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Annamma Varghese

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# From crisis to comfort : contemporary bestsellers and the French Middlebrow's narrative of recovery

Annamma Varghese

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## Introduction

- 1 Over the past twenty years, studies on Anglophone middlebrow fiction have flourished, challenging the previous neglect of middlebrow cultures by providing detailed accounts of twentieth century texts, their readerships and institutions.<sup>1</sup> The majority of these studies attest to the instability of Middlebrow cultures and their classification.<sup>2</sup> Despite this fluidity, several common aspects of Anglophone (British and American) Middlebrow fiction have been identified: it is feminized and class-conscious, its narratives encourage emotional engagement and favor mimetic styles. More recently, Beth Driscoll and Timothy Aubry have initiated important conversations about the contemporary (Anglophone) Middlebrow. Driscoll develops a taxonomy for what she calls the “new literary middlebrow”, traits which are shared and indeed inherited from the twentieth century: “middle-class, reverential towards high culture, and commercial; (...) feminized, emotional, recreational, mediated and earnest.”<sup>3</sup> Through a different lens, Aubry’s *Reading as Therapy* focuses on the discourse and functions of Middlebrow fiction, arguing that although the Middlebrow produces diverse representations of the social world, it can above all be characterized by its distinctly therapeutic framework.<sup>4</sup>
- 2 In great contrast to the Anglophone context, Middlebrow fiction has been excluded from the French studies’ critical agenda, largely due to widespread academic disdain towards scholarship on popular fiction.<sup>5</sup> This can also be attributed to the invisibility of the Middlebrow in France, neither an established nor recognizable category of fiction.<sup>6</sup> As a consequence, there have been very few explicit accounts made of French Middlebrow

fiction. Pioneering research in this area, Diana Holmes's article "Mapping Modernity" identifies the aesthetics and function of the French Middlebrow during the Belle Époque, arguing that far from preserving the *status quo*, these narratives demonstrate a capacity to challenge traditional roles for women and promote new ways of being. Holmes is the first to discuss the existence of a contemporary French Middlebrow and to investigate its heritage. Extending a line of inquiry initiated several years earlier in "The Comfortable Reader"; her study proposes that popular novels, such as Anna Gavalda's bestsellers, provide readers with pleasurable immersion in a realistic story world. Acknowledging and addressing readers' anxieties about life in contemporary France (such as isolation and alienation), these narratives provide an optimistic vision and relief for the reader.<sup>7</sup>

- 3 The study at hand aims to further explore this understanding of the French Middlebrow, comparing the brows' representations of and responses to contemporary anxieties. I will demonstrate how the analysis of a corpus of contemporary bestsellers can illuminate significant aspects of the French Middlebrow. Comparing the articulations of one common motif (in this case, the French-foreigner relationship) across numerous bestselling novels, key ideological and functional differences between the brows come into view. With the distinction of three different narrative categories, I propose a parallel comparison rather than a hierarchical conceptualization of the brows. While corresponding to most of the criteria of the Anglophone literary middlebrow, I argue that the contemporary French Middlebrow novel has a national particularity: it features a recurring narrative pattern which concludes with the reinsertion of an alienated French protagonist within the national home through a relationship with a foreigner, renewing individual and collective engagement to the values of the Republic (*liberté, égalité* and *fraternité*). While critics have reduced the Middlebrow to merely a hybrid text, this article argues that the French Middlebrow has its own distinct narrative structure, ideology and function.
- 4 I begin by teasing out the issues involved in the conceptualization of the Middlebrow. Next, I outline the scope of this study and the principal findings leading to the creation of three narrative categories corresponding to the three brows. Following this, I turn to the heart of this project, which is an account of the Middlebrow narrative of recovery, its anxieties, therapeutic function and imaginary.

## Escaping a hierarchical model and making the Middlebrow "visible"

- 5 From its first designation as a category in English, the Middlebrow has been conceived of both relationally and hierarchically.<sup>8</sup> With an inbuilt pejorative label indicating inferiority to the elite highbrow, it has long been considered the poor cousin to modernist literature.<sup>9</sup> A rather extreme example of highbrow disdain is located in Virginia Woolf's letter to *The New Statesman* where the writer zealously distances herself from the Middlebrow.<sup>10</sup> For Woolf, Middlebrow cultural practices are detestable and threatening because of their hybridity, operating in the "betwixt and between" cultural space. Despite identifying Middlebrow habitus and ideology and defending it from dismissal, Janice Radway and Nicola Humble also understand the Middlebrow as a "hybrid"<sup>11</sup> or "parasitic"<sup>12</sup> form.

