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Diana Holmes
University of Leeds, D.Holmes@leeds.ac.uk

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The Way We Read Now: Middlebrow Fiction in Twenty-First Century Europe¹

Diana Holmes

School of Languages, Cultures and Society
University of Leeds, United Kingdom
D.Holmes@leeds.ac.uk

Abstract

The allocation of a novel to the category ‘middlebrow’ is partly a matter of marketing and shifting attitudes to literary value, but this article argues that it also designates certain stylistic and narrative qualities that are little esteemed by ‘serious’ critics, but appeal consistently to a wider reading public. The article focuses on one sub-category of contemporary middlebrow fiction, feminine crime, through a comparative analysis of novels by Fred Vargas (French) and Kate Atkinson (British). The argument addresses the relationship between popular and middlebrow within the genre of crime writing, and the ways in which a female perspective inflects generic conventions in ways that are comparable despite the very individual narrative voices of the two authors. It finds that mimetic, story-telling fictions perform significant social, cognitive and emotional roles for readers, and that their pleasures deserve more serious critical attention than they generally receive, particularly in France.

Keywords: popular; middlebrow; fiction; crime novel; women’s writing; gender; bestsellers; book market

1. The pleasures of fiction

Harvest

The heat rising up from the tarmac seemed to get trapped between the thick hedges that towered above their heads like battlements.

‘Oppressive’, their mother said. They felt trapped too. ‘Like the maze at Hampton Court’, their mother said. ‘Remember?’

‘Yes’, Jessica said.

‘No’, Joanna said.

‘You were just a baby’, their mother said to Joanna. ‘Like Joseph is now.’ Jessica was eight, Joanna was six.

The little road (they always called it ‘the lane’) snaked one way and then another, so that you couldn’t see anything ahead of you. They had to keep the dog on the lead and stay close to the hedges in case a car ‘came out of nowhere.’²

¹ The title alludes to Anthony Trollope’s 1875 novel *The Way We Live Now*, one of the last great Victorian novels to be serialised before publication, and one of the greatest works of an author who was often, in his own day, patronised by literary critics due to his popularity with a middle-class readership. Trollope’s novel could be described as a middlebrow classic.

² Kate Atkinson: *When Will There Be Good News*. London: Doubleday, 2008, p. 9.

There we are, 100 words in, on a hot summer lane with a mother and three small children, a mild sense of foreboding arising from the heat, the imprisoning hedges, the snaking lane that limits visibility. What, we wonder, is going to ‘come out of nowhere’?

Il y avait des petites miettes de pain qui couraient de la cuisine à la chambre, jusque sur les draps propres où reposait la vieille femme, morte et bouche ouverte. Le commissaire Adamsberg les considérait en silence, allant et venant d’un pas lent le long des débris, se demandant quel Petit Poucet, ou quel Ogre en l’occurrence, les avait perdues là. L’appartement était un sombre et petit rez-de-chaussée de trois pièces, dans le 18^e arrondissement de Paris.³

And now here we are in a small dark flat with a dead body, a mysterious trail of crumbs, and a policeman who thinks in terms of fairy tales—ominous fairy tales featuring an Ogre. In both cases there is a place, there are protagonists, the suspenseful promise of a story—and a good chance that as readers we are hooked.

The death of the novel has been prophesied virtually since the genre began. With the contemporary proliferation of new technologies of entertainment, and of new media that demand we be constantly plugged in to the present, the twenty-first century may appear to offer an inhospitable climate for the time-consuming, solitary pleasures of narrative fiction. And yet people keep on reading novels. In 2014-15, British bookshops saw a modest but continuous growth in sales, particularly of printed books, that confirms a trend already apparent in 2012. After a long decline there is evidence too of new bookshops opening.⁴ French statistics also show a rise in book sales: 5.7% for literary sales in 2015, with the contemporary novel accounting for almost 80% of these. National markets also converge in the continuing feminisation of fiction-reading, to which we will return.⁵ All the evidence suggests that the book, and particularly the novel, is surviving and indeed thriving in the

³ ‘There were little bread crumbs running from the kitchen to the bedroom, and all along the clean sheets on which the old woman was lying, dead, her mouth open. Commissaire Adamsberg considered them in silence, walking up and down beside them, wondering what Tom Thumb, or in this case what Ogre had left them there. It was a dark little ground floor flat with three rooms, in the 18th arrondissement of Paris’. Fred Vargas: *L’Armée furieuse*. Paris: Viviane Hamy, 2011, p. 7. Translations are my own unless otherwise stated. .

⁴ Harry Wallop: The Kindle is dead, the book is back. Or is it? In: *The Telegraph*, 9 January, 2015, accessed on 23 January, 2016 on <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/booknews/11335718/The-Kindle-is-dead-the-book-is-back.-Or-is-it.html>; Joshua Farrington: Online book shopping overtakes in-store for the first time. In: *The Bookseller*, 25 March, 2015, accessed on 23 January, 2015 on <http://www.thebookseller.com/news/online-book-shopping-overtakes-store-first-time>.

⁵ Anon.: Men prefer to watch big screen adaptations whilst women read the books. In: *Reading Agency*, no date, accessed on 23 January, 2016: <http://readingagency.org.uk/news/media/men-prefer-to-watch-big-screen-adaptations-while-women-read-the-books>; Anon.: Chiffres clés du secteur du livre: l’édition 2014 (données 2012-2013) est parue. In: *Culture Communication*, 14 March 2014, accessed on 23 January, 2016 on <http://www.culturecommunication.gouv.fr/Politiques-ministerielles/Livre-et-Lecture/Actualites/Chiffres-cles-du-secteur-du-livre-l-edition-2014-donnees-2012-2013-est-parue>.

twenty-first century, and that women read more than men, across national cultures. This sexual division of leisure is accentuated in the case of fiction.

Literary fiction, though, is far from a homogenous category. Anecdotal evidence suggests that for most academics working in the literary field, there is a gap between what is read for the professional purposes of teaching and research, and what is read purely for pleasure. This gap is symptomatic of a wider distinction, particularly marked outside Anglophone cultures, between what is considered 'literature' and what the majority of readers choose to read in their everyday lives. The latter - what most of us read in bed, on the beach, on the train - can be variously described as 'popular' or 'middlebrow.' How we designate the third element in the trinity is less certain, although without it there is no *middle* in middlebrow. What Bourdieu designates the '*sous-champ de production restreinte*'⁶ or 'sub-field of small-scale production' is variously termed 'high' or 'élite' literature, or simply 'literary fiction' (although in that case the term 'popular literature' becomes something of an oxymoron). The words, used to distinguish between 'levels' of fiction are not empty signifiers - they are useful, we use them - but they are complex, both in meaning and in terms of the relations between them.

