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## **Negotiating the middlebrow: women writers and literary stardom in contemporary**

### **France**

**Diana Holmes**

Literary fame is always, in Chris Rojek's useful typology, achieved rather than merely ascribed or attributed (2001: 17-18). That is, it is based on the perception of a real and unique accomplishment: the perceived quality of the writing itself is the sine qua non of a writer's celebrity. Nonetheless, as with other forms of stardom, the figure of the famous author 'enters into subsidiary forms of circulation' which then 'feed back into future performances' (Ellis 1982:1); public appearances and media commentary carry fame well beyond the limits of actual readership and set up an interplay between the author's mediated persona and their published texts, both past and future. Recent critical work has stressed variety in local - particularly national - constructions of both literature (what constitutes 'quality') and celebrity (Braun 2011; Ohlsson et al 2014), and thus the need to nuance any general theory by paying close attention to specific cultural context. Ohlsson et al have also highlighted the question of ascribed cultural value, pointing out that most studies so far have restricted their frame to 'highbrow' authors rather than the popular end of the market (2014). In this article, I propose to examine the construction and functions of literary celebrity in the specific context of contemporary France, and to focus on that intermediate swathe of the literary market sometimes designated 'middlebrow'. By concentrating on women writers, I want to argue that celebrity is shaped not only by national culture and its specific hierarchies of taste, but also by gender.

French national identity has long been sustained by a belief in the unique excellence of French culture, and particularly literary culture. This pre-dated the triumph of the republican

model of government,<sup>1</sup> but the doctrine of republican universalism along with centralised control of education and strong state support for the cultural sector certainly underpins the identification of 'Frenchness' with a demanding but elevating 'high' culture, theoretically made available to all citizens through education and state cultural policy.<sup>2</sup> One result of this has been the creation of a particularly sharp divide between, on the one hand, a critically acclaimed 'high' literature, deemed central to the nation's identity as historic defender of intellectual freedom and rigour,<sup>3</sup> and on the other a 'low' or commercial popular literature, designated on the whole not 'popular' but 'mass'. 'Mass' culture suggests the mass market, books as mere commodities; it evokes the fear that has haunted France since the Second World War, of American inspired vulgarisation or 'coca-colonisation' of a precious cultural tradition. Bourdieu's identification of two separate sub-fields of culture, though widely applicable, is firmly grounded in the French context (Bourdieu 1993). The distinction he draws between the sub-field of small-scale or restricted production oriented towards the reward of symbolic capital, and the sub-field of large-scale or mass production, oriented towards economic capital or success on the market, corresponds to a binary divide that is still ideologically powerful in France despite the inevitable reality of overlap between the two. There is still a tenacious assumption in the French literary world that commercial success on the mainstream market is incompatible with real literary quality. Thus to win one of the big literary prizes in France, with the attendant rise in sales and exposure to the media, is to risk one's reputation as a serious writer: the Goncourt, as Sylvie Ducas puts it in her study of the French prize system, is at once a source of shame and glory, 'simultaneously like being put in the dock and given the Légion d'Honneur' (Ducas 2004: 181). Thus too the 'cultural studies' approach, with its

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<sup>1</sup> Since the end of the Second Empire in 1870 France has been a Republic, apart from in the years 1940-44.

<sup>2</sup> See Holmes and Looseley 2013, particularly pages 85-122.

<sup>3</sup> France accords high honour to its writers, appointing those judged the greatest to the Académie française, whose mission is to defend and promote French culture and language, and burying them with full pomp in the Pantheon. As one contemporary Academician put it 'One might even say that France itself is a literary creation' ('Au point que l'on pourrait même dire que la France est une création littéraire', Rouart 2014).

assumption that the taste of the majority is inherently interesting and significant, has never really taken off in France. 'Popular culture', as one commentator put it in 2005, is 'not so much studied in France as deplored' (Pasquier 2005: 62). To become a literary 'star' read by millions and feted by the media is thus problematic for the author who takes him or herself seriously.

Yet the book industry in France is subject to the same market-based economic system as the rest of the Western capitalist world. Though inflected and softened by a relatively generous and very visible system of state support, which has helped to maintain a sturdy network of independent bookshops<sup>4</sup> and small, adventurous publishers, in the end the viability of the industry demands sustained sales of its products and thus a marketing strategy that includes the 'celebrification' of the author. This in turn demands some negotiation of the frontier between what is considered authentic literature, and mere success in the marketplace.

The meeting point of these two incompatible models of literary success is what I want to term the middlebrow. Middlebrow is an anglophone concept that defies translation, its nearest equivalent in French being 'culture moyenne' or 'middle culture' which has little of the semantic resonance of the English word. However, it can usefully be borrowed and imported into a French context to designate that unnamed, hence un-discussed borderland between 'high' literature, defined by critical esteem, and 'low' literature defined purely by market success. From its coinage in 1920s Britain 'middlebrow' has been a derogatory term, connoting mediocrity, blandness, a watered-down, timid version of authentic 'high' culture, but it is arguably of more critical value when used, as I intend to use it here, in a more positive sense, to mean (as another revisionist theorist of the middlebrow puts it) the sort of text that 'straddles the divide between trashy romance or thriller on the one hand, and the philosophically or formally challenging novel on the other' (Humble 2001: 11). Middlebrow

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<sup>4</sup> Since 1981 France has implemented a fixed-price policy on books that limits the right to discount sales and thus protects independent booksellers from the giants such as Amazon. This policy, largely supported by both Left and Right, means that independents still have around 23% of market share in France.

fiction, viewed favourably, is the sort that entertains and provides the very pleasurable experience of being transported to an imaginary world, more coherent and legibly charged with meaning than our own, whilst addressing themes or questions that feel relevant and serious. In the globalised culture that we now inhabit, there is no shortage of such reading matter, much of it written by authors who have achieved some degree of international celebrity - but who tend to write in English. A quick list might include Sebastian Faulks, Nick Hornby, Ian McEwan, Maggie O'Farrell, Ann Tyler, Sarah Waters, all of these seriously reviewed, often proposed for prizes and familiar through media appearances. Contemporary French bookshops and literary book pages tend to favour and promote more self-consciously avant-garde texts, admirable for the quality of their prose, generally sombre in their worldview; crime fiction is the only popular novel genre to have achieved a cult status that earns it dedicated review columns and shelf space. The page-turners that one might seek for leisure reading, sometimes displayed in bookshops under the title 'romans romanesques' or 'novelish novels', are often translated, many of them from English and including works by the authors listed above. The middle ground in France is smaller and more contested than in anglophone cultures, and as a French author it is not easy to find a place there.