- 6 In the French context, the conceptualization of the Middlebrow is complicated by what Caroline Pollentier calls the “semantic fuzziness” of the term *moyenne*, interpretable as either “average” or “middle”.<sup>13</sup> In *Distinction*, Bourdieu proposes that the cultural practices of the *petit bourgeois*, conflated with Middlebrow, exist purely through their relationship to legitimate culture.<sup>14</sup> Critiquing Bourdieu’s treatment of the Middlebrow, Caroline Pollentier highlights that the ambiguity of *moyen* remains unresolved in his work<sup>15</sup> and slippages between the two meanings result in an essentializing and negative understanding of *la culture moyenne*.<sup>16</sup> Pollentier proposes a reinvestment in the Middlebrow as a culture outside hierarchy, emphasizing its moral and inclusive nature. Equally critical of Bourdieu’s relational framework, Beth Driscoll argues that his model is essentially binaristic, causing the Middlebrow to “disappear” in an ill-defined gap.<sup>17</sup> This article responds to Driscoll’s invitation to produce an account of the Middlebrow that goes “beyond gatekeeping and culture wars”<sup>18</sup>. I propose to understand the Middlebrow through a parallel comparative analysis of the brows, rather than a relational framework. Such a method need not depend on a negative definition, or a judgment of the value of each brow. I wish to demonstrate that a parallel comparison of narrative themes and teleology can throw into relief the specificity of the Middlebrow, both what it is and what it is not.
- 7 This study thus attempts to escape the traditional French binary of high and low, removing the brows from a hierarchical framework and placing them side-by-side. This account of the contemporary French Middlebrow reveals it to be more than a parasitical form. These novels provide a distinct response to the anxieties of the period in which the novels became bestsellers.

## Bestsellers in the Sarkozy years (2007-2012) : national identity crisis and “collective therapy”

- 8 Bestseller lists can offer an insight into what the majority reads rather than an elite minority. Although impacted by international trends and market forces, they can also reflect the mood of the period in question<sup>19</sup> and manifestations of the national imaginary. Such lists offer a corpus with a diversity of genres and brows, and contrary to common assumption, a bestseller is not always lowbrow.<sup>20</sup> An analysis of bestselling fiction allows us to consider common themes across the brows and to identify their different articulations of contemporary issues.
- 9 The empirical research for this article focused on French novels that were bestsellers during the Sarkozy years (2007-2012), an interesting period for questions of the national image and belonging. It was during Sarkozy’s presidency that anxieties about national identity were brought explicitly and fervently into political and public discourse. Although these issues were present and indeed recurring in political discourse of the previous decades, they became central to the debate leading up to the 2007 presidential elections<sup>21</sup> and were a dominant preoccupation of Sarkozy’s mandate. An official debate on “what it is to be French” was launched by Eric Besson in November 2009 and according to the minister’s outlined goals, aimed to heal France’s self-image: “faire émerger des actions permettant de conforter notre identité nationale, et de réaffirmer les valeurs républicaines et la fierté d’être Français”.<sup>22</sup> Continuing in this therapeutic paradigm, Henri Guaino, a spokesperson for Sarkozy, likened the debate to a form of “collective

therapy” necessary for French citizens to feel better.<sup>23</sup> The terms and form of the debate were criticized as rhetorical and the debate, and later the ministry itself, were dissolved. Despite the controversy surrounding the debate, there was considerable public engagement: the online forum received more than 58,000 responses and meetings were held in the Prefectures all over France.<sup>24</sup> Three key elements of the socio-political discourse of this period are significant to my study: firstly, the connection made by the government between national identity and immigration; secondly, the evocation of France as a depressed patient needing therapy and thirdly, the anxieties evoked through the debate and in public forums. This article analyzes how these elements manifest in the bestsellers of the Sarkozy years. We will see that the narrative of the contemporary middlebrow novel is enmeshed in these questions, structured around the therapy of the alienated French protagonist recovering his/her self-image through a relationship with the foreigner.

- 10 This study was limited to the top 20 bestsellers over the 6-year period of Sarkozy’s presidency (2007-2012), consequently 120 titles in total. These titles were sourced from *Livres Hebdo*’s annual bestseller lists.<sup>25</sup> Dominating these lists are international blockbusters such as *Harry Potter*, *Twilight* and *Millenium*; and *polars* by Harlan Coben, Fred Vargas and Mary Higgins-Clarke. Although these non-indigenous books rate highly, two thirds of the 120 titles were penned by French writers.<sup>26</sup>
- 11 My analysis focused on novels which represent even in part, contemporary France - almost one third (37/120) of the positions. Significantly, the majority (30 out of 120 rankings) of these novels involve a relationship between a French protagonist and a foreigner.<sup>27</sup> The frequency of this motif is striking and allows us to compare the varying image and function of the foreigner and Frenchness across the brows. Moreover, this research considers how the symptoms of national depression and “forms of dissatisfaction”<sup>28</sup> are represented and managed in these narratives.
- 12 The varied representations of this intercultural relationship and the teleology of these plots can be grouped into three principal categories: the escapist narrative, the narrative of failure and the narrative of recovery. Below are the bestsellers which represent the strongest examples of these narrative groups, along with the year(s) in which they were among the 20 bestselling books in France:

Escapist Narrative	Narrative of failure	Narrative of recovery
<i>Je reviens te chercher</i> , Guillaume Musso (2008, 2009)		<i>L’Élegance du hérisson</i> , Muriel Barbery (2007, 2009)
<i>L’appel de l’ange</i> , Guillaume Musso (2011, 2012)	<i>La Carte et le territoire</i> , Michel Houellebecq (2010)	<i>La Délicatesse</i> , David Foenkinos (2011, 2012)
<i>Que serais-je sans toi?</i> , Guillaume Musso (2009, 2010)	<i>Trois femmes puissantes</i> , Marie Ndiaye (2009, 2011)	<i>La Consolante</i> , Anna Gavalda (2008, 2010)
<i>Le Premier Jour</i> , Marc Levy (2009, 2010)		

- 13 The next section outlines the key features of the escapist narrative and narrative of failure, followed by a more detailed account of the Middlebrow narrative of recovery.