There is certainly a strong contextual element to what gets defined as 'low' or 'high' brow: processes of production, packaging, marketing and reception play a determining role and, as Bourdieu tells us, the attribution of high cultural status to certain kinds of text can be motivated less by aesthetic appreciation than by the defence of social and educational privilege.⁷ Texts, and in particular novels, can move up or down the hierarchy as the conditions of production and readership change. Nicola Humble, who has written on the British feminine middlebrow of the inter-war period, claimed in a 2011 interview that 'there is no such thing as "middlebrow literature". It is a category into which texts move at certain moments in their social history.'⁸ To confirm this, we only have to think of Charles Dickens or Emile Zola, in their lifetimes read by a vast popular audience and since elevated to the status of literary classics, or Colette, variously viewed over the decades as the author of popular, slightly seedy romances, of trivial (if beautifully crafted) passages on animals and

⁶ Pierre Bourdieu: 'Le champ littéraire'. In: *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* vol. 89, Septembre 1991, p. 3-46, p.9.

⁷ Pierre Bourdieu: *La Distinction. Critique sociale du jugement*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1979.

⁸ Nicola Humble: 'Theorizing the Middlebrow', interview with Elke D'hoker. In: *Interférences littéraires* 7 (November 2011), p. 259-65.

nature, or as an iconic literary figure - in Julia Kristeva's terms the incomparable inventor of a 'new alphabet' of emotional and sensory experience.⁹

Nonetheless I am going to argue here that the categories of 'popular' and 'middlebrow' are not only a matter of reception, but also designate - albeit broadly - certain stylistic and narrative qualities. In this article my aims are threefold. First, using France as my main point of reference whilst claiming that it is to some extent representative of other Western European cultures, I want to examine the construction of the categories 'popular' and 'middlebrow' in the context of recent debates about the value and function of reading fiction. Second, I aim to explore what 'middlebrow' means in contemporary Europe by reference to two examples of bestselling yet 'literary' crime fiction, both by women authors and arguably appealing in particular to the female majority of the reading public. . . And in conclusion, I want to ask why does this matter? Why does the reading of fiction, and the ways in which novels are classified and evaluated, matter in the twenty-first century?

2. Popular and middlebrow fiction: critical reception and theoretical debates

Developments in the publishing industry have been broadly similar across advanced capitalist economies, hence across Western Europe: small companies have been bought up and absorbed into global multi-media conglomerates, and editorially-led policies gradually superseded by the logic of the marketplace—tendencies interestingly countered by the proliferation of small, often financially precarious independents.¹⁰ There is however some difference between the UK and continental Europe in terms of the classification and evaluation of fiction: in Britain, I would argue, the categorisation of novels as literary or otherwise is relatively loose, and critical disdain for the 'lower' types of text, though by no means absent, is less evident than elsewhere. France, not untypically of Western Europe as a whole but with an intensity peculiar to French national culture, displays a strong identification of national identity with the quality of the written word, and a generalised belief in the salutary nature of difficult or experimental forms, both of these supported by a highly centralised educational system that strengthens cultural hegemony.¹¹

In the UK, Cultural Studies—as developed by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies—transformed Leavisite and Frankfurt School views of popular culture as

⁹ Julia Kristeva: *Le Génie féminin, tome III, Colette ou la chair du monde*. Paris: Fayard, 2002.

¹⁰ Claire Squires: *Marketing Literature. The Making of Contemporary Writing in Britain*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007; Jean-Yves Mollier et al., *Où va le livre?* Paris: La Dispute/SNÉDIT, 2007.

¹¹ The status of 'high' and in particular high *literary* culture in France is explored in depth in *Imagining the Popular in Contemporary French Culture*. Ed. by Diana Holmes and David Looseley. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012.

simply inferior, or as merely the degraded product of capitalist consumerism, and emphasised the agency of the popular consumer. It is ironic that Cultural Studies drew so heavily on French theorists (Barthes and Bourdieu among them), for in France ‘les Cultural Studies’ has never really taken off, although there is now evidence of a minority academic interest. Analysis of popular (more commonly termed ‘mass’) cultural forms has largely been undertaken in departments of sociology, separated off from any critical or textual analysis, and in France readers with any pretension to intellectual seriousness are reticent about admitting to a taste for, in particular, middlebrow culture - the fully popular being more easily viewed as offering ironic or ‘second degree’ pleasures. There is of course a strongly gendered element to the allocation of cultural worth. Crime fiction, like comic books (*bandes dessinées* or BD) have long achieved a sort of cult status. Crime is a richly varied genre, but in its *noir* guise especially it is associated with masculinity: cerebral rather than emotional, violent and dark rather than rosily life-affirming. As Nicole Ward-Jouve puts it in her description of why, as an academically aspiring French teenager in 1950s France, she knew that she must never be seen to read Colette with her stories of love, animals, the texture of quotidian living: ‘Real literature was about mind and anguish and nothingness and night’, all of these of course central elements of the *polar* or crime novel.¹² Romance, fiction that deals neither satirically nor tragically with relationships and the domestic business of everyday life, tends to be subjected to a critical discourse that favours the words ‘poncif’ (cliché), ‘bons sentiments’ (cosy moralising), sentimentality and facility.¹³

Novels that provide reading pleasure for a large mainstream public, and thus achieve very high sales, do tend to share certain features. These include: the use of narrative conventions sufficiently familiar as to be transparent, so that they draw the reader easily into an imaginary world; effective story-telling, or what Janice Radway in her study of the eminently middlebrow American Book of the Month Club calls ‘the rush of a good plot (and) the

¹² Nicole Ward-Jouve: *Colette*. Brighton: Harvester Press, 1987, p.3.

¹³ Reviews of Muriel Barbery’s 2007 best-seller *L’Élegance du hérisson*, a warm-hearted story of love and social class set in contemporary Paris, were typical of the disdain that middlebrow successes tend to attract. The critic Philippe Lançon, in the left-leaning broadsheet *Libération*, mocked the ‘comfortable’ reading that the novel offered, and complained that it was highly derivative of a number of recent popular successes (among them the fiction of Daniel Pennac and Anna Gavalda, Jeunet’s box-office hit *Amélie* and Agnès Jaoui’s *Le Goût des autres*): ‘Le tout assez répété, rabâché, mis sous ampoules sentimentales à fort voltage, pour que les plus sourds et aveugles puissent ne pas traîner en doute’. (‘All of this repeated and rehashed, and lit with high-voltage sentimentality so that even the deafest and blindest readers can’t miss the point’): Philippe Lançon, ‘Faut-il écraser le hérisson?’ In: *Libération*, 5 July 2007, accessed on 23 January, 2016 on <http://www.liberation.fr/livres/0101106688-faut-il-ecraser-le-herisson>.

inspiration offered by an unforgettable character’;¹⁴ a degree of optimism or the feel-good factor, even if it is only that offered by narrative resolution, with its implication that however sad, the world does make some kind of sense. These features are in direct contradiction to the implicit criteria of literary quality shared, at least in France, by both academic criticism and reviews in the mainstream press.¹⁵ An orthodoxy reigns that characterises the sort of pleasurable reads approved by the majority of readers as reprehensibly bland, aesthetically uninteresting, in short - not quite literature.

