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Women's

Fiction

From 1945 to Today

Deborah Philips

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# Women's Fiction

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# Women's Fiction

From 1945 to Today

*Deborah Philips*

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*For Claudia, who read many of these novels,  
and for Ursula, who only read the good ones.*



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# Introduction

This is not a book which claims to cover the entire range of women's writing from the post-war period or to comprehensively chart the important women writers of the late twentieth century. Instead, it focuses on those texts which were read by large numbers of women, and is concerned to identify the emergent genre of women's fiction that marked each post-war decade. The novels discussed here were widely read by women readers; they were not all best-sellers (although many were), but they were all written by names which were and are now familiar to women readers, and commanded a loyal following. Many of these novels were to be reprinted over several decades, and many remain in print still. The majority of these texts can be defined as 'popular novels' which enjoyed a wide readership at the time. Although feminist theory and media and cultural studies have challenged literary theory to reassess women's writing and to take more serious account of popular culture, these are authors and texts which remain largely unacknowledged by mainstream literary criticism, and also by much feminist criticism.

The novels discussed here belong to genres of fiction that are rarely reviewed or cited in critical studies, and most are not considered as worthy of entry into the feminist canon. These are, however, the titles that women read in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, as evidenced in their ubiquity in second-hand bookshops, charity shops and public library holdings. These are the novels and authors that are still to be found on the remaindered shelves, testimony to a onetime wide circulation and readership. Some of these texts have been recuperated into a feminist canon, but the majority have not; together they stand as a hidden history of women's reading.

The novels in this study can be classed as belonging to the category of the 'domestic romance', that is: their settings are contemporary rather than historical, they are largely written within a realist tradition, and their focus is on personal relationships. Within these limits, however, there are a great many divergent forms; the 'romance' genre is a complex category. Readers of romance are very sophisticated in their awareness of sub-genres and categories, but these are rarely acknowledged by critics. Literary and cultural theory has a tendency to discuss romance fiction as though it were a homogenous genre, whereas, as publishers, librarians and readers are very aware, it is a genre which breeds sub-genres. Even within the category of the formulaic romances published by Mills and Boon and Silhouette, there is a host of variants. There are fine distinctions to be made between contemporary 'romance' novels, which are of great importance to readers.

Variations of the 'romantic novel' include: medical, rural, tropical, erotic and workplace narratives. And that is not to include the historical saga, which itself has a range of variations. As the position of women has changed over the twentieth century, even within the 'formula fictions' of the popular romance, new genres have emerged which have adapted to and accommodated those changes. The traditionally virginal heroine of the classic Silhouette romance was no longer quite so viable in the 1980s, and so a new sub-genre of eroticized romance emerged in Silhouette's 'Desire' label. By 2000, the sassy heroine of the 'chick-lit' novel represented a challenge to the conventionally quiescent Mills and Boon heroine. Harlequin responded with their own imprint 'Red Dress Ink', publishing novels which featured the young, single woman in the city. The publishing companies associated with the popular romance have had to respond to initiatives from writers and publishers and to the changing experience of women.

If the narratives of the domestic romance do conform to many of the conventions of the formula romance novel, the novels under discussion here do not necessarily end with the consummation of a love affair or with marriage, as the classic Mills and Boon, Harlequin or Silhouette romance requires. These novels do not strictly belong to the formulaic romance genre, although they may share many of the same desires and fantasies. The object of romance for the woman protagonist may not necessarily be a male erotic partner; it may be another woman, it may be a child, it can be the heroine herself, and need not be a person. Among the objects of desire in the novels here are: commercial empires, houses and revitalized families. Whatever the goal of their heroines might be, these novels uniformly articulate some form of desire, and express the wish that things could be different for women.

I would make no claims that these are novels that should be entered into an alternative feminist canon or a women's great tradition, but I would argue that they need to be acknowledged as fictions which commanded a huge readership, and which do articulate the concerns of many women. The popular novel tends to be an aspirational fantasy, and these novels can often represent forms of wish fulfilment. The nature of those aspirations, however, shifts and changes in different historical conditions. To identify the way in which the popular discourses of masculinity and femininity shift in romance fiction is to recognize that the categories of 'man' and 'woman' are not fixed. The idea of what constitutes a 'hero' or a 'heroine' changes dramatically in different historical periods. Even within the output of a single woman writer, the ideal of masculinity and femininity may change. While Rose Franken's perfect husband begins her series of 'Claudia' novels as an unrepentantly dominant male, in the novels after the Second World War, he has to be protected from Claudia's growing self-sufficiency. The troubled husband of the Aga-saga is a very different creature from the existentially challenged man of the immediate post-war period. The powerful women of the 1980s sex and shopping novel are far removed from

the anxious housewife heroines of the Aga-saga who were to follow them a decade later. While romances claim to offer eternal partnerships and ideal models, the nature of those models is demonstrably unstable.