This difficulty is particularly marked in the case of women authors. First, women continue to receive less exposure in the form of press reviews of their work and the award of literary prizes. The website VIDA Women in the Literary Arts systematically charts the predominance of male reviewers and male-authored books reviewed in the USA, and there is every reason to believe that the same disparity persists in France. Though women make up over two thirds of novel readers in France (*'Qui lit quoi?'* 2010), the intermediaries who judge and publicise the nation's annual literary production are mainly men. It came as no surprise when in December 2011 the widely-read news and culture weekly *Le Nouvel Observateur* recommended 'for Christmas, read French!' and proposed a list of the twelve

'must-read' French novels of the year - all twelve by male authors.<sup>5</sup> Prizes tell the same story: the Prix Goncourt has gone to only eleven women since its foundation in 1903, roughly 10% of total awards, while the Prix Renaudot's score since it was founded in 1926 is just under 14%. Only the prizes awarded by women-only juries (the Femina and the Grand Prix des Lectrices de Elle) achieve broad gender parity in their selections. Thus since celebrity depends on public exposure, women writers are less likely to be perceived as belonging to a constellation of 'important French authors'. However the problem is also more complex. As women, female authors are assumed to write primarily for a female readership - and indeed, given the majority of women among readers of fiction they almost certainly do. But women readers are irrevocably associated with romance and escapism, both abhorred by most French critics and 'serious' writers. The very stance attributed to the reader of the immersive, plot- and-empathy driven novel is a feminine one: to be 'carried away by a story' connotes a 'feminine' passivity rather than, as Rita Felski puts it writing of modernism, the 'critical, judicious, and masculine' [Felski 2003: 33] attitude of the more highbrow reader. A woman author may be acknowledged as a commercial success, but even more than her male counterparts she will struggle to combine this with recognition of her literary achievements.

All in all, it is a complex undertaking in contemporary France to position oneself as a writer who blends aesthetic and thematic gravitas with popular appeal, and the problem is severely aggravated by being a woman. State support, a well embedded tradition of cultural activity and a pro-active book industry ensure that there are plenty of events that showcase literature, from book fairs to book signings to radio and TV programmes and websites. The apparatus of literary celebrity is fully present in France: it remains to see how prominent women novelists negotiate fame, through an analysis of two of the most successful

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<sup>5</sup> The total erasure of women on this occasion did lead to a flood of complaint, and an apology appeared in a later issue (4.01.2012).

contemporary female authors. In the twenty-first century relatively few French-language authors sell more than a hundred thousand copies of each new novel, are well-known to the point of being household names and instantly recognisable faces, and are translated widely across and beyond Europe.<sup>6</sup> Among this select group are Anna Gavalda and Amélie Nothomb, two very different writers, born respectively in 1970 (Gavalda) and 1966 (Nothomb), and rarely out of the bestseller charts since the start of their careers.

Anna Gavalda, then a secondary teacher of French, began to publish in 1999 with a book of short stories, *Je voudrais que quelqu'un m'attende quelque part* (I Wish Someone Were Waiting for Me Somewhere, 2003), that rapidly sold three quarters of a million copies (by 2008, sales had reached 1.5 million [Peras 2008b]). The stories, told in a variety of narrative voices - first- and third-person, male and female narrators - range from lightly acerbic snapshots of contemporary mores (a promising sexual encounter founders on one partner's surreptitious glance at his mobile phone), to vignettes of domestic tragedy (a stoical narrator recounts her welcome second pregnancy and the in utero death of the foetus - after which life must go on), broad-brush farce (one story ends with a wild boar trapped inside a top-of-the-range Jaguar) and vengeful black comedy (a woman vet raped by some of her drunken clients knocks them out with ketamine and castrates them). All set in a palpably contemporary France, they share a wry, sometimes dark humour, a cast of characters who are socially diverse but all plausibly representative of their nation and era, and a theme of loneliness and the desire for connection expressed in the volume's title. Gavalda's next novel *Je L'Aimais* (Someone I Loved, 2003) is a sparsely told story of love and ageing, narrated by a young mother suddenly abandoned by her husband, and cared for by a father-in-law she had hitherto seen as truculent and egoistic. It is the older man's story of lost love and missed

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<sup>6</sup> If these names are little known in the UK, this is not unconnected with the deplorably low level of translated fiction available, usually calculated at around 3%.

chances that comes to take centre stage in the narrative, and that moves the narrator towards a possible recovery from grief. Again the novel was widely read, reaching sales of over a million within five years. Gavalda's technical versatility and thematic heft might seem to have been proven, but critical reception was very mixed: Pierre Jourde (critic and academic) and Éric Naulleau, for example, in their *Précis of Twenty-First Century French Literature* (2008, originally 2004), attacked and parodied the 'banality' of her stories, what they held to be their lack of stylistic innovation or subtlety, and - despite the dryness of tone and the narrators' recurring self-mockery - their 'sentimentality'. Jourde and Naulleau are prominent scourges of what they define as a bestseller culture incompatible with real literary value. They articulate with sardonic eloquence a widely shared French suspicion of literature that demonstrably appeals to a wide, 'non-professional'<sup>7</sup> reading public.