In the last few years, there have been reactions against this. One of the high priests of structuralism, Tzvetan Todorov, published a polemical essay in 2007 entitled *La Littérature en péril*¹⁶ in which he castigated the teaching of literature in French schools and universities for what he termed the nihilism and solipsism of its narrow focus on textual mechanics, and its indifference to the pleasure or the ethical capacity of fictions. Some of Todorov’s humanistic, appreciative statements in the book have a curiously old-fashioned ring in a France where the dominant stance on literature entails a sceptical view of mimesis, story and empathetic identification with fictional characters.

La littérature peut beaucoup. Elle peut nous tendre la main quand nous sommes profondément déprimés, nous conduire vers les autres êtres humains autour de nous, nous faire mieux comprendre le monde et nous aider à vivre. [...]

Le lecteur ordinaire, qui continue de chercher dans les œuvres qu’il lit de quoi donner sens à sa vie, a raison contre les professeurs, critiques et écrivains qui lui disent que la littérature ne parle que d’elle-même, ou qu’elle n’enseigne que le désespoir.¹⁷

In 2008 Nancy Huston, a novelist who manages to combine appeal to a wide general readership with literary esteem, also published an essay that defended the importance of story-telling and empathy in the novel, *L’Espèce fabulatrice* or the ‘Storytelling Species’:

Les caractéristiques du roman - sa façon de mettre en scène la tension entre individu et société, entre liberté et déterminisme, sa manière d’encourager l’identification à des êtres qui ne nous ressemblent pas - lui permettent de jouer un rôle éthique.¹⁸

¹⁴ Janice Radway: *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste and Middle-Class Desire*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997, p.7.

¹⁵ This sharp division between authentic literature and majority taste is mirrored in French bookshops - where a section is generally devoted to crime but very rarely to romance. In some shops, a new section has been invented called ‘romans romanesques’ or ‘novel-ish novels/storybook novels’ (the word also has connotations of ‘romantic’). This contains what I would call feminine middlebrow fiction, a large proportion of which is usually translated, often from the English. Though confined to a category separate from ‘literature’, their translated status confers on such novels a minimal degree of respectability, an aura of the serious and the difficult emanating from the fact that the book has its origins elsewhere.

¹⁶ Tzvetan Todorov: *La Littérature en péril*. Paris: Flammarion, 2007.

¹⁷ ‘Literature can do a lot. It can hold out a hand when we are profoundly depressed, lead us towards other people, help us to understand the world and to live our lives [...] Ordinary readers, who continue to seek in the books they read ways of giving life meaning, are right - and the teachers, critics, writers who try to tell them that literature is only about itself, or can only teach despair - they are wrong’. *Ibid.*, p.72.

This defence of popular reading practices is echoed in small corners of French academia, notably in work emanating from the French-based international network for the study of popular culture, *Littératures populaires et cultures médiatiques* (LPCM).¹⁹ Here I will focus on just two of the defining elements of fiction chosen by ‘ordinary readers’, mimesis and story, outlining some recent ways in which French-language theorists have argued for the human and literary value of these traditional components of narrative fiction, and against the dominant critical view that immersion in life-like imaginary worlds and thrilling plots (‘getting lost in a book’) is a lamentably passive, uncritical and implicitly *feminine* activity.²⁰ In *Pourquoi la fiction* (1999, translated in 2010 as *Why Fiction?*), Jean-Marie Schaeffer diagnoses the critical and philosophical suspicion of mimesis that runs through Western culture since Plato. Mimesis here can be defined as the representation of life through art, but the sort of representation that offers so convincing an imitation of life that we temporarily inhabit the fictional world, suspending that of lived experience. To suspend disbelief, to immerse oneself in an imaginary universe is often equated with the relinquishing of reason, with letting oneself be deceived or hoodwinked, with a spineless preference for illusion over reality. Thus formal experimentation, distanciation, a knowing self-reflexivity, all of these techniques that sustain a barrier to complete immersion, are highly valued as marks of the fully literary. In France, perhaps more than elsewhere, mistrust of the mimetic illusion pervades critical discourse, both academic and in mainstream media. The new novelists’ 1950s critique of classical realism as mere *trompe-l’oeil* has had a lasting effect on how fiction is valued, and the pleasure of ‘being carried away by a book’, regularly celebrated in readers’ blogs, for example, is more often equated in reviews with facility and mindless entertainment. Contemporary bestsellers, as a 2008 article disparagingly put it, offer no more than ‘intrigues faciles, une lecture aisée et une écriture de divertissement.’²¹ Novels that

¹⁸ ‘The characteristics of the novel - its staging of the tensions between the individual and society, between freedom and determinism, its way of encouraging identification with people who are different from ourselves - enable it to play an ethical role’. Nancy Huston, *L’Espèce fabulatrice*. Arles: Actes Sud, 2008, p.182-3.

¹⁹ The LPCM originated at the University of Limoges. Directed by Jacques Migozzi, it has supported and promoted the work of many of the major French scholars of popular culture, of whom Migozzi is one. See <http://www.flsh.unilim.fr/lpcm/>; for the network’s on-line scholarly journal *Belphégor* see <http://belphegor.revues.org/>.

²⁰ In the many recent analyses (in the UK, USA, France and elsewhere) of the strong and apparently growing gap between reading levels in girls and boys, one recurring argument indicts the gendering of fiction reading as ‘feminine’. As the author Danièle Sallenave put it in a 2012 opinion piece on the radio station *France Culture*, ‘ne pas lire est un marqueur de virilité’ (‘Not reading is a marker of virility’).

²¹ ‘Facile plots, easy reading and writing designed essentially for entertainment’. Thomas Yadan, ‘Musso et Cie - les livres muets’, *Evene.fr* - Septembre 2008, accessed on 11 February, 2015 on <http://evene.lefigaro.fr/livres/actualite/litterature-populaire-musso-levy-pancol-chattam-gavalda-1569.php>.

invite thorough immersion, that suspend perception of spatial and temporal surroundings, are seen as aesthetically naive but also morally debilitating—yet these qualities are also what most readers value in fiction.