The novels discussed in this study can be described as ‘women’s books’, although the literary equivalent for the cinematic term ‘the women’s picture’, a category which is recognized by film critics, audiences and producers alike, is rarely used by literary critics. Nicola Beaman is one who does use it, and who reappropriates the term for fiction in her study of women’s writing between the wars:

there *is* a category of fiction written for women – ‘the women’s novel’ ... They generally have little action and less histrionics – they are about the ‘drama of the undramatic’, the steadfast dailyness of a life that brings its own rewards, the intensity of the emotions and, above all, the importance of human relationships.

(Beaman, 1983, p. 5)

If the contemporary woman’s novel now allows for more histrionics than could be permitted in the stiff-upper-lip era of the interwar years, it remains the case that the ‘women’s novel’ is preoccupied with the domestic and with personal relationships. The Aga-saga as a form is defined by the ‘drama of the undramatic’, and their narrative trajectories continue to celebrate ‘steadfast dailyness’. If the women’s novel does take to the world stage, as the sex and shopping novels of the 1980s dared to, the narratives continue to focus on personal relationships and are largely written from the heroine’s subjective perspective. Because these novels are largely about personal relationships does not mean to say that they are inconsequential; that the personal is political was a central rallying call of the women’s movement. And in their focus on female experience and their concerns with love, family and marriage, these narratives cannot but be concerned with power relations between the genders. Claud Cockburn recognized in 1972 that the popular novel inevitably addresses gender politics and the ‘woman question’:

The bestsellers are, of course, rich sources of information regarding what may be called, for very rough convenience, the ‘private sector’ of life and love, notably love, and spilling over from there to cover the general status of women.

(Cockburn, 1972, p. 14)

The novel may not be a barometer of social history, and is never a simple reflection of its times, but what it can do is to chart the limits and shifts in social discourse, and so offer insights into what can and cannot be fantasized about and publicly acknowledged. John Sutherland has argued that what is significant about best-selling novels is ‘what they tell us about

the book trade, the market place, the reading public and society generally at the time they have done well' (Sutherland, 1981, p. 5). The distinction between 'best-selling' and 'literary' fiction is less easy to make in women's writing than many critics, both mainstream and feminist, would suggest. It is just as difficult to categorize the readership of these fictions. Women writers and readers would seem to trouble any neat categorizations of the 'literary' and the 'popular' in both texts and readers. Jenny Hartley's study of the reading choices of reading groups (which, as her research shows, are largely made up of women readers) demonstrates that the reading choices of book groups tend not to include the kind of genre fiction that is sold and read by millions of women readers. It appears that women readers are not prepared to publicly admit their private choices of reading material; the espousal of 'literary' titles in surveys and questionnaires is not borne out by the best-seller lists. The best-seller lists of popular titles and the more 'literary' lists from the reading groups do not match up, suggesting that there are large numbers of women who are happily drawing their reading from both ends of the book market. Hartley questions how useful it is to make a distinction between the academic critic and the 'general' reader:

is this either fair or useful? I think it is fair to say that literary élites and establishments have always defined themselves against the middlebrow ... Reading groups, though, are often reading the same serious literary fiction ... as those literature departments which show so little interest in their activities; and their discussions aren't so different from those in the seminar rooms either – and often better prepared.

(Hartley, 2002, pp. 62–3)

Although many of the novels in this study would not rank as 'serious literary fiction' it would be equally unfair to define them or their readers as middlebrow. Readers of genre fiction have a sophisticated understanding of the conventions and requirements of a genre novel. The critical term 'genre' is, however, a very loose category. In Fredric Jameson's definition: 'Genres are essentially literary *institutions*, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular artifact' (Jameson, 1981, p. 106). While this is a useful concept, in that it acknowledges the importance of readers, it does not allow for the proliferation of sub-genres that cannot be entirely dictated by writers but which are also constructed by publishers.

The sub-genres of the domestic romance are defined by their historical context, and often themselves contributed to the definition of a decade. With their eye-catching covers, the best-selling novel with 'its vivid colours designed to appeal to mass tastes' (Escarpit, 1964, p. 131) could capture the *Zeitgeist* of a period. This is at its clearest in the sex and shopping novels of the 1980s; the glitzy covers which marked the genre, with their raised gold lettering and their women in bright red lipstick and stiletto shoes, were to

become iconic images of the decade. The fashionably acid colours of the covers of the 'chick-lit' genre, with their cartoon stick-thin young women, similarly supplied a contemporary image of end-of-the-century femininity. As publishers define market segments more and more precisely, their categories of fiction become self-defining genres into which the majority of fiction is ordered. Marketing departments identify a popular success, whether this be *Bridget Jones's Diary*, the Aga-saga, or the 'Harry Potter' novels, and seek out authors and texts which can emulate the same marketability. These are then promoted with covers that associate these texts with that category of fiction, and so define a novel as belonging to a genre.