## “Escapist Narratives”: star-crossed lovers in an exotic *ailleurs*

- 14 The escapist narrative involves a romance between a French expatriate and an Anglophone (American or British) protagonist. Although some of the action takes place in France, the stories often jump back and forth between various countries and the relationship usually blossoms in the USA “echoing Harlequin’s desertion of national settings for a globalized North American ‘anywhere’...”<sup>29</sup> The strongest examples of this category are bestsellers by Guillaume Musso and Marc Levy<sup>30</sup>, two French writers who rate highly in the annual lists, often with more than one title each year. These authors are well-known household names in France with strong marketing campaigns. Several of their bestsellers have been adapted into feature films.<sup>31</sup> Diana Holmes calls these stories “cosmopolitan adventures” and identifies the familiar characterization and settings from American television and film.<sup>32</sup>
- 15 In contrast to the Middlebrow, the nationalities of the principal characters in these escapist narratives are not emphasized and indeed, are sometimes obscured.<sup>33</sup> For example, in Musso’s *L’Appel de l’ange*, Madeline, a florist in Paris, is actually British, whereas Jonathan, a chef who lives in the USA, is French. The contemporary world is represented as fast-paced and high-tech where characters have no permanent territory and belong rather to an international cosmopolitan class. Rather than emphasizing cultural differences, the narrative tends to accentuate the polarity of the couple’s personalities and a transnational identity. The French protagonists of these bestsellers are either working-class or *petit bourgeois*, and their British/American “soul mates” are explicitly represented as having working class origins. In the escapist narrative, the French protagonist is depressed or in crisis, because of heartbreak, unfulfilled dreams or an unresolved mystery: Jonathan in *L’Appel de l’ange* has experienced a fall from grace and a separation from his wife, Céline in *Je reviens te chercher* is dissatisfied with her conventional Parisian life, and Juliette of *Sauve-moi* is an aspiring actress who dreads the prospect of returning to a lacklustre life in the suburbs of Paris. France is portrayed as stifling and lacking in opportunities for a fulfilling existence. The success of the romance, the stories’ *dénouement*, is incorporated into the solving of a mystery, thus resulting in a double catharsis for the reader. Rather than a happy ending in France, the couple is united in an exotic *ailleurs* and the narrative does not return to the Republic. Musso and Levy adopt elements of a variety of genres including romance, thriller and *polar*. The philosophy of these narratives of escape is anchored in the spiritual world with frequent references to destiny, karma, soul mates, and an afterlife. Despite being embedded in recognizable geography, these narratives are thus fantastical. In conclusion, the escapist narrative does not attempt to provide a workable real-world solution to contemporary issues of the French reader. Instead, it describes a fast-paced alienating globalized world where true love gives life meaning and indeed bestows immortality. National identity is left behind and happiness is located beyond the Republic.

## Anxiety and alienation in “narratives of failure”

- 16 In this category a relationship with a foreigner fails to provide sustained recovery, *épanouissement* or sense of belonging for the French protagonist. Instead, it causes further

destabilization and questioning of subjectivity. Two bestsellers can be attributed to this second narrative category: *La carte et le territoire* by Michel Houellebecq and *Trois femmes puissantes* by Marie Ndiaye.<sup>34</sup> Both novels were awarded the Goncourt Prize, undoubtedly contributing to their bestseller status. Houellebecq, *enfant terrible* of the media, has been the subject of numerous academic studies with even a conference (*Le Monde de Houellebecq*, Edinburg 2005) devoted to his work. The reception of Ndiaye's work establishes her as a highbrow writer, critically acclaimed both by the press and the academic world. Her first publishing house was *Éditions Minuit* and her play *Papa doit manger* was adopted by the *Comédie Française*.