The final story of *Je voudrais qu'on m'attende quelque part* is a sceptical, self-mocking little tale of a would-be woman author who sends off a manuscript (of short stories) to a respected Parisian publisher and is finally invited to meet him, only to have her hopes of publication dashed. Against all the obstacles to writing - not only domestic and maternal responsibilities but also her husband's mockery and her own severe lack of self-belief - are set her dreams of a future as a fêted writer: she fantasises about book fairs and book-signings, international tours and adoring readers, and practises looking *louche*, *sombre* and mysterious like a proper author: 'elle a son statut d'artiste maudite à travailler maintenant' ('she has to work on her 'artiste maudit' image now', 144). The story is at once funny and self-reflexive: Gavalda, through her fictional alter ego, 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',

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<sup>7</sup> The expression is used by the eminent literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov who, in a passionate 2007 essay, castigated France's literary and educational establishment for their formalism and failure to respect the life-enhancing pleasure of fiction for 'ordinary' readers (Todorov 2007: 72).

144), and represents with unusual (and, at least in France, counter-normative) honesty the appeal of fame, fortune and a large responsive readership. This was precisely what she achieved with her next novel, which amplifies certain qualities of her first two published works that had particularly appealed to readers: narrative vivacity, dry humour, contemporary relevance and accessible style.

*Ensemble c'est tout* (2004, literally 'Together means everything' but translated into English in 2006 as *Hunting and Gathering*) is a big (almost six-hundred page), multi-stranded story set in contemporary France. It contains most of the elements that characterise the 'high popular' novel: it is romantic, optimistic, peopled by a set of quirkily likeable characters whose quests for love, economic survival and self-fulfilment drive a lively narrative, and it deals lightly but thoughtfully with real contemporary issues. The novel sold in massive numbers and in 2007 was adapted for the cinema with 'face of the moment' stars Audrey Tautou and Guillaume Canet in the lead romantic roles. The follow-up novel *La Consolante* (2008, translated as *Consolation* in 2009) was another generously sized, wryly romantic tale that tackled family break-up, urban alienation, death and mourning within the structure of the love story, and again delighted readers. If subsequent publications have had slightly less success, Gavalda has nonetheless remained true to the uphill agenda she has set herself as a popular but literary novelist, and continues to be highly visible in the media, the press, bookshops and on-line book sites.

Gavalda does succeed in many ways in occupying the precarious middle ground of French literary life. On the one hand she is undeniably a popular novelist, both in the sense that she is warmly appreciated by a vast readership, and in the sense that her novels conform to many key conventions of popular fiction. The volume of sales keeps Gavalda constantly in the bestseller lists - she was again at number one in June 2015 with her latest novel *La Vie en mieux* (literally 'Life - a better version') and readers' blogs largely concur in praising Gavalda's

ability to capture the mood and the issues of the moment, and to provide a sense of hope and affirmation. To take a few examples from a range of readers' comments:

'This book is fantastic, it's got me under its spell. As soon as I read the first page I was hooked – couldn't put it down.'

'This was a novel so good to read that when I closed the book it left behind the smell of happiness.'

'I love her simple use of language; her way of plunging us into her story by using words that are our words; her way of seeing real people - the sort of people that more highbrow (in French 'intello') authors describe so badly (...) her books just reconcile me to the world'<sup>8</sup>

All of Gavalda's fiction provides strong plotlines, a mimetic sense of place and social context, a clear invitation to empathise with characters, the pleasurable experience of immersive reading and satisfying closure. If her protagonists are driven by the need to find meaning and connection in an economically insecure, socially atomised world, the plots work to ensure that they do so: in friendship, in the traditionally French art of good cuisine (the four disparate characters of *Ensemble c'est tout* end by opening a restaurant together), in painting and writing, in caring for others through new forms of family based on affinity more than ties of blood, and in the formation of romantic partnerships. As in most popular fictions, narrative resolution provides a charge of optimism, for not only does it allow the vicarious experience of a happy end, it also affirms that life can be patterned into sense and coherence.

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<sup>8</sup> These are representative comments taken from Le Figaro's well-used pages for readers' comments and the readers' blog 'dérangée de livres'. References below.

At the same time, Gavalda positions herself both textually and paratextually as a serious literary writer. At a narrative level, even if the protagonists' quests for meaning and affective fulfilment are somewhat magically satisfied, the plots do raise and explore real and topical issues that include the fragmentation of the traditional family as social unit, the financial and professional precariousness of young people's lives in a fiercely neo-liberal society, the social isolation of old people. Textually, Gavalda's style is very far from the would-be transparent omniscience that characterises Harlequin romances, or Dan Brown thrillers, or for example the fully popular French writers Marc Levy and Philippe Musso.<sup>9</sup> Her narrative voice is dry, warm but ironic, highly self-aware and given to directly apostrophising both her protagonists ('Eh ben alors?' says the narrator to the lovelorn Franck in *Ensemble*, 'Qu'est-ce qui ne va pas, mon grand?'/ 'What then? What's the matter, big guy?', 255)<sup>10</sup> and her readers ('Allez... Je vous épargne tout ça... Vous les connaissez par cœur, ces parenthèses chaleureuses et toujours un peu déprimantes que l'on appelle la famille' /'Go on then, I'll spare you all that ... you know it off by heart anyway, those warm but slightly depressing parentheses known as families...' [Gavalda 2008: 49]). The narrator also comments ironically on her own narrative choices and on the hegemony of pessimism in the French literary landscape. As the central couple of *La Consolante* finally recognise their mutual attraction, the narrator delivers a warning:

What follows is called happiness and happiness is very embarrassing.

It is not a proper part of a story.

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<sup>9</sup> Levy and Musso consistently top the French bestseller charts with romantic novels tinged with the supernatural, generally set, like Harlequin romances, in a loosely defined North American location. Narration is in the third-person and covert rather than overt: no identity is ascribed to the voice that tells the story. Both these writers are firmly identified as 'popular' and commercial; though well-known names, unlike Gavalda and Nothomb they confirm rather than complicate the dominant paradigm of a clear frontier between popular and authentic literature.