Fictional genres are not only a marketing category, but also a means of bringing together a range of texts and reading them symptomatically for what they share. The texts selected here are chosen because their concerns are clustered around a theme that expresses something significant about gender relations at a particular historical moment. When a number of writers who achieve popular status and a wide readership are preoccupied with a shared narrative structure, as in the picaresque male journey of the 1950s women's novel, or the multi-stranded college novel of the 1970s, then this is a signal that something important is being addressed. Fiction written by women clusters around the dominant discourses of femininity in any given period, either to challenge or embrace that hegemony. Popular fiction is drawn into these clusters as publishers and authors search for a marketable form. 'Literary' novels by women writers are not unaffected by these discourses, and may not be as innovative as they first appear. Writers who regularly appear in contemporary writing and women's writing courses and textbooks can be seen to share a great deal with their populist counterparts. Women writers across the hierarchy of genres are often concerned with precisely the same issues, and can often come to very similar conclusions.

Because this is fiction that is generally not taken seriously by critics, these novels can express commonly experienced doubts and anxieties that cannot be admitted in any other context. And what they share is an articulation of anxieties about what it means to be a woman, the desires of the feminine, that are inadmissible elsewhere. The novel can confront these tensions in a way that cannot be found in other forms of popular culture, even those with a predominantly female readership or audience. Women's magazines present lifestyle fantasies, while soap operas are concerned with stories of communities rather than those of individual women. The novel is a fictional form that can present an entirely subjective point of view.

The narrative voice in these novels is, almost without exception, intensely personal. The narrator, whether first or third person, frequently assumes a tone of intimacy with the reader, often addressing the reader directly. This is a strategy that is employed by women writers as far apart stylistically as Monica Dickens, Alice Walker, Fay Weldon and Helen Fielding. This assumed intimacy constructs an experience that is close to a conversation

with a close woman friend (and such conversations frequently figure in the narratives). Dominic Head has described Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* as in 'a new tradition of confessional feminine personal first-person narrative' (Head, 2002, p. 6), but this first-person confessional address is hardly a new convention. It is to be found in the 1940s with Monica Dickens's fiction, Lynne Reid Banks, Margaret Drabble and Andrea Newman all use this voice in the 1960s; it is central to the 1970s college novel, and is also there in the 1980s sex and shopping novel and in the Aga-saga of the 1990s. The first-person confessional voice continues in the 'chick-lit' genre and in the narratives of resentful daughters: the intimate address is a longstanding feature of women's writing.

Nicola Beauman has noted that this assumed intimacy could, in the interwar 'woman's novel', be attributed to the shared class of reader and author:

The 'woman's novel' between the wars was usually written by middle-class women for middle-class women. Since writers and readers formed a homogenous group it is clear that the woman's novel at this period was permeated through and through with the certainty of like speaking to like.

(Beauman, 1983, p. 3)

It can no longer (if it could ever) be assumed that writers and readers are a 'homogenous group', as publishers and bookshops increasingly target titles at market segments. Nonetheless, the tone of intimacy and the assumption of a shared female experience that Beauman identifies in the interwar novel continue on in contemporary women's fiction. Nicola Humble also asserts that the interwar 'middlebrow novel' 'was widely read by the middle-class public – and particularly by the lower middle-classes' (Humble, 2001, p. 13). However, it cannot be categorically stated that these novels are 'the literature of the middle-classes'. They may have been written by middle-class women, but this is knowable, whereas their readership is not. Public and private libraries and book clubs did not and do not record their members' class. While the heroines of these fictions may be irrevocably middle-class, like those women's magazines that address a class segment above their actual readership, their status may well represent the aspirational rather than the actual.

It is just as difficult in the era of mass-publishing and sophisticated marketing to know who it is precisely who reads which novels. Library borrowings go largely unrecorded, and second-hand and market-stall sales of books do not feature in published sales returns. Steven Connor makes the important point that it is mistaken to make over-easy assumptions about readers and readership, an error that can be made by both publishers and literary critics:

Mass market publishers and academic commentators on the fiction industry share the assumption that there are distinct groups of people in society known as romance readers, thriller readers, science fiction readers, etc. ... The idea of the homogenous reader thus conditions the assumption that this reader will always read the same way.