- 17 Curiously, the first part of Houellebecq's *La carte et le territoire* resembles the Middlebrow narrative of recovery: isolated artist Jed begins a relationship with Russian businesswoman Olga who bolsters his self-image. The "petit français"<sup>35</sup> appears to thrive in this affair with the beautiful and glamorous Russian, his career rocketing. However, Houellebecq quickly diverges from the Middlebrow script: after Olga accepts a promotion in Russia, Jed rejects the possibility of happiness and lets the relationship dissolve. In the final chapters, Jed establishes a large estate in provincial France, but avoids interaction with the community. Houellebecq expresses tongue-in-cheek cynicism regarding life in rural France<sup>36</sup> and his protagonist shows no desire to form a community, instead finding a sort of happiness in his isolation.
- 18 Two French-foreigner couples (Norah and Jakob, Rudy and Fanta) are represented in *Trois femmes puissantes*. In each case, the foreigner contributes to the French protagonist's anxiety. Each couple is already formed at the beginning of the narrative, and thus the pathway to the relationship is in no way the focus or key event. Norah's relationship with Jakob, who has immigrated from Hamburg to France, has brought her tension rather than relief, he is a burden and a source of mystery: "Seul un miracle la débarrasserait d'eux, les délivrerait, songeait-elle parfois, elle et Lucie de la cohabitation avec ce couple gracieux et subtilement malfaisant. Oh, c'était ainsi, elle était coincée."<sup>37</sup> In Ndiaye's second story, the principal action takes place in France with references to an anterior past in an unnamed African country, resembling Senegal. Rudy's marriage to Fanta is strained and alienating, with tension arising from Fanta's infidelity but especially from Rudy's spiraling lack of confidence and fear of not being able to please his family. The French protagonist appears to be at the height of isolation from friends and family, and failure at work. These novels do not attempt to comfort or ease anxieties but rather dwell in these uncomfortable states with no promise of relief. This confirms the understanding that critically acclaimed highbrow texts "have tended to...emphasize the unintelligibility and generally unsatisfactory nature of life."<sup>38</sup> This category portrays characters with complex identities and fraught belongings: Rudy has French nationality but his upbringing has been in Africa, Norah, a *métisse* from France is staying with her estranged father in Africa. Provincial France is a failed project; the life that Rudy dreamed of having with his wife and son is understood as illusory. Rather than feeling a sense of belonging, Rudy experiences discomfort and disgust. Furthermore, comfort appears to be located in Senegal, despite this being the site of childhood trauma. Although the teleology of the plot is a homecoming of sorts, a "*contrepoint*"<sup>39</sup> to the anxiety and alienation that precedes it, the tension and issues of Rudy's relationship with Fanta remain unresolved.
- 19 While the highbrow narrative of failure refuses to find comfort and happiness in a relationship with the foreigner, for the Middlebrow narrative of recovery the foreigner is essential to the rehabilitation of the French protagonist.

## The “Narrative of recovery” : a therapeutic romance

- 20 Particularly significant in the socio-political context of the Sarkozy years, the Middlebrow narrative of recovery proposes a successful relationship between a French protagonist and a foreigner on French soil. Echoing Guiano and Besson’s goals for debate on national identity, the outcome of this narrative appears to be therapy for a depressed national identity. The plots are structured around a therapeutic cycle – from the description of symptoms of the depression, to the identification of the root causes and the recovery of the lost object, leading to the improved self-image and increased subjectivity of the French protagonist, as well as the elaboration of key strategies to “se sentir bien”. Akin to the American Middlebrow<sup>40</sup>, the narrative of recovery responds to contemporary anxieties about the atomization of society, a testament of longing for community and belonging in a landscape of fractured social relationships. However, specific to the French Middlebrow, this involves the reinsertion of the alienated protagonist into a community built on the values of the Republic.
- 21 In the narrative of recovery, a depressed or alienated French protagonist (working or middleclass), who has experienced the loss of a loved one, undergoes a transformation through a romance with a “foreign” character. There are three principal bestsellers which best illustrate this category, Muriel Barbery’s *L’Élégance du hérisson*, David Foenkinos’s *La Délicatesse* and *La Consolante* by Anna Gavalda. In Barbery’s novel, Renée, an erudite concierge, finds happiness and confidence in a romance with wealthy Japanese retiree Kakuro. In *La Délicatesse*, Nathalie, a widowed *cadre*, comes to terms with her grief with the support of Markus, her besotted Swedish colleague. Gavalda’s *La Consolante* sees architect Charles experiencing a mid-life crisis before crossing paths with half-English, American-educated, Kate in the French countryside. In contrast to the escapist narrative, nearly all the events of the Middlebrow novel take place within France, beginning in Paris and often ending in the countryside. They present a recognizable universe, with Parisian streets and neighborhoods mentioned, as well as more abstract evocations of provincial France.
- 22 The root causes of depression are identified as the loss of community, class tensions (blamed on the bourgeoisie), fractured family relationships and the threat of neo-liberalism on communal cultural practices. Importantly, the foreigner appears as a role model of Republican values - promoting freedom, equality, mutual respect and community. As Holmes has identified in Gavalda’s texts, these romances go beyond that of the traditional heterosexual couple to include nuclear and non-nuclear family members and friends.<sup>41</sup> While non-nuclear families are also celebrated in escapist narrative, these are formed outside France. Rather than causing disgust, or permitting further isolation, as observed in the narrative of failure, provincial life in the Middlebrow offers a site of recovery for both the individual and the collective. The teleology of the plot invests in the imagining of an abstract “*terroir*” – an ideal “miniature”<sup>42</sup> republic.
- 23 It is important here to note that the successful romance is between a French protagonist and a “foreigner”, rather than an “immigrant”. Alexis Spire teases out the differences between these two terms:

le terme d’« immigré » conserve une forme de stigmatisation à l’égard du groupe ou de la personne auquel il s’applique (...) (il) demeure associé à une position sociale



dominée, tandis que l'étranger est d'avantage identifié à l'image du cadre (...) bénéficiant d'un niveau de formation élevé.<sup>43</sup>