<sup>10</sup> Translations are my own unless otherwise stated. I have included the original French only where it is particularly hard to capture in English the exact tone or nuance of Gavalda's prose.

They say.

Happiness is flat, soppy, boring and always tedious.

Happiness bores the reader. (554)

Self-reflexivity marks the text as self-aware, engaging the reader in meta-literary considerations - in other words as 'literary' rather than purely entertaining.

The presentation of Gavalda in paratextual terms echoes her fiction's ambivalent status, between the popular and the 'literary'. Though the publisher Random House seems to position English translations of her work as French chicklit, with hearts, flowers, butterflies featuring heavily on the covers and reference made to other very 'French' popular successes ('like *Amélie*,<sup>11</sup> *Hunting and Gathering* stops at nothing to make the reader feel good'), Gavalda's French publisher opts for more discreet and oblique visual references, like the box of colourful, half used chinks for *Ensemble* - the heroine is an artist - or the architect's sketches for *La Consolante*, which both evoke the hero's profession and form an attractive abstract motif. And the publisher to which Gavalda has remained faithful throughout her many successes is *Le Dilettante*, a small independent company with its offices in Paris's Latin quarter, symbolically located in Bourdieu's sub-field of restricted production rather than in that of mass production, despite the change in its commercial fortunes brought about by Gavalda herself. Gavalda aligns herself neither with the literary avant-garde nor with Levy, Musso and other bestsellers: in an interview with the *Independent* in 2010 she claimed as her models anglophone middlebrow authors Anne Tyler and Nick Hornby (House 2010).

However, it is on the stage of her publicly mediated celebrity that the awkwardness of occupying this literary middle ground becomes apparent. Gavalda is frequently interviewed

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<sup>11</sup> A reference to Jean-Pierre Jeunet's international hit of 2001, *Amélie* starring Audrey Tautou. The film was widely marketed and received as the epitome of Frenchness, though its representation of the nation triggered much controversy in France itself.

and reviewed both in the press and on radio and television, and most of her reviewers and interlocutors clearly consider her large, emotionally engaged, female readership as incompatible with any pretension to real literary quality. Interviewed in 2008 by the popular and authoritative Patrick Poivre d'Arvor (known nationally as PPDA) for his book programme *Vol de Nuit* (Gavalda 2008b), Gavalda is asked whether she herself is the 'consoler' of her novel's title: does her work function as 'blotting paper' for the emotions of her (women) readers? The implication of a therapeutic rather than aesthetic quality to her writing recurs frequently. In 2004 the critic of *L'Express* had reviewed *Ensemble* as a novel that dealt in 'feelings. Fine feelings. Good ones. The sort that have the reputation of not producing good literature' but, he admitted, the sort that made a good summer read 'somewhere quiet in the shade' (Martin 2004). Marianne Payot, again in *L'Express* in 2013, describes Gavalda as the 'empathetic queen of thousands of nice women readers' ('reine empathique de milliers de gentilles lectrices' [Payot 2013]): the 'nice' is distinctly barbed, implying blandness and sentimentality. Victor Garcia in a review of *La Vie en mieux* (2014) objects that the first-person narrative reads 'like the diary of a teenage girl horrified to discover that life can be cruel. The whole thing accompanied by violins' and qualifies Gavalda's style as one that 'leaves you cold if you're not keen on this sort of thing, but will certainly please Gavalda's many fans' ('peut laisser de marbre les moins friands, mais que les nombreux fans d'A.G. devraient apprécier') (Garcia 2014). Gavalda's readers are termed 'fans', the implication being that they are unconditionally committed rather than 'critical and judicious'.

Gavalda's response to critical reception of her work - her management of her own public image - is interestingly self-contradictory. The fact that she is a slight, blonde, elegant woman encourages her characterisation as an author more for *Elle* magazine than *Le Monde des livres* (equivalent of the *TLS*), and her appearance ('scandalously photogenic' as one critic put it [Peras 2008]) is often commented on. Her manner is generally mild, more shy than

confident (lowered eyes, soft voice, hesitations), and she is very willing to acknowledge the culturally dominant belief that market success is incompatible with true literary quality, and to endorse interviewers' doubts about her own right to be considered a serious author. 'I know the word "artist" is too big for me' ('Je sais que le mot artiste est trop grand pour moi') she told Bernard Lehut in a 2014 radio interview on the station RTL (Gavalda 2014b), echoing her response to Poivre d'Arvor in the 2008 TV interview quoted above: 'I do wonder about my legitimacy as an author' ('je me pose des questions par rapport à ma légitimité en tant qu'auteur').

Yet Gavalda can also - sometimes within the same interview - present a quietly combative assertion of the value of her own work, in terms of both themes and aesthetic project. With Bernard Lehut, she emphasises the depth and contemporary relevance of her themes in the 2014 text *La Vie en mieux* ('Life - a better version' or 'A Better Life' - not yet translated), a book composed of two novella-length stories of twenty-something Parisians leading typically 'young professional' lives but inwardly lost, empty and in search of a sense of meaning. Gavalda defends the importance of representing 'what it means to be 25 in 2014', of exploring the 'lives of the over-privileged children of old Europe', and unapologetically declares that for the next ten years she intends to stick to these same 'very basic themes' that she has made her own: 'I know exactly what I'm going to do and that's stay with precisely the same themes - there you are, I've warned people' ('je sais très bien ce que je vais faire et c'est encore exactement les mêmes thèmes, voilà, je préviens'). Despite sharing critics' doubts over her own 'legitimacy', she also claims to no longer read reviews ('I don't read the critics') but to base her sense of identity as a writer on the approbation of her readers, spending more time on 'meet the readers' book-signings than on media events. With Poivre d'Arvor she discusses readers' expressions of an urgent desire that she should continue to write, amounting at times to an emotional dependence on her work. Whilst acknowledging

that this works against authorial legitimacy ('I sometimes ask myself: where is the literature in all this?' ['je me dis où est la littérature?']), she also presents readers' pleasure in her work as itself a form of legitimation ('they tell me they need me').