(Connor, 1996, p. 19)

It would appear that women particularly are promiscuous readers of fiction who clearly do not always 'read in the same way'. Nor do women readers stick to a single kind of reading but may well share their reading of innovative women writers with the reading of popular genre novels. To be a reader of popular fiction does not, as Jenny Hartley's lists of reading group choices demonstrate, mean a lack of engagement with other kinds of fiction.

The question of the readership of popular fiction is a thorny methodological problem for cultural critics. Janice Radway's anthropological study (Radway, 1984) of a group of readers of popular romance has been invoked by many critics, but there are problems with this methodology. Respondents may not be reliable in their answers to questionnaires (particularly when these deal with the private experience of reading), and they cannot be representative of the entire readership for a fictional title or genre. There are also difficulties in establishing who audiences for a text might be that are particularly associated with the market for fiction. In our research for *Brave New Causes* (Philips and Haywood, 1998), Ian Haywood and I unwittingly emulated the technique that Jackie Stacey outlines in her study of women's cinema attendance in the 1940s and 1950s. Stacey explains that she chose this historical moment because 'this period had been a key focus of feminist work on Hollywood (for example, film noir of the 1940s and melodrama of the 1950s)' (Stacey, 1995, p. 99), and Stacey's research covered much of the same period that we covered in *Brave New Causes*. It seems significant that while this is a period that is much discussed in feminist film theory, as the high point of the film melodrama, there has been relatively little work in cultural or literary studies on the written equivalent. Like Stacey, we wrote to popular women's magazines aimed at a readership of the age that might remember the books we were discussing and asked for readers' memories of those novels. Interestingly, unlike Stacey, we had no replies at all.

The difference between research into cinema and literary fiction raises an important question about the different experiences of viewing and of reading a text. Reading is a very private act, rarely shared except in the context of a student group or a reading group, and these are groups which are largely concerned to read fiction which is confirmed as 'literary'. While cinema going is a public act, women readers cannot be relied upon to be honest about their consumption of fiction. If it is difficult to trace quite who makes up the readership for these novels, it is impossible to assess how they might have been read. While journalists are quick to ascribe published genres to specific generations and groups (as in 'the Bridget



Jones generation'), and publishers target precisely defined market segments, it is clear that readers with similar demographics cannot be assumed to share the same tastes in reading. As one book-group member of Hartley's research puts it: 'Sociologists would probably regard us all as having similar reading habits and preferences!' (Hartley, 2002, p. 80).

While the readership of particular genres and texts cannot be taken for granted, publishing has become increasingly sophisticated in identifying new marketing groups. Steven Connor has argued:

both the reading and readerships of fiction have become rather more complex, hybrid and mobile in the post-war period than previously. Localised or specialised readerships have arisen alongside the previously established mass readerships for genre fiction. Women's and lesbian and gay fiction have enjoyed marketing successes.

(Connor, 1996, p. 27)

If the readership for fiction has become more fluid, one factor remains constant, and it is not surprising that it is women's fiction that currently enjoys 'marketing success'. Historically, it has always been the case that it is women who are the main consumers of the novel form and who continue to read the majority of fiction: 'almost three-quarters of all fiction is borrowed or bought by women, a mirror image of the purchase of non-fiction by men ... Women readers are vital to the book trade' (Bloom, 2002, p. 51). There is, nonetheless, a hierarchy of fictional genres, and it is the romance, the form most closely associated with women readers and writers, which is the most clearly gendered and which remains the most denigrated form of fiction. As Clive Bloom argues:

Popular genres do not ... have equal status. Some are considered more serious than others (which often means less 'female' or less 'juvenile'). This becomes obvious when one compares the two leading genres that account for almost all the annual fictional output: detective fiction and women's romance. Detective fiction always had *cachet*.

(*Ibid.*, p. 14)

The implication is that romance fiction does not share in this 'cachet', even if a romance title or writer achieves longevity. While those genres most associated with masculinity, the once derided 'pulp fiction' of Westerns and Science Fiction novels, can attain 'classic' or 'vintage' status, the popular romance remains in the lowest position of the league table. If the 'woman's book' is low in the pecking order, it remains high on the packing order, in holiday suitcases and in publishers' warehouses, and sells more than any other kind of fiction. Still, in the post-feminist, post-modern critical age, women's fiction is not accorded the same status as writing by men. The domestic romance is uncomfortably positioned between a traditional

literary canon that denigrates the feminine and feminist critics who are looking for explicit innovation and progressive ideas in women's writing.

Even those male critics inflected by the impact of feminist theory tend to include women writers as an afterthought to the male canon, and to contain them in a category of 'feminist writers'. