age in which it is subject to extreme and public eroticisation, and about female agency, in a context of marked disparity between official commitment to gender equality and an often dissonant reality. They are middlebrow in a very twenty-first-century way: deceptively slight in their length and concise,
throwaway form, and thus dismissed as ‘romans de gare’ (popular romance), but for their readers they are both pleasurable to consume and deal, thematically and formally, with issues that matter.

Conclusion

The contemporary female middlebrow is extremely diverse, though connected by its combination of compelling, accessible narrative form and capacity to explore and process contemporary experience. It is that body of fiction that France’s ‘big readers’, most of them women, choose and appreciate, sometimes entering into explicit conflict with the gatekeepers of literary ‘standards’ when the latter cast emotion as sentimentality and the ‘matriarchal realism’ of the everyday as mere banality. The territory of the middlebrow, as represented here by a small and inevitably partial (in both senses) corpus, stretches from southern borders with the popular to a northern frontier with the highbrow. As a whole, it displays both continuity with earlier periods – an optimistic narrative arc, a rejoicing in the sheer power of immersive fiction to send us travelling in space and time, a realism of both form and theme that may be termed (in Lorna Sage’s coining) ‘matriarchal’ – and something new. Self-reflexivity was by no means absent from earlier middlebrows, but in the globalised, highly networked and hybrid society of the new millennium, awareness of the constructed nature of both literary form and cultural hierarchies becomes part of the lingua franca of fiction itself.