Schaeffer's central argument constitutes a defence of mimetic readings. Simulated experience through fiction, he argues, is a vital learning process that operates at both a cognitive and an emotional level; it is central to the acquisition of knowledge as well as to that of the emotional intelligence that enables us to live competently in the social world. Fiction offers virtual experience, empathetic identification with subjectivities beyond our own, enabling the acquisition of that plurality of selves we need to function socially. For Schaeffer, the experience of fiction works at a profound level and serves 'à enrichir, à remodeler, à réadapter tout au long de notre existence le socle cognitif et affectif originaire grâce auquel nous avons accédé à l'identité personnelle et à notre être-au-monde.'²² Mimetic or immersive fiction then is not a facile, naive or pre-modernist form of art but one that fashions, enriches and nuances subjectivity. Schaeffer likens the space of fiction to Winnicott's 'transitional space of play', that vital activity of make-believe central to human development, in which the child appropriates elements of the objectively real, external world into their own imagined reality, thus both confronting the otherness of what exists beyond themselves, and affirming their own subjective agency.²³

Schaeffer offers the engaging description of the fictional pact between authors and readers as a 'feintise ludique et partagée'²⁴ or a playful, shared form of make-believe. This phrasing attributes to the reader an active role: the reader shares in the creation of the fictional world. Raphael Baroni's *La Tension narrative. Suspense, curiosité, surprise* (2007) also emphasizes the agency of the reader, and their interaction with the text. To mimesis, the relationship between simulated and 'real' world, he adds the vital dimension of intertextuality, present (I would argue, and I think his argument implies) in even the simplest or most popular of fictional texts. For suspense to work, there must be a set of expectations about where the plot is leading us, and these expectations come not so much from life as from literature; for the author to succeed in surprising us, there must be a departure from the expected sequence, or

²² 'Throughout our lives, to enrich, rework, adapt that core knowledge, both cognitive and emotional, that is at the heart of our personal identity and our being-in-the-world'. Jean-Marie Schaeffer: *Pourquoi la fiction?* Paris: Seuil, 1999, p.327.

²³ See Donald Winnicott: *Playing and Reality*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974 (1971).

²⁴ Schaeffer, *Pourquoi la fiction?* p.148.

what Baroni terms the ‘détournement d’un intertexte’, a diversion from intertextually based anticipation.²⁵ A successful fiction demands a competent reader.

Above all, though, Baroni emphasizes two dimensions of that ‘plaisir gratuit mais salubre’ which, like Schaeffer, he accords to fiction.²⁶ First, there is the pleasure of concordance: that reconfiguration of random and arbitrary life into a meaningful pattern, that Ricoeur terms ‘concordance’²⁷ and Frank Kermode nicely glosses as the addition of a ‘tock’ to the ‘tick’ of time (‘tick tick’ is hardly a narrative).²⁸ Baroni writes of the ‘colmatage des fissures du temps.’²⁹ But this image would cast fiction as wholly reassuring, as what Baroni terms elsewhere the ‘domestication de l’inattendu.’³⁰ Fiction, however, Baroni argues, goes beyond the provision of a brief refuge from the chaos of contingency – it also enables the reader to confront that chaos. Suspense allows us to live through in a concentrated yet safely virtual manner that uncertainty about the future that is part of the human condition; narrative curiosity plays on existential anxiety about the unpredictable connection between cause and effect. Fiction thus represents a ‘mise en intrigue de la sous-détermination du devenir et du monde.’³¹ No doubt – neither theorist goes into this very much – the depth, plurality, complexity and fine-tuning of the simulated experience proposed by fictions vary depending on the text, but the implication is that these arguments on the functions and value of narrative fiction apply generically, to the experience of fiction-reading as a whole.

3. Contemporary middlebrow: the case of ‘feminine’ crime

Defenders of immersive fiction then, like its critics, make little distinction between the different types of novel that make up Bourdieu’s ‘sub-field of large-scale production.’³² Schaeffer, Baroni (implicitly), and Todorov (explicitly) each claim the ‘gratuitous yet salutary pleasure’ of immersive reading for *all* levels of fiction. But in terms of understanding the cultural importance of novel reading both historically and now, it is pertinent to consider the distinction between the fully popular fictional text and that other broad, much maligned but also very widely consumed category of the middlebrow.

²⁵ Raphaël Baroni: *La Tension narrative. Suspense, curiosité et surprise*. Paris: Seuil, 2007, p.165.

²⁶ ‘Gratuitous, yet salutary pleasure’. Baroni, *La Tension narrative*, p. 34.

²⁷ Paul Ricoeur : *Temps et récit I*. Paris, Seuil (Coll. « L’ordre philosophique »), 1983.

²⁸ Frank Kermode: *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 45.

²⁹ ‘The sealing or plugging of the cracks in time’. Baroni, *La Tension narrative*, p. 409.

³⁰ ‘Domesticating the unexpected’. *Ibid.*

³¹ ‘A translation into the form of plot of the under-determined nature of human life’. *Ibid.*, p.158.

³² See footnote 6.

Popular fiction is the type of fiction already vilified by the French critic Sainte-Beuve in 1839 as ‘industrial’, that is as irremediably tainted by its origins in the marketplace.³³ The story’s function as commodity produces the popular’s preference for seriality, for forms of narrative that play on the promise of deferred or repeated pleasure: *feuilletons* or serialised novels, series or collections like Mills & Boon, Harlequin, the French *série noire*; heroes who recur from novel to novel and also hop successfully across media, like Fantômas, Angélique or James Bond; authors who become brands, like James Patterson or Stephanie Meyer. As ‘high’ literature has shifted toward self-reflexivity and postmodern detachment, popular novels have remained true to the traditional narrative pleasures of suspenseful story, identification with protagonists, satisfying closure. Popular fiction tends towards linguistic transparency, or what Bourdieu calls popular culture’s ‘erasure of the distancing power of representation.’³⁴ Popular novels invite not appreciation of style but rather direct access to a fictional place sufficiently grounded in the known to be rapidly conjured up in the readers’ imagination, yet more patterned, more concentrated, more satisfyingly coherent than the real. Popular genres work through mimesis in the sense that they hook firmly onto locations, types of people, and situations that are familiar through living or through the already mediated experience of other fictions, then animate these through plotting that mobilises fear, desire, curiosity, in some cases contradictory wishes for order and for transgression. Their intertextuality draws on myth, fairy tale and popular publishing itself. E.L James, author of the phenomenally popular *50 Shades of Grey* (2011), can count on her readers’ accurate anticipation of the plot when her heroine encounters a rich, arrogant, and emotionally wounded hero: prior readings from Jane Eyre to Harlequin provide the enjoyable certainty that there will be a struggle between Christian Grey’s misguided need to exercise power and his real need for love, between the heroine’s desire both *for* him and *to save* him and, conversely, her need to defend her own autonomy. Popular fiction belongs to what Linda Williams, writing of film, termed ‘body genres’: it works on the senses, on what the French call the ‘pulsions’ which only partially translates into the English ‘drives’ or ‘instincts.’³⁵ If it works, it makes us hold our breath, gasp, laugh, cry, feel aroused - all bodily sensations physically indistinguishable from responses to lived experience, yet safely virtual, and safe too in the knowledge that they lead towards some kind of resolution, even if a sad one. Popular fictional worlds translate the ‘*vécu passionnel*’ (emotional experience) into an

³³ Sainte-Beuve: ‘La Littérature industrielle’. In: *Revue des Deux Mondes*, Tome 19, 1839.