- 24 The foreigner in these Middlebrow novels is always assimilable, speaking perfect French and well versed in French literature and culture. I would argue that despite being identifiable as middleclass or above, the foreigner's social class is obscured or neutralized in order to appear as representative of universal values and "noble" through their moral integrity and tastes (thus escaping the criticisms leveled at the bourgeoisie). The Middlebrow's foreign protagonist has adopted France as a permanent home, distinct from the narrative of escape where these characters live only temporarily in France, and from the narrative of failure where there is no suggestion of the foreigner's loyalty or integration in France. Indeed, the opportunity to leave France is rejected: in *La Délicatesse* Markus refuses a transfer to Sweden, quitting his job and following Nathalie to Normandy. In *La Consolante*, Kate has given up a comfortable life in the USA with her American fiancé in order to be the adopted mother to her orphaned nephew and nieces. More value is placed on Kate's rich relational life in France than on an international career in the USA. The exotic *ailleurs* is not a solution to real world problems in the Middlebrow.
- 25 There are very few representations of immigrants in the Middlebrow novel of recovery and these scarce secondary characters mostly serve to flatter the image of the French protagonist and the newly formed community. The figure of Manuela, the Portuguese house-cleaner in *L'Élegance du Hérisson*, is employed to criticize the bourgeoisie, to ennoble Renée and to highlight equality as a core value of their new community. In *La Consolante*, Kate fosters Yacine and Nedra, two children from disenfranchised migrant and "sans papiers" families, highlighting her benevolence and the openness of her community. The French Middlebrow does not see foreignness or immigration as a threat to national identity and well-being, on the contrary, we shall see that these relationships bolster and affirm Republican values. However, in all these cases, it is the foreigner and not the immigrant who facilitates the protagonist's recovery. I would add that this figure allows the invented community to appear cosmopolitan, despite being firmly rooted in the nation.
- 26 Before exploring the therapeutic cycle of the French Middlebrow further, I will briefly introduce the three writers and their reception. David Foenkinos is the author of 16 novels to date and is especially known for his playful, comic style.<sup>44</sup> Foenkinos has developed a strong public profile participating in frequent talks and book signings, and engaging with his readers in online forums and blogs. Although he has received numerous literary prizes including the Prix Francois-Mauriac and the Prix Roger-Nimier, there is very little academic scholarship on his work. In 2014, *Charlotte* was awarded the prestigious Prix Renaudot and the Goncourt des lycéens. Some have seen the change in style and subject matter as an attempt by Foenkinos to "buy credibility"<sup>45</sup> in order to crossover to highbrow status. In contrast, Muriel Barbery is not nearly as prolific or as mediatized. While she participates in numerous interviews with magazines and radio, her profile is relatively discrete. Her success with *L'Élegance du hérisson* was a complete surprise to the media, as her first novel *Une Gourmandise* had received very little press. In 2015 Barbery's much-anticipated third novel *La vie des elfes* was published, with poor reviews. Among these three authors, Anna Gavalda is probably the best known. Sales of *La Consolante* were no doubt boosted by the popularity of her earlier novel *Ensemble c'est tout* and the positive reception of the film adaptation. The media often emphasize Gavalda's

shyness, and she presents herself not as a writer but as someone who is attentive to real life.<sup>46</sup> Her writing has been ridiculed as *guimauve* literature for the middle classes by satirists Éric Naulleau and Pierre Jourde, inspiring their damning pastiche in *Le Jourde et Naulleau*.<sup>47</sup>

- 27 While these three authors appear quite disparate they have some overlapping characteristics, including their age and education. Gavalda and Barbery were both high school teachers before their publishing success, significant in terms of the link Janice Radway has made between the Professional Managerial class and American Middlebrow culture.<sup>48</sup> Equally, this role and sensibility are pertinent as it is the primary responsibility of a teacher is to transmit the values of the Republic.

## Contemporary anxieties and the roots of depression

- 28 Given the sheer volume of sales for these novels, it would seem that their assessment of “readers’ pre-existing needs”<sup>49</sup> was indeed accurate and successful. Despite their diverse styles, the three texts follow a distinct narrative sequence and portray a similar landscape of contemporary anxieties. The first third of each text is devoted to building a portrait of the French protagonist’s depression and isolation, resulting in greater pleasure for the reader once their romantic interest is introduced to the narrative: “wounding instability is evoked in order to be resolved and cured (...) lack or loss is deliberately experienced for the pleasurable reassurance of recovery”.<sup>50</sup> In each case, the French protagonist is in mourning, for a former partner, family and a home but also for a set of ideals for human relations: solidarity, mutual respect and open communication.
- 29 The nuclear family unit is either absent or cannot be relied on for comfort, security or belonging. In *La Consolante*, Charles’ alienation and depression are attributed to the impact of modernity, a stressful work environment and family breakdown. These escalate after the death of Anouk, a figure who represents the values of freedom and the struggle against social inequality. *Élégance*’s concierge Renée is the product of a neglected childhood in a poor rural family, and the death of a sister due to their disenfranchisement. Alienation is chiefly attributed to class inequalities and lack of recognition by “les riches” of her intellectual capacities. In *Délicatesse* there is no real family support for Nathalie after her husband François is killed in a car accident. Her work place is rife with rumor, competition and empty relations- Foenkinos’ comic critique of neo-liberalism. All three novels comment on the erosion of traditional social practices, for example the lack of cooking and eating together. Of note, bourgeois figures are the common object of criticism in the French Middlebrow novel; accused of superficial relationships and immoral actions, they are portrayed as a threat to the republican *devise*.
- 30 Such anxieties echo those identified in the public forum on national identity, studied by Pascal Marchand and Pierre Ratinaud in *Être Français aujourd’hui: les mots du grand débat sur l’identité nationale*. Pervasive are concerns surrounding the perceived erosion of republican values and cultural practices, the disappearance of the “*terroir*” and the threat of globalization to French culture. The narrative of recovery produces a consistent and unified response to these worries and desires, and significantly, sees the relationship with the foreigner as essential to the creation of a community and the location of a symbolic *terroir*.