To attribute an affective function to literature, in the simple sense of a novel's providing emotional comfort, goes against the more exalted view of literature as demanding, as resisting easy interpretation, as 'writerly' in Barthes's highly influential term (Barthes 1970).<sup>12</sup> A model of reading as a pleasurable immersive suspension of disbelief ('getting lost in a book') is similarly cast as naive and retrograde in standard academic and critical discourse. Gavalda - an ex-teacher of French literature - is thus deliberately provocative when she casts herself as the 'naive reader' in her discussion of her own work, speaking to PPDA of her extreme fondness for her characters, defending her dedication of *La Consolante* to its main character ('However egotistical and illusionary it may seem, this book, Charles, is for you') on the grounds of the character's apparently independent agency ('Whenever I got stuck, it was he who pulled me out of it'). She also admits to an intense emotional relationship with the fictional world she creates, in words which are close in tone to those of her readers: 'I write with a smile on my lips; I make myself laugh; sometimes I make myself cry' ('J'écris le sourire aux lèvres; je me fais rire, je me fais pleurer parfois') (Gavalda 2014b). This sense of literature's supportive and shared affective function, achieved through immersive reading, also underpins her choice of literary forebears whom she acknowledges as models. Victor Hugo provides a strong riposte to the charge of sentimentality since, as she points out (whilst modestly eschewing any comparison) *Les Misérables* was also condemned as 'mere romantic tosh' ('ce truc à l'eau de rose, gnan-gnan' [Gavalda 2008b]). Elsewhere, Gavalda evokes the importance for her of reading Colette (Gavalda 2014c), and identifies herself with Françoise

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<sup>12</sup> Barthes' opposes the 'readerly' (lisible) text to the 'writerly' (scriptible). Though this distinction is interesting and complex enough to have provoked endless debate and commentary, its major legacy is as a powerful formulation of the modernist credo that accessible, mimetic, broadly realist literature is intrinsically inferior to texts that are more opaque, formally experimental, and self-reflexive.

Sagan through their shared 'addiction' to the use of dictionaries of synonyms. Both Colette and Sagan attracted huge, loyal female readerships, and suffered accordingly from a reputation for trivial themes and an excess of romance.

Anna Gavalda's immense popularity with readers results from her novels' useful and pleasurable mapping of the present moment, combined with the charge of optimism delivered by coherent plotting and empathetic characterisation. The extent of her success may well be inflated by the shortage of home-produced 'middlebrow' novels of this kind in France. Her fame depends on the exceptional - and so far sustained - extent of her commercial success, and is fed too by media fascination with this photogenic, unassuming, middle-class 'everywoman' catapulted to fame by the initially word-of-mouth enthusiasm of her readers. However there is generally a distanced, even sardonic quality in media discourse on Gavalda's fiction: she is the object of much critical belittlement, for her type of fiction, and its warm reception from a mainstream and largely female audience, contravene a powerful if tacit view of what constitutes authentic literature. She responds with an acknowledgment of the dominant view, a quiet insistence through self-presentation (including paratextual) on the aesthetic and thematic quality of her work, and a deliberate and quietly combative self-alignment with her much patronised 'nice readers'.

Amélie Nothomb is a very different incarnation of the author. Belgian by birth but based in Paris since the start of her career, Nothomb is a literary phenomenon, an *enfant terrible* who enjoys massive sales and wide media coverage - she is an instantly recognisable name and face in France - as well as a degree of critical respect, albeit more in the UK and USA than in France itself.<sup>13</sup> Her first novel *Hygiène de l'Assassin* (1992) - *Hygiene and the Assassin* -

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<sup>13</sup> Critical studies of Nothomb abound in English and in English-language journals from around 2003, and several books have been dedicated to her work. She is the object of far fewer academic studies in French and is often the object of negative criticism in the serious press. See <http://modernlanguages.sas.ac.uk/centre-study-contemporary-womens-writing/languages/french/am%C3%A9lie-nothomb>.

features a monstrously misanthropic Nobel Prize author and constitutes a mordant attack on the literary milieu she was attempting to join: it was treated with considerable suspicion, several critics assuming that the signature was a hoax and that the novel was actually the work of an older male writer, since they found it implausible that a young female author could be the source of so high a degree of literary competence and sophistication (Lee 2010: 17-21). The authenticity of Nothomb's authorship was, however, soon established, and *Hygiène* rapidly sold twenty-five thousand copies, an exceptional number for a first novel by an unknown author. Interviews and articles continued to emphasize the tantalizing contrast between the author's youth and air of innocence, and the violence and knowingness of her writing, a critical stance familiar from the reception of many young women writers in the past:<sup>14</sup> 'Don't trust that angelic air!' wrote one critic. 'Behind that pretty little top-of-the -class face, Amélie Nothomb conceals the soul of an exterminator!' ['Le Nouveau massacre d'Amélie', Lee 2010: 37]. By the turn of the century, Nothomb had become an established bestseller: *Stupeurs et tremblements* (Fear and Trembling), an auto-fictional story of the narrator (Amélie)'s experience working in a rigidly hierarchical Japanese company, went rapidly from a first print run of forty thousand to five times that figure, and with the award of the prestigious Grand Prix de l'Académie française doubled again to four hundred thousand. All of Nothomb's novels sell two hundred thousand copies even before republication in the cheap, ubiquitous paperback volumes of the *Livre de Poche*, and this is the more remarkable for the fact that she publishes at least one each year, writing up to four new texts annually and then selecting which one to give to her publishers. Often two or three Nothomb novels figure in bestseller lists at the same time. If her sales figure per novel are lower than Gavalda's, her total sales are far higher because of her exceptional rate of publication: not a

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<sup>14</sup> Decadent novelist Rachilde, for example (pen-name of Marguerite Eymery, 1860-1953) was promoted at the start of her career through an emphasis on the titillating contrast between her air of youth and innocence and the scabrous nature of her writing; in the 1950s, Françoise Sagan's publishers also cannily encouraged the piquant image of the knowing ingenue.

literary rentrée (France's annual start of September moment for a wave of new publications) goes by without a new Nothomb text appearing.