³⁴ Bourdieu: *La Distinction*, p. 570.

³⁵ Linda Williams: *Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess* In: *Film Quarterly* 4/4 (Summer 1991), p. 2-13.

‘*histoire passionnante*’ (thrilling story), and allow us to enjoy the provisional belief that the world makes sense.³⁶

Middlebrow has been a derogatory term since its coinage in the 1920s, well before Virginia Woolf (in 1940) described the middlebrow reader as a ‘bloodless and pernicious pest’, by which she meant, I think, a member of the respectable, aesthetically timid middle-class who despises popular culture but rejects the avant-garde as both pretentious and morally dangerous.³⁷ The OED definition is instructive: ‘of limited intellectual or cultural value, demanding or involving only a moderate degree of intellectual application, typically as a result of not deviating from convention.’ It is a term that perhaps suggests particular historical periods, notably the inter-war years, but that also, stripped of its negative charge, can usefully designate an important component of contemporary culture. The middlebrow is certainly the most porous and fluid of literary ‘brows’, at least in Anglophone cultures: it is that great swathe of literary fiction found in WH Smith’s bestseller displays and in airport bookshops, read by reading groups, serialised on Radio 4’s Book at Bedtime, reviewed not just on the literary pages of the Sunday papers but also in *Cosmopolitan*.

The middlebrow shares with the popular an emphasis on plot and character, thus the capacity to suspend lived reality through immersion in an imagined world, and also a kind of restorative optimism. However in other respects it differs from ‘popular’ literature: in the type of intertextuality that it brings into play, which demands a more extensive, often more educated frame of reference; in the specificity and originality of setting and character, more highly prized than in the popular which tends more toward the generic settings and stock characters of myth (for example Harlequin romance novels, like perennial French - and international - bestsellers Marc Levy and Guillaume Musso, all set their stories in a minimally described, North American place of globalised modernity); in its addressing of issues, questions, tensions that evoke the socio-cultural realities of readers’ lives.

Middlebrow, says Janice Radway, provides a way for the reader to ‘participate in the common cultural ritual of the moment.’³⁸

The example of contemporary middlebrow I have chosen addresses the question of the relationship – at once of similarity and dissimilarity – between middlebrow and popular, demonstrates what I have suggested are the specific features of middlebrow, and returns to the question of the gendered reader. Crime fiction, as briefly discussed above, is a massively

³⁶ Baroni, *La Tension narrative*, p. 35.

³⁷ Virginia Woolf: ‘Middlebrow’. In: *The Death of the Moth, and Other Essays*. London: Hogarth Press, 1947 (first published 1942), p. 115.

³⁸ Radway, *A Feeling for Books*, p. 357.

popular genre and spills over into the middlebrow in terms of reception (even in France there is no shame in acknowledging a taste for the *polar*), readership, and seriousness and topicality of theme. It is also historically a masculine genre, despite the significant number of women crime authors in the English (not the French) crime canon. Currently, though, this category of fiction includes a significant component of middlebrow feminine crime, written by women and read by a huge mainstream, broadly middle-class and, the evidence suggests, to a large extent female readership.³⁹ The English author Kate Atkinson and the French Fred Vargas exemplify this trend, both having achieved national and to some extent international celebrity and bestseller status with novels that offer all the generic pleasures of suspense, violent action, and detection, combined with compelling characterisation and depiction of place, a strong thread of humour, and an interesting take on what in the broadest sense are political questions. Their fictional worlds are distinctive and quite different from each other, but what connects these authors is also what places them squarely within my definition of the contemporary middlebrow. I will concentrate here mainly on one novel by each - the source of the opening passages cited earlier: Atkinson's *When Will There Be Good News* (2008) and Vargas's *L'Armée furieuse* (2011). Both form part of a series featuring a recurring detective hero and cast of secondary characters, as is typical of the genre.

The specificity of female crime writing can be overstated in a way that plays into stereotypical models of gender: as the French author Dominique Manotti commented, responding to a spate of articles in the late 1990s identifying a new sub-genre of 'feminine crime', 'C'est enfin une façon de nous renvoyer à l'éternel féminin.'⁴⁰ Many of the features that connect Vargas and Atkinson, and could be generalised to a wider group of women crime writers,⁴¹ are equally present in contemporary male crime writing of the middlebrow variety, situated between the genre's popular origins and the literary. Crime writing as a genre works variations on narrative structures so recurrent, pervasive and satisfying that they could be described as mythical: there is a crime, an enquiry that itself leads on to further conflict and violence, an uncovering of truth that produces a sense of moral closure in the form of justice and retribution. But much contemporary crime fiction also deploys fine-tuned

³⁹ See Natacha Levet : Les «chéries noires»: écriture féminine et roman noir. In: *Belphégor* 7/2 (2008), accessed on 23 January, 2016 on <http://dalspace.library.dal.ca/handle/10222/47754>. Levet surveys the phenomenon of women authors' increased presence on the French and international crime scene in the 1990s and 2000s, and quotes a *Livre Hebdo* survey from 2004 that shows women accounting for 59.5% of crime fiction sales in France (*Livre Hebdo* 549, 19 March 2004, 106).

⁴⁰ 'It's a way of sending us back to the Eternal Feminine'. Dominique Manotti: 'Chéries noires'. In: *La Raison présente* 134 (2000), p. 94. Quoted in Natacha Levet, Les «chéries noires», p.179.

⁴¹ For example, in France Maud Tabachnik, in the UK Minette Walters, Denise Mina.

characterisation, and makes the depiction of place one of the pleasures of the story: one has only to think of Montalbano's Sicily, Rebus's Edinburgh, and the bleak Northern landscapes of the Scandinavians. It often invokes a broad range of intertextual reference, assuming the reader's familiarity not only with the crime genre but also with 'highbrow' literature. It displays an explicit engagement with contemporary issues, both social and political, from Stieg Larsson's and Henning Mankell's concern with the continuing presence of the Far-Right in Sweden to Didier Daeninckx's use of crime plots to interrogate sensitive moments of recent French history.