## Therapy with the foreigner : affirmation, affect and rehabilitation

- 31 There are several ways in which the foreigner facilitates the recovery of the French protagonist. Firstly, by recognizing their subjectivity and by providing affirmation, flattering their good taste and self-image. This is exemplified by the figure of Kakuro in *Élégance*, who bestows intellectual and aristocratic status on Renée by reassuring her of her brilliance and superior tastes: “Des prétentions? Mais vous n’avez pas de prétentions, vous avez des goûts, des lumières, des qualités!”<sup>51</sup> Kakuro’s attentions transform Renée into a lady, finally visible to the world. Janice Radway sees such desire for recognition and affirmation as core to middlebrow culture, “aimed at people like me who wanted desperately to present themselves as educated, sophisticated, and aesthetically articulate.”<sup>52</sup> Moreover, by identifying the protagonist with an intellectual class, the French Middlebrow sidesteps the inherent contradiction in desiring social ascension while holding on to ideals of equality.
- 32 Secondly, the foreigner is a catalyst for increased affect in the French protagonist, enhancing subjectivity and leading to a moment of catharsis which finally results in a state of lucidity. For example, Kate’s secondary story within *La Consolante* allows Charles to work through his own grief, by providing him with a miniature version of the optimistic narrative of recovery and key strategies for overcoming loss. Gavalda is explicit about the protagonist’s recovered subjectivity, Charles’ “Je” first-person narrative reappears at the conclusion of the novel.
- 33 Thirdly, the foreign characters symbolically challenge and replace a bourgeois figure, triumphing as the embodiment of Republican values. They renew faith in the *devise* and in each case replace the protagonist’s lost object. In *Délicatesse*, Markus successfully wins Nathalie’s affections over his adversary Charles, their wealthy boss, promoting freedom of self-determination, respect for others and solidarity. In the final scenes in Nathalie’s grandmother’s house in the countryside, having accompanied Nathalie in her grief, the foreigner takes the seat of the patriarch of the family, and equally the position of Nathalie’s dead husband François.
- 34 These three therapeutic functions of the foreigner can be recognized across the middlebrow bestsellers. Although these relationships are reciprocal, the ultimate narrative event of these novels is the recovery of the French protagonist rather than that of the foreigner.

## Reinventing community and the *terroir*

- 35 The final stage of the Middlebrow’s cycle of therapy entails the reinsertion of the French protagonist in a community and the articulation of strategies for sustained individual and collective well-being. The community is made up of a group of misfits,<sup>53</sup> who come together to form a non-nuclear family governed by respect for individual difference. The narrative of recovery could thus be considered a national representation of J.B. Priestley’s *broadbrow*, which transforms the Middlebrow into a moral space of “inclusivity and friendship.”<sup>54</sup> The forged community in *Élégance* is more symbolic and temporary, but provides Renée with the family, happiness and recognition she has been yearning for. In

*La Consolante* and *La Délicatesse*, the recovery involves leaving Paris for the *terroir*<sup>55</sup>, a site in an abstract rural France where the community is protected from the negative impact of modernity and the city, but not necessarily cut off from it. The Middlebrow does not produce a utopic or bucolic vision but rather, one that promotes a balance between global citizenship and community belonging. The most developed model of the middlebrow community is located in Gavalda's *Consolante*, where Kate has reinvigorated a site significant to France's national history and formed a community open to society's most vulnerable. Kate renews this community's connection to the land, the *patrimoine* of the republic and ensures it is governed by values resembling those of the Republic. The French protagonist is needed to bolster this community, conferring on it his legitimacy and Cartesian thinking. Gavalda emphasizes the infinitely inclusive nature of this community, capable of continuing expansion. The Middlebrow novel thus imagines a home in the nation for its once alienated protagonist and other wounded individuals who are in need of belonging, freedom and solidarity.

## Conclusion

- 36 This article has argued that the French Middlebrow novel of the Sarkozy years is essentially a narrative of recovery whose key goal is the improved self-image and sense of place of the French protagonist within a national home. While I have confirmed several shared characteristics of the contemporary French and Anglophone Middlebrow, most significantly its therapeutic lens, this account has demonstrated its national particularity. Far more than a hybrid form, the French Middlebrow provides a unique response to the anxieties and questions raised in the debate on national identity in the Sarkozy years. Depression and alienation are overcome through a relationship with the foreigner who inspires a renewed belief in Republican values and enables an optimistic vision of community in the French *terroir*.
- 37 Through the comparison of the three distinct narrative categories of escape, failure and recovery, my analysis has demonstrated key differences between the brows' ideology and imaginary. While this study has provided a new methodological approach which illuminates the French Middlebrow as a valid and rich cultural phenomenon, more scholarship is required to understand the Middlebrow novel's articulation of the *enjeux* of identity and belonging in contemporary France. This article opens up new pathways for future research, including the investigation of the dominant themes and narratives of the bestsellers of the post-Sarkozy years. It equally paves the way for future comparisons of this French corpus with its British or other European bestsellers of the same period.

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## NOTES

1. Among the most influential, Janice Radway's pioneering study of the Book of the Month club's editorial practices in *A Feeling for Books*; Nicola Humble's investigation of British Middlebrow fiction in *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel*; Joan Shelley Rubin's *The Making of Middlebrow Culture*; and Grover and Brown's *Middlebrow literary Cultures: The Battle of the brows, 1920-1960*.
2. "The Middlebrow is difficult to define (...) because as a product of contested and precarious assertions of cultural authority, it is itself unstable." Brown and Grover, "Middlebrow Literary Cultures", 2.
3. Driscoll, *The New Literary Middlebrow*, 17
4. Aubry, *Reading as Therapy*, 10.
5. Holmes and Looseley remark on France's academic tradition of canon-making, and resistance to the cultural studies approach *Imagining the Popular*, 4. The LPCM research network has strived to remedy this neglect, and through *Belphégor* has demonstrated the value of popular texts as an object of study.
6. Verstraeten and Van Hove, "Imagining Adventure in Middlebrow Fiction", 3-4.; Holmes, "The Mimetic prejudice" in *Imagining the Popular*, 87.

7. This reading of popular narratives is initially proposed in “The Comfortable Reader” but not explicitly as analysis of Middlebrow fiction. Holmes, “The Comfortable Reader, 294.
8. Beth Driscoll identifies the roots of the term Middlebrow: “Phrenology, the linking of skull shape with intellectual abilities, has long been discredited as a pseudoscience with racist undertones. Yet the language of the brows it inspired- highbrow, middlebrow and lowbrow- continues to influence the way we think about literary culture”. Driscoll, *The New Literary Middlebrow*, 5.
9. “in one sense middlebrow fiction is the ‘other’ of modernist or avant-garde novel” Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow*, 27.
10. In a letter destined but not sent to the *Statesman* and published in *Death of a Moth and Other Essays*, Woolf signs off her diatribe against the Middlebrow: “If any human being, man, woman, dog, cat or half-crushed worm dares call me “middlebrow” I will take my pen and stab him, dead.” Woolf, “Middlebrow”, chapter 22.
11. “the middlebrow was formed, rather, as a category, by processes of literary and cultural mixing whereby forms and values associated with one form of cultural production were wed to forms and values usually connected with another.” Radway, *A Feeling for Books*, 152.
12. Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow*, 11.
13. Pollentier, “Configuring Middleness”, 38.
14. Bourdieu, *La Distinction*, 371.
15. Pollentier, “Configuring Middleness”, 38.
16. *ibid.*, 41.
17. Driscoll, *The New Literary Middlebrow*, 17.
18. *ibid.*, 1.
19. “success with a wide popular audience also frequently depends on sensitivity to the moment, on topicality or response to a specifically located mood or tension.” Holmes and Looseley, *Imagining the Popular*, 11.
20. “...authors of literary fiction can have best-sellers too, and conversely, not every work of popular fiction sells successfully.” Gelder, *Popular fiction: the logics and practices of a literary field*, 3.
21. Martigny, “Le débat autour de l’identité nationale dans la campagne présidentielle de 2007: quelle rupture ?”, 23-24.
22. D.I.L.A. 2010. “Identité nationale: fin du débat ou simple pause?” *Vie Publique*, February 10. <http://www.vie-publique.fr/actualite/alaune/identite-nationale-fin-du-debat-ou-simple-pause.html>
23. “Ce débat prend de l’ampleur. C’est très bien ainsi. Il va durer le temps qu’il faudra pour que les Français se sentent bien. Il y a une forme de thérapie collective”. Henri Guaino, spokesperson for Sarkozy, cited in Leparmentier, Arnaud. 2009. “Inquiétudes à droite sur les risques de dérapage du débat sur l’identité nationale.” *Le Monde*, December 2. [http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2009/12/02/inquietudes-a-droite-sur-les-risques-de-derapage-du-debat-sur-l-identite-nationale\\_1274998\\_823448.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/politique/article/2009/12/02/inquietudes-a-droite-sur-les-risques-de-derapage-du-debat-sur-l-identite-nationale_1274998_823448.html)
24. Gastaut, ““The Immigration Question”: Mainspring of Sarkozy's Presidency”, 338.
25. *Livres Hebdo* uses sales data generated by Ipsos. The original annual lists include the top 50 books from which I take the top 20 to ensure significant number of sales and to reduce the size of the corpus. The annual lists are published in the early months of the following year, in a dossier of “meilleures ventes”.
26. This figure also includes Franco-Belgian collaborations.
27. I will discuss the differences between the terms “foreigner” and “immigrant” in the section focusing on the narrative of recovery.
28. Following Timothy Aubry’s line of questioning in *Reading as Therapy*, 72-73: “what forms of dissatisfaction with the contemporary United States do these novels presuppose, and what compensations do they provide?”

29. Holmes, "The Mimetic prejudice", *Imagining the Popular*, 113.
30. We can also count Katherine Pancol's trilogy in this category, although her French-foreigner relationship is played out through a story of platonic friendship between the French heroine Josephine, and Scottish Shirley in the first novel of the series, and then later in the series through romantic relationships between secondary characters
31. Levy's *Mes amis mes amours* was released in 2008, directed by Lorraine Levy; Musso's *Et après* was released in 2009, directed by Gilles Bourdos.
32. Holmes, "The Mimetic Prejudice" in *Imagining the Popular*, 86.
33. Whereas the nationality of secondary characters is explicit and stereotyped: a Japanese doctor (*Je reviens te chercher*); a Japanese florist; English and Russian Mafia bosses (*L'Appel de l'Ange*)
34. Ndiaye's novel is a triptych and I must note here that only two of the three parts include a French-foreigner relationship.
35. Olga's pet name for Jed. Houellebecq, *La carte et le territoire*, 225.
36. "en dehors de certaines zones très touristiques (...) les habitants de zones rurales sont en général inhospitaliers, agressifs et stupides" (...) Et cette hostilité...se transformait en haine pure et simple dès lors que ceux-ci faisaient l'acquisition d'une résidence" Houellebecq, *La Carte et le territoire*, 393.
37. Ndiaye, *Trois femmes puissantes* 41-42
38. Holmes, "The mimetic prejudice" in *Imagining the Popular*, 87.
39. Leclair, "La communication triomphante ou la nécessité de redéfinir l'espace critique" in *Les Temps Modernes*, 7.
40. Aubry, *Reading as Therapy*, 50.
41. Holmes, "The Comfortable Reader", 294.
42. "The fragile possibility of uniting different cultures and identities within one indivisible Republic is played out in miniature in the multi-generational, cross-class, and (in *La Consolante*) international households that end both plots on a note of invented community and reconciliation of the personal and the collective." *ibid.*, 294
43. Spire, "De l'étranger à l'immigré", 4.
44. This corresponds to Humble's claim that humour is characteristic of the Masculine Middlebrow. D'hoker, "Theorizing the Middlebrow. An Interview with Nicola Humble", 263.
45. Philippe, Elisabeth, 2014. "Avec *Charlotte*, David Foenkinos s'échoue à s'acheter une crédibilité littéraire". *Les Inrocks*, September 6. <http://www.lesinrocks.com/2014/09/06/livres/demontage-manque-delicatessen-11522127/>
46. "J'ai simplement retranscrit ce que j'entendais dans mon oreille. Je n'ai pas une démarche très intellectuelle. je suis (des verbes "être" et "suivre") mes personnages et j'essaye de leur être le plus fidèle possible." Duchatel, "Viva Gavalda" 9
47. Jourde and Naulleau, *Le Jourde et Naulleau*.
48. Radway, *A Feeling for Books*, 252.
49. "If novels in myriad ways construct the desires that they purport to satisfy, then they have also become extremely sensitive measuring devices capable of registering their readers' pre-existing needs." Aubry, *Reading as Therapy*, 10-11.
50. Holmes, "the Comfortable Reader", 294.
51. Barbery, *Élégance du hérisson*, 284.
52. Radway, *A Feeling for Books*, 4.
53. The banding together of misfits is identified as a typical Middlebrow trope. Aubry, *Reading as Therapy*, 204.
54. Pollentier, "Configuring Middleness", 46.
55. According to Périco Légasse, the notion of *terroir* goes beyond a geographical conceptualization, and becomes a symbol of the nation: "le terroir est un mot cuisiné à toutes les



saucers. Le terroir n'est pas seulement un critère géographique, c'est aussi une certaine idée de la France. C'est la synthèse entre un lieu, un temps et une culture." Sallenave and Légasse, *Nos amours de la France. République, identités, régions, entretien avec Philippe Petit*, 93.

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## ABSTRACTS

The present article proposes an account of the contemporary French Middlebrow through the study of a corpus of bestselling novels. I identify a recurring motif in the bestsellers of the Sarkozy years (2007-2012), a political period marked by debates on national identity and immigration, and thus pertinent to questions on the social imaginary and national representation. The findings demonstrate that the majority of the bestsellers representing contemporary France portray a relationship between a "foreign" character and a depressed or alienated French protagonist. A comparative analysis of the expressions of this theme establishes three distinct categories: firstly, escapist "lowbrow" narratives, by writers such as Marc Levy and Guillaume Musso, where a French expatriate finds salvation abroad thanks to a relationship with an Anglophone character; secondly, "highbrow" narratives of failure (by Michel Houellebecq and Marie Ndiaye) where the protagonist's relationship with a foreigner increases anxiety or is abandoned; thirdly, "Middlebrow" narratives of recovery (by Muriel Barbery, David Foenkinos and Anna Gavalda) where the French protagonist falls in love with a foreign character within France and is rehabilitated. These three categories provide disparate models for understanding and approaching the problems inherent to contemporary life such as the atomization of traditional social groups. Their comparison puts into relief the core characteristics and function of contemporary French middlebrow fiction.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** middlebrow, bestseller, therapeutic, national identity, Sarkozy years, the foreigner

## AUTHOR

### ANNAMMA VARGHESE

The University of Melbourne

Annamma Varghese is completing a PhD in French Literature at the University of Melbourne. Her thesis is entitled: *Romance or remedy? Imagining the foreigner in contemporary French bestselling novels*.