A typical Nothomb novel is slight (around a hundred to a hundred and fifty pages of generously spaced text), acerbically witty, and combines stylised, non-realist narrative form with themes that are arguably topical. In terms of plot, setting and narrative voice, her work shows considerable versatility: some novels are auto-fictional, dealing with her early childhood in Japan, where her father was the Belgian ambassador, and her return there as a young adult, as well as with her life as a famous author; some are set in the future and could be described as science-fictional; some take place in a fantastical world unlocated in real time or space, and others in contemporary France or the USA. Ranging from third-person narrative omniscience to first-person, homo-diegetic narrators, and to narratives cast entirely in dialogue or in the form of letters, the novels are all written in overtly crafted, non-naturalistic style that might include tongue-in-cheek use of outmoded grammatical forms (such as the imperfect subjunctive), wordplay and a rich and at times erudite range of vocabulary. At the same time themes and plotlines situate these stories firmly in their time, for despite their frequently non-realist settings and stylised form they deal variously with the beauty imperative, anorexia, reality television, finding flat shares in the modern city, negotiating celebrity. There is a postmodern self-reflexivity to much of Nothomb's clever, artful body of work: she shifts between the profound and the showy, between visceral emotion and whimsicality.

Nothomb's 'middlebrowness' is thus very different from Gavalda's, for if Gavalda's early stories carried some of the dark humour and playful shifts of tone that typify Nothomb, these qualities are less central to the novels that made her a literary star. Nothomb emphatically does not share in the realist aesthetic and humanist ethic that characterises Gavalda's and indeed most mainstream narrative fiction. Protagonists have none of the

implied back story that makes the fictional world feel immersively real: they often have the overtly signifying names more typical of a fairytale or parable (the heroine who vanquishes Bluebeard is named 'Saturnine Puissant' or 'Saturnine Powerful'; the girl who presents herself as the narrator's saviour in *Antéchrista* (2003) is called 'Christa'; the pompous academic in *Les Combustibles* (1994) remains simply 'Le Professeur') and follow a spare, purposeful narrative trajectory unadorned by humanising complexity, so that we learn very little of the woman journalist in *Hygiène de l'Assassin* beyond her clever, revealing dialogue with the great, and hitherto implacably secretive author, and Saturnine in *Bluebeard* pursues a ritualised series of encounters with don Elemirio (Bluebeard) that will lead to her revenge for the deaths of his preceding 'wives', without becoming more than a narrative agent. Indeed once she has successfully fulfilled her function, and don Elemirio dies, Nothomb makes her redundancy explicit: 'At the very moment that don Elemirio died, Saturnine was changed into gold' (125). Plots are tightly patterned towards stylised forms of closure, and contrastive hyperbole opposes monstrously ugly, ogre-like characters to ethereally beautiful heroines, absolute love to absolute hatred, the murderous wills of Prétextat Tach (the famous author in *Hygiène*) or don Elemirio (Bluebeard) to the serene self-belief of their female nemeses.

If there is a consistent underlying philosophy in Nothomb's work, it centres on the belief that art is of greater value than mere living, or as Anna Kemp puts it 'aesthetic value trumps moral concerns' (Kemp 2013: 243). Nothomb's heroines and heroes, like most of her 'monsters', seek not emotional or moral fulfilment but rather aesthetic transcendence of the ordinary, transforming themselves into works of art (like the ballerina Plectrude in *Robert ou les noms propres*), staging elegant vengeance for the crimes of a Tach or a Bluebeard, with the emphasis much more on verbal dexterity and poetic *mise en scène* than on moral justice. These are not immersive fictions: the reader is always conscious of the surface of the text, or

of a controlling authorial voice playing with language and artfully manipulating plot and character.

So far then, Nothomb seems to belong to the domain of 'high' culture. Her stylistic and generic versatility, the self-reflexivity that characterises so much of her work and includes 'Hitchcockian' appearances by the author even in non-autofictional texts (Jordan 2003: 110), together with the relative scarcity of romance plots and sceptical treatment of romantic love ('cette absurdité' ['that absurdity', 73], as the narrator of *Barbe-bleue* terms it), all align Nothombian fiction with an implicit model of 'serious', even avant-garde writing. It is the sheer quantity of her novels and their popular reception that militates against her acceptance as 'highbrow' and situates Nothomb between Bourdieu's 'restricted' and 'mass' sub-fields of production. Her prolific output smacks of the production line, and her validation as a legitimate author is further endangered by her willing complicity with stardom and the fact that her most vocal and visible readership (or fan base)<sup>15</sup> is both young and female. She is a very visible and audible presence in French cultural life, regularly interviewed on TV and radio and in the press, from *Le Monde* to *Elle* magazine, attending book-signings and book fairs all over France, followed faithfully by her thousands of readers and fans. Like Gavalda, she responds to readers with warmth and gratitude, spending hours each working day (as she repeatedly explains in interviews) replying personally to the vast number of letters she receives, or at least, as she specified in 2010, to 'those that deserve an answer' (Nothomb 2010). At promotional events Nothomb is famous for engaging in long friendly chats with her fans, many of them already known from previous readings or book-signings. Her public persona is highly distinctive, visually characterised by a large, oddly shaped black hat, dark,