In these senses – satisfyingly thrilling plots combined with thematic relevance and a 'literary' attention to style, character and place—Atkinson and Vargas typify middlebrow crime writing. They create suspense, both through the introduction of apparently discrete narrative threads which, as readers, we anticipate will reveal their connection, though we don't know how, and through the posing of narrative enigmas. Characters are rapidly established as interesting and empathetic: the desire to know what happens next (suspense) is inseparable from the desire to know more about the characters and their world (curiosity). These are page-turners. Their novels share with the popular the quality of being materially precise and vivid, of language that mobilises virtual sensory perception. At the same time their range of reference credits the reader with some literary culture: Atkinson prefaces her story with lines from Emily Dickinson and nods to the picaresque eighteenth-century novel, for example, with the chapter humorously entitled 'The Life and Adventures of Reggie Chase, Containing a Faithful Account of the Fortunes, Misfortunes, Uprisings, Downfallings and Complete Career of the Chase Family', while Vargas has one character who, bizarrely and comically, speaks solely in the alexandrines of French seventeenth-century classical theatre. Landscape is at once geographic and socio-political. Vargas's plots always return to a Paris whose diverse neighbourhoods are vividly evoked, and whose streets (especially by night) often provide clues or catalysts that further the investigation. But they also make both narrative and descriptive use of the specificity of France's varied regions: Adamsberg's origins in the Pyrenees region of France contribute to his detachment from metropolitan culture; the rural landscape and local mythologies of Normandy play important parts in *L'Armée furieuse*. Atkinson's Yorkshire-born hero Jackson Brodie is also a provincial outsider in London, carrying in his heart 'the dark and sooty chamber that contained his sister and his brother and, because it was an accommodating kind of space, the entire filthy history of the industrial

revolution.⁴² Brodie returns to Yorkshire in *When Will There Be Good News*, in a plot also extensively set in and around Edinburgh. In both writers the social landscape is one of inequality, and the novels' sympathies are firmly with the dispossessed. In the Vargas novel, the socially marginalised tend to be suspected of murder – like Momo-mèches-courtes, a petty criminal from the *banlieue* arrested for the killing of a rich industrialist – but the true assassins are the victim's sons, rich, privileged, well-connected and ruthless. Adamsberg, carrying reader sympathies with him, rescues Momo just as (in a typically Vargas-ian subplot that weaves through the novel) he rescues a pigeon whose legs some evildoer has tied together: 'Toi aussi, Mo, on t'a ficelé les pattes'.⁴³ Atkinson's most likeable protagonists come from deprived, difficult childhoods that have armed them with a tough pragmatism but also left emotional scars: Brodie was a working-class boy whose family was destroyed by his sister's unsolved rape and murder, the police officer Louise Monroe grew up fatherless with a depressed, poor and alcoholic mother, and 16-year-old Reggie Chase is orphaned and has apparently slipped through the cracks of the welfare state. The comfortably-off middle classes, represented by Louise's kind but complacent husband Patrick and his family, are more satirically treated. Brodie identifies geographically and politically with the industrial North of England, suspicious of the affluent and the sophisticated, thinking darkly anti-Thatcherite thoughts as his train passes Grantham: 'birthplace of 'That Woman, the very person who had single-handedly dismantled Britain' (49).

Middlebrow does not depart too far from readers' expectations, and provides that satisfaction of desire and curiosity that makes for reading pleasure. But as Baroni explains, narrative works not only by fulfilling expectations, but also by departing from them, by 'diverting from the familiar intertext.' It is in the specific nature of their diversions from the conventions of crime narrative that Vargas and Atkinson can usefully be described as *women* writers of middlebrow crime. In particular, a female perspective is apparent in their representations of violence, gender and sexual relationships, all of which are arguably central to their novels' appeal.

Traditional, culturally ingrained notions of what is 'feminine' might predict a lower quotient of violence in women-authored crime, but this is not noticeably the case. Vargas and Atkinson, like their male counterparts, stage those unforeseen eruptions of mortal violence that allow crime fiction to articulate possibly atavistic fears of the world's frightening unpredictability (Baroni's 'sous-détermination du monde'). *L'Armée furieuse* has corpses

⁴² Atkinson: *When will there be good news*, p. 260.

⁴³ 'You too, Mo, someone tied your legs together'. Vargas, *L'Armée furieuse*, p. 151.

incinerated in a burnt-out car, bleeding on the floor of a church, shot, bludgeoned, and sundered by axe; what ‘comes out of nowhere’ in Atkinson’s novel is in fact a hideous multiple murder, by a stranger, of a mother and two of her small children. But what could be seen as more ‘feminine’ in both authors is the emphasis on violence not from without but from within the private sphere. Violence that comes ‘from out of nowhere’ is more than matched by domestic violence. In these texts—as in reality—women in particular are more at risk from husbands, partners, and family members than from strangers. By patient detection Adamsberg learns that the axe-murder, the impact of which underpins the plot of *L’Armée furieuse*, was committed by the small, motherly Madame Vandermot, in a desperate bid to protect her children from a brutal husband: Adamsberg’s decision to conceal this discovery from his superiors is, in the novel’s terms, professionally incorrect but morally right.⁴⁴ As a police officer, Atkinson’s Louise regularly encounters domestic violence of the most extreme kind, and returns in a recurring sub-plot to visit a woman living in terror of her estranged husband: he has escaped after breaking into his daughter’s birthday party and, failing to find his wife, killing his mother- and sister-in-law in her place. Louise angrily reflects on the varied catalogue of ‘guys who attacked women and children.’

Somewhere, in some utopian nowhere, women walked without fear. Louise would like to see that place.

Give medals to all the women. (61)

Domestic violence haunts these stories, but although women are (as in reality) overwhelmingly its victims, they rarely display the passivity of victims. The one unpunished – and arguably justified – murder in *L’Armée furieuse* is the one that puts an end to the real aggressor, the satisfyingly ‘David and Goliath’ killing of a large, violent man by a ‘petite femme fragile et désemparée qui avait fendu son mari en deux coups de hache’ (45).⁴⁵ In *When Will There Be Good News*, the surviving daughter of the initial murder, Joanna, grows up to become a caring local doctor and the loving mother of her own child, but also – when the chance occurs – neatly and cold-bloodedly engineers the death of the murderer, with the implied approval of the author (and surely the reader). DCI Louise Monroe works her vengeance through the legal procedure of detection and arrest, but this does not diminish the vitality of her anger against the perpetrators of violence and the complacency of those who

⁴⁴ In a further political reference, the husband’s unhinged violence is explained by a head-wound sustained in the Algerian war that led to his detachment to an Intelligence squadron and hence to his involvement in torture

⁴⁵ ‘Small, distressed, fragile woman who had sliced through her husband with two strokes of an axe’.

ignore it: ‘She was beginning to notice that she was more bloodthirsty than she used to be (and that was saying something)’ (35).

Sane, maternal, socially committed Joanna not only exacts revenge for her family’s murder, but also kills with extreme, pragmatic violence when her kidnappers threaten herself and her baby son. Handed a pen to write a letter begging for a ransom to be paid for her release:

She crossed the is and dotted the ts and when John came back in she jammed the pen into his eye as hard as she could. It surprised her how far it went in. (31)

That violence is not only external but is, for many women, an everyday fact of domestic life is a fact woven into the fabric of these fictional worlds, and one of the narrative satisfactions provided is women’s (sometimes violent) resistance, their survival, and in Atkinson’s case their colourful and un-’feminine’ fury.

For both writers have fun with gender stereotypes. Apart from Vargas’s fragile, motherly axe-murderer, *L’Armée furieuse* contains several strong female protagonists who, through their whole way of being, refute any notion of fixed gender difference. Of these, the policewoman Violette Retancourt, a member of Adamsberg’s close-knit team and thus a recurring figure in the novels, is one of the most memorable as well as the most quirkily comic. Violette exercises a distinct charm over many of the male characters, most notably Adamsberg (whom she persistently shuns) and is declared by at least one to be ‘très belle’ (39). Yet, as Adamsberg reflects, she has none of the conventional attributes of desirable femininity: ‘ni la grâce, ni la nuance, ni l’amabilité’, and with her huge stature and ‘puissants maxillaires fixés sur un cou de taureau’ is ‘en tous points opposée à la délicatesse charmante et fragile qu’ évoquait son prénom’ (39).⁴⁶ What is seductive about Violette is her comforting and protective vastness, allied with her almost superhuman (she is described at one point as a ‘déesse polyvalente’ [37]) powers of speed (she runs like the wind), deduction, intuition, saving those in need (including sick pigeons), and generally managing life.⁴⁷ The humour comes from the hyperbole, from what in more conventional terms is an oxymoronic merging of opposed attributes, and from the unexpected reversal of dominant representations of big women. Atkinson also invites laughter with her knowing reversals of the expected, though in this case the laughter for some readers might carry an element of self-recognition. DCI

⁴⁶ ‘Neither the grace, nor the nuance, nor the amiability’; ‘her powerful jaws set above a bull neck’; ‘in every way the opposite of the charming, fragile delicacy evoked by her first name’.

⁴⁷ ‘A polyvalent goddess’.

Louise Monroe⁴⁸ is petite and blonde—so far so ‘feminine’—but is overly fond of malt whisky (or wine when this is not available), often foul-mouthed and bad-tempered, and utterly ill-suited to domesticity. Louise is echoed by another small female figure whose toughness belies her appearance. Reggie (short for Regina) Chase, whose very name blurs gender boundaries, is a 16-year-old orphan who plays a key role in unravelling the plot’s multiple strands. Reggie’s resilience, pragmatic will to survive and protect those she loves, and vast appetite for education contradict both her apparent fragility and the social deprivation that has disrupted her schooling.

Masculinity is also more ludically interrogated than in most male crime writing. If the threat of violence, both external and domestic, comes largely from men, both author’s male protagonists offer compelling proof that gender identity is variable and complex rather than essential and fixed. Adamsberg and Brodie both fulfil the narrative functions of the traditional detective hero, investigating and in some ways resolving crimes, restoring a kind of order and justice to the world. But Vargas’s Adamsberg is a far cry from the bloke-ish, hard-living detective figure with a nose for the truth, familiar from Raymond Chandler through most *noir* fiction to Ian Rankin’s Rebus. He is small, dreamy, wary of confrontation, heterosexual in his desires but diffident about fulfilling them. In his manner of solving or resolving crimes, he displays attributes more conventionally seen as feminine: Adamsberg’s mode of detection is affective, intuitive and strangely passive, as opposed to deductive, rational and linear.⁴⁹ It often involves a retreat into something like a meditative state, where he puts aside the misleading conclusions provided by a rational approach, and allows the truth to surface quietly from the ‘inept fragments of his personal mass of perceptions’ (*L’Armée furieuse*, 385). Atkinson’s Jackson Brodie has all the outward appearance of the virile hero, a big ex-soldier scarred by past episodes of violence, divorced and rarely able to sustain long-term relationships, geographically mobile and generally, at some point in the plot, getting into a fight. But Brodie’s appeal, both for Louise – the unconsummated mutual attraction between these two fuels the plot of this as of preceding novels – and for many readers, lies in the fact that he is less in control, more driven by emotion than he at first appears. Jackson Brodie too has a kind of passivity, like Adamsberg eschewing the confidently rational in favour of a confused but instinctive sense of justice and right. Rather

⁴⁸ Strong, competent police women are by no means absent from male writing. In the Ian Rankin novels, Rebus’s colleague and protégée DI Siobhan Clarke is a good example, but Clarke is essentially a sidekick character, an interesting component of the Rebus story, whereas DCI Louise Monroe is a character in her own right and often the focaliser of action from which Jackson Brodie is absent.

⁴⁹ In this he resembles his French forerunner Maigret to some extent, though Adamsberg is a less imposing and authoritative figure, and there is no equivalent to Madame Maigret to anchor him in a masculine social role.

than embarking on a purposeful quest, Brodie tends to be buffeted around by the plot, reacting rather than acting. Beginning the novel in the Yorkshire Dales on a quest to find his small son, the unintended child of a former relationship whose mother denies him any access, Brodie catches the wrong train back to London and thus ends up entirely through error in a train crash in Scotland, where his rescue by Reggie carries him into the novel's main plot. Unlike Louise he has no formal role in the investigation, but succumbs to a reluctant inclination to help out, unable to resist the force of Reggie's will, his appreciation of her courage, or his intense desire to see more of Louise. So Brodie plays his part, but the chief agents in the solving of the component mysteries and the saving of the kidnapped Joanna Hunter are Louise, Reggie and Joanna herself.

Both the emphasis on home and family as sites of violence, and the play with gender conventions, produce what could be termed a feminine inflection of the crime genre. Given the popularity of romantic fiction with women readers, and the resilient belief in the culture at large that love and family are primarily women's domain, we might also expect these novels to veer towards a greater narrative concern with relationships, especially romantic ones. Family relationships certainly play a significant role in characterisation, in a way that resembles but possibly exceeds that of many top male crime-writers. Ian Rankin's Rebus, Henning Mankell's Wallander both have children from past relationships who provoke in them an occasional wistful desire for the life they did not choose. Similarly, both Adamsberg and Brodie have children with women who are not, or are no longer, a regular part of their lives, and both do their best, as largely absent fathers, to play some sort of paternal role and maintain the connection. This device provides the hero with some emotional hinterland, whilst maintaining the mobility and availability for new experience (including emotional) needed for the chief protagonist in a crime series. If there is a difference, it is one of degree: both Vargas and Atkinson carry filial/parental relationships beyond techniques of characterisation to make them central strands of the narrative. Thus Adamsberg's developing relationship with his elder son Zerk, whose existence he only discovered in the preceding novel,⁵⁰ is one of several threads that compose the narrative of *L'Armée furieuse*; Zerk's major role in the concerted effort to cure the crippled pigeon works to reveal his practical and emotional qualities and his emerging resemblance to his father, whilst neatly tying his story into the detection plot. As we have seen, relationships between parents and children, both functional and dysfunctional, weave through the entire novel, and motivate two of the