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<sup>15</sup> Anne Fulda in *Le Figaro* describes the crowd who wait for Nothomb to arrive at her guest appearances as 'monomaniacs, nothombophiles' and as in the majority young and female. (quoted in Lee 2010: 66). Her popularity with teenagers is often remarked on. e.g. in the dossier that the magazine *Lire* devoted to her in September 2006: 'what is most striking is the youth of her audience: mainly between 15 and 30, a lot of girls, though some boys too.' (38, quoted in Lee: 67).

fitted clothing, and red lipstick standing out against a pale face in a style that connotes at once goths and Japanese geishas. This instantly recognisable image illustrates the covers of most paperback editions of her novels; cut out 'dress Amélie' paper dolls have appeared, and women's magazines have sometimes proposed tongue-in-cheek articles on how to get the Amélie look.<sup>16</sup> One unemployed writer, Frédéric Huet, managed to find a publisher by dressing up as Amélie Nothomb and posting on-line videos of 'Ma vie ratée d'AN' ('My failed life as AN'), a title that he then turned into a book. It is not surprising then that Nothomb is frequently described in the French media as a 'literary rock star'.

Critical response to her work, unsurprisingly in the French context, is decidedly muted. One of her more sympathetic critics, Daniel Garcia, commented in 2006 on the recurrent note of disdain for her bestseller status, comparing the high reputation her work enjoys abroad to the 'contempt (at worst) or indifference (at best) with which she is treated by the French intelligentsia' (Garcia 2006). The critic of *Télérama* for example, reviewing Nothomb's latest novel in 2011 (Landrot 2011), termed her novels 'romans de gare en série' (literally 'train station novels', but meaning formulaic popular romances) and advised her to stop 'putting her brain at the service of readers' blindness' or in other words 'dumbing down'.

Nothomb responds to the odd mix of adulation and contempt that she inspires with a public performance of the authorial role that is theatrical, stage-managed and highly self-aware, and thus succeeds, I would argue, in defying the usual mechanisms for classifying and evaluating literature. Women writers more than men find themselves discussed and judged in terms of physical appearance and style: by presenting a highly stylised exterior, easy to caricature and ridicule, but also forming a sort of chosen protective shell for the person within, Nothomb has established herself firmly in the public eye on her own terms. Like her novels, her 'look' is eclectic and refuses easy categorisation: the conventional femininity of

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<sup>16</sup> See Lee 2010: 63.

long hair, make-up and skirts clashes with the robust and functional boots (Doc Martens style), the touches of gothic gloom, and the polysemic hat (is it drolly old-fashioned? is it comic? is it ironically postmodern?). Her way of speaking in public also defies expectations: she is frank, agreeable and has a nice deadpan humour, but at the same time she remains extremely controlled, her sentences emerging beautifully formed so that she never seems to be off-guard. In terms of both the high/popular divide and gender, Nothomb challenges neat classification. Her writing displays the formal qualities associated with high literary culture, yet pleases a mass readership with whom she maintains the sort of warm, literary yet personal relationship much more typical of female than male writers:<sup>17</sup> 'the greatest mission I could have on earth', she insists, 'is to bring people to reading' (Nothomb 2014). Yet the sense of a protective shell remains in place: there is a strong sense of mystery about the cordial, champagne-sipping figure who signs her books with warmly personal messages. As Shirley Jordan puts it, Nothomb 'writes from a position of sustained awareness of the brutally invasive machinery of the contemporary literary world in which the author's self is at stake and (...) anticipates and toys with its demands with combative verve.' (Jordan 2003: 101).

Nothomb thus manages her fame well, adroitly straddling the frontier between high and lowbrow, between literary art and popular success. As a writer, though, her fame remains dependent on the perceived qualities of her writing, and what it is that pleases a mass readership is less evident in her case than in that of Gavalda, whose fictions provide the immersive entrancement, the optimism and the sense of social relevance that normally characterise the middlebrow. Nothomb's readers express a pleasure in her texts that resembles that of Gavalda fans, in that it rests on their construction of the author as at once inspiring and sympathetic: 'she creates happiness', 'she's interested in people', 'she's just amazingly

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<sup>17</sup> In France, Colette (1873-1954) and Annie Ernaux (born 1940 and one of the most prominent and widely read of contemporary French women writers) are good examples of sustained, close relationships with a large female public. Nothomb forms a sharp contrast with, for example, her contemporary Michel Houellebecq, who fosters a public image of the reclusive artist indifferent to readerly or critical reception.

intelligent and subtle - all her books are gems and so is she'.<sup>18</sup> However reader response to Nothomb also tends to focus to a greater extent on the stylistic qualities of the writing, praising for example her 'incredibly unique style'.<sup>19</sup> Novels and celebrity figure become merged, but the interest in the latter continues to depend on the appeal exercised by the texts themselves - an appeal, like the image of the author herself, more complex and harder to articulate than that of Gavalda.

The pleasure of Nothomb's writing, for her large and predominantly female readership, seems to come from a combination of features that include the resonance of fairy-tales in her plots (murderous ogre figures recur throughout the work from *Hygiène de l'assassin* (1992) to *Bluebeard* (2012); beautiful young heroines defeat their machinations, sometimes helped by fairy godmother figures; generic locations such as islands (*Mercure*), forests (*Les Catilinaires*), ogres' lairs or castles largely replace spatial realism), and the visceral pertinence of narratives that, like fairy tales themselves,<sup>20</sup> address fundamental experiences of birth, identity, desire for and fear of the other, with the emphasis on female destinies. Nothomb's very distance from more stereotypically 'popular' literature may also play its paradoxical part in her popularity, for the reader of her unsentimental, self-reflexive, morally sceptical little tales can feel that they respond to the strong unwritten imperative in France to read 'real' literature, which (as we've seen) tends to be characterised as dark and bleak rather than 'consoling', and as cerebrally demanding. Despite critical deprecation of her work, reading Nothomb could certainly be felt to confer the status of a serious reader.