⁵⁰ Fred Vargas: *Un lieu incertain*. Paris: Viviane Hamy, 2008

murders. Atkinson's novel also intertwines stories of both good and bad relations between parents and children with the crime narrative, and makes the orphaned Reggie's entry into the happy family formed by Joanna Hunter and her baby son central to the novel's satisfying closure: 'Reggie knew that Dr Hunter would walk to the ends of the earth for someone she loved and that she, Little Reggie Chase, orphan of the parish (...) came within that warm circle. And now, for better or worse, the world was all before her. *Vivat Regina!*' (181). Family units can provide much needed warmth and comfort in a dangerous world, but they are rarely conventionally composed. Female protagonists in these novels, far from seeking the One True Love with whom to live happily ever after, 'actively eschew permanent partners',⁵¹ as Sara Poole puts it of Vargas's fiction. These are certainly not romantic novels in any conventional sense of the word, and women in their pages are for the most part unhappily married or - more frequently - single by choice and inclination, hence most unlikely to suffer from any wistful yearning for a conjugality lost or refused. Adamsberg's most durable love, for the musician/plumber Camille, the mother of his son Thomas, is resisted by her repeated departures, and she scarcely figures in *L'Armée furieuse*. Louise in *When Will There Be Good News* is also disinclined to cohabitation: 'I can't do relationships' (36), but in this novel has decided to try out 'relinquishing control' (36) by marrying Patrick, a kind, confidently middle-class surgeon who represents 'a chance for change, to become like other people' (37). Louise tries on the role of domesticated wife, and the novel has fun with her efforts to play the hostess, to shop in Waitrose and cook 'sea bass on a bed of puy lentils, twice-baked Roquefort soufflés' (36). But she experiences marriage as surrender—'He had broken her in as if she was a high-strung, untamed horse. (But what if he had just broken her?)' (36)—and soon reverts to her single lifestyle of long working hours, often followed by boozy oblivion. Neither of these two bestselling authors presents love and marriage as a happy ever after, for either sex.

Love and desire, on the other hand, fuel the plots and represent a significant element of reading pleasure. Adamsberg's sensuous desire for the lawyer Line Vandermot thickens the plot, since Line plays a key role in the murder mysteries, and also adds a further note of suspense (will he, won't he?). Line is an imperfect beauty ('un peu de ventre, le dos plutôt rond', 190) who nonetheless 'lui ouvrait démesurément l'appétit' by reminding him of a particular kind of honey-flavoured cake, a 'kouglof au miel' he had once eaten as a child.⁵²

⁵¹ Sara Poole: *Rompols* not of the Bailey: Fred Vargas and the *polar* as *mini-proto-mythe*. In: *French Cultural Studies* 12 (2001), p. 95-108, p.99.

⁵² 'A bit of a tummy, a little round-shouldered'; 'made him ravenous with desire'.

The sensual precision of Adamsberg's desire is both humorous and eloquent: the fact that it remains politely unspoken and unsatisfied is typical of Vargas's pleasing unpredictability. In *When Will There Be Good News*, the romance of mutual desire plays a compelling role in the narrative. In a storyline carried over from preceding novels in the series, Atkinson's two main protagonists, Jackson Brodie and Louise Monroe, are strongly attracted to each other, a fact revealed to the reader who has access to the inner thoughts of each ('There had been another man once...' thinks Louise, remembering a previous encounter with Brodie, 'the kind of man she could have imagined standing shoulder to shoulder with' [66]), but concealed by each from the object of their desire. When Brodie wakes from his train-crash induced coma in the hospital Louise is by his bedside, there in her professional capacity and stunned to see him. In his semi-conscious state he speaks aloud what (in true romance style) the novel suggests is the truth:

He had a moment of supernatural clarity. He was with the wrong woman. He had been going the wrong way. This was the right way. The right woman (...)
'I love you', he said. (107)

Louise that night, the wrong side of a bottle of wine, sees that 'Of course, the right response was 'I love you too', and it was only by the merest whisker that she had escaped saying it to Jackson' (110). She also mentally compares the seemly conjugality of sex with Patrick with what might happen 'if she ever kissed Jackson.' 'It would be the end of decency and good manners. A pair of tigers roaring in the night' (124). The tension of desire fuels the rest of the novel but remains unresolved, the love story forming a bridge to the next book in the series. For both characters, attempts at forming durable romantic relationships have only been disastrous, and the novels invite enjoyment of the narrative of passionate desire without directing this towards the classic denouement of marriage.

The fictional worlds of Atkinson and Vargas are each unique and eccentric, but what they share, and what typifies a certain kind of contemporary middlebrow, is effective, suspenseful storytelling shot through with wit, and a concern to chart and explore current issues and shifting patterns of relationship. These are novels that provide an un-idealised but positive portrayal of the diverse, complex, recomposed or non-biological family units that typify modern living, of the often serial pattern of romantic relationships, and of many women's rejection of the traditional family with its deeply ingrained, hard-to-shift distribution of labour and power between the sexes. Their novels share a taken-for-granted feminism that partly explains their appeal to a female readership, in their often ludic reversals and derangements of classic expectations of gender, in their representation of violence as a

domestic more than an external threat, in their reworking of the crime genre to incorporate yet subvert the conventions of romance. Vargas' own coinage of the compound term 'rompol' to characterise her fiction could be applied to both the novels discussed here: both Vargas and Atkinson broaden the detective novel into a composite genre of *rompol*, and in so doing pleasurably rearrange the conventions of both 'masculine' crime and 'feminine' romance.

Conclusion

What I have termed here *middlebrow* reading—reading immersive narratives that 'mobilis(e) body and brain, heart and soul'—is an activity associated with leisure and everyday pleasure, rather than with the pursuit of knowledge or aesthetic appreciation.⁵³ Like the popular, with which it has fluid borders and with which it is often conflated, the middlebrow is generally excluded from the category of the fully literary on the grounds of a naive, pre-modernist fidelity to the conventions of mimesis and story-telling, with feminine genres like the romance attracting more disdain than the more virile genres such as crime. Yet fictions such as these also map, represent and implicitly interpret the reader's world, shaping, through Schaeffer's 'shared, playful make-believe' that 'cognitive and emotional knowledge' that is 'at the heart of our personal identity and being-in-the-world.'⁵⁴ How they perform this process, what kind of world they invite us to provisionally inhabit, is a matter of importance, and the current re-gendering of the crime genre to accommodate very topical questions about family structures, and relations between women and men, is just one instance of this. As Rita Felski puts it: 'literature may speak to readers in ways that literary critics are often ill equipped to deal with.'⁵⁵ Yet it is surely part of the job of the literary critic to pay attention to and try to understand the specific pleasures of the way that most people read now, or of what currently constitutes literature's capacity to, in Todorov's words, 'help us to live.'

⁵³ Radway, *A Feeling for Books*, 117.

⁵⁴ Schaeffer, *Pourquoi la fiction?* See footnote 22.

⁵⁵ Rita Felski: *Literature after Feminism*. Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2003, p. 162.