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<sup>18</sup> 'elle crée du bonheur'; 'elle s'intéresse aux gens'; elle est 'sidérante d'intelligence et de finesse - tous ses livres sont des bijoux, sa personnalité aussi est un joyau' ('Biographie d'une lectrice' 2013).

<sup>19</sup> 'une écriture unique et incroyable' (ibid).

<sup>20</sup> Angela Carter (*The Bloody Chamber*, 1979; *The Virago Book of Fairy Tales*, 1992), Marina Warner (*From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*, 1996; *Once Upon a Time: a Short History of Fairy Tale*, 2014) and even Disney's film *Frozen* (2013) have all demonstrated the powerful and continuing place of fairy stories in the representation of female identities, desires and relationships.

However for young - and possibly not so young - women readers, one key aspect of Nothomb's appeal is surely her treatment of the body. Much of her fiction gives narrative form to pervasive anxieties about the female body, and offers the vicarious experience of resolving these through a control that is both performed in the plot and manifest in the novels' style. In Nothomb's world, the passage through puberty means transition from the spare, functional, androgynous body of childhood to the awkward encumbrance of breasts, hips and monthly bleeding, a transition always lived as painful trauma. As the author has expressed it in interview: 'Childhood is the perfect age: absolute plenitude, being in full possession of one's own intensity. Adolescence then comes with a sense of physical monstrosity and means the discovery of an incomprehensible feeling of guilt.' (Nothomb 2002: 188).<sup>21</sup> If the secret of *Prétextat Tach* in the first novel (*Hygiène*) turns out to be that he murdered his adored, pubescent female cousin rather than let her pass from the integrity of childhood to fleshy, abject womanhood, this resistance to what is perceived as the degradation of becoming adult persists through Nothomb's work. Corporeal beauty in her fiction is always slender, smooth and ethereal - like that of the anorexic *Plectrude* in *Robert aux noms propres* whose 'lightness defied the laws of gravity' (75) - whereas fully adult bodies of both sexes often appear, like the pasty, obese *Tach* himself, both monstrous and abject. In Nothomb's world the maturing then ageing body escapes the individual's will and situates her, regardless of personal volition, as a desirable or repulsive object of others' perception.<sup>22</sup> In an age of extreme eroticisation and visibility of the female body, and of the ubiquitous and contradictory imperatives to be at once extremely slender and curvaceously sexy, as well as eternally youthful, it is little wonder

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<sup>21</sup> 'L'enfance, c'est l'âge parfait: plénitude absolue, pleine possession de sa propre intensité. L'adolescence est vécue comme une monstruosité physique (et le moment de la) découverte d'une culpabilité incompréhensible'.

<sup>22</sup> Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* provides a brilliant analysis of what in existentialist terms is the pubescent girl's discovery of her body's 'en-soi' ('in-itself') status as object of desire, whereas as a child she has experienced herself as pure consciousness, 'pour-soi' ('for-oneself').

that Nothomb's thematics of bodily shame and control should resonate with - in particular, though not uniquely - women readers.

Within the narratives themselves, or at a diegetic level, female protagonists successfully perform control of their own bodies and of an external reality that threatens their integrity. Wit, determination and extreme verbal dexterity enable the journalist Nina to utterly vanquish the celebrated author in *Hygiène*, just as Saturnine will deflect all attempts at seduction and enact elegant vengeance on her Bluebeard, Blanche will dispose of her tormentor Christa in *Antéchrista*, and Plectrude (*Robert des noms propres*) will ward off puberty through the rigours of classical dance and confirm her own happy ending by killing off ... Amélie Nothomb or the author herself. But at a textual level too - what readers appreciate as Nothomb's 'style' - there is also a demonstration of extreme control: concise, clever, witty and self-referential, the texts perform the possibility of control by maintaining an ironic distance from their own stories, by elegantly crafted syntax, cool humour, and self-reflexive appearances of Nothomb's own persona that highlight the artificiality of fiction. The parsimonious slightness of Nothomb's texts is mirrored in a style 'as slight as a lean, wiry body' (Rodgers 2003: 59); these are tightly controlled little tales that ration their engagement with the external world, and possibly mirror an anxious relationship with the body and the world beyond that resonates with many adolescent girls, and also chimes with older readers. Brief, tightly written, often ending abruptly with forms of closure too artificial to provide the reassurance of completion, Nothomb's fiction displays what Catherine Rodgers nicely terms an 'anorexic sensibility' (59). And if an important aspect of the novels' charm lies in their evocation of the body as threat to subjective identity, and their performed routing of this intimate enemy, this theme and aesthetic are also played out through the celebrity persona of the writer herself: slim, asexual, verbally indomitable and self-constructed.

## Conclusion

Gavalda and Nothomb are both in quite different ways middlebrow writers, in the sense that they occupy what, in France at least, is still the inhospitable borderland between literature regarded as 'high' and authentic, and market-based popular fiction. The sine qua non of their celebrity is the specific quality of their writing, which in each case captures a contemporary mood and responds to a desire to explore pleurably, through stories, affective tensions and social concerns that are widely shared. But as narratological theory has extensively shown,<sup>23</sup> narrative fiction tends to produce the sense of an 'implied author' addressing us through the telling of the story, and for many readers the flesh and blood embodiment of this perceived interlocutor not only satisfies curiosity, but also amplifies the pleasurable feeling of empathetic dialogue with a possibly wiser, more articulate but nonetheless kindred spirit. The author's celebrity - handled with temperate discretion by Gavalda, and theatrical flamboyance by Nothomb - 'feeds back' (in John Ellis's formulation) into the relationship between author and readers, and helps to sustain demand for and consumption of the texts themselves. It is of course precisely their celebrity that makes both writers suspect to the guardians of literary value - and yet at the same time their fame provides a very public stage for the challenge they represent to any rigid line of demarcation between literary authenticity and what most readers actually like to read.

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<sup>23</sup> See for example Kindt and Harald-Müller, 2006.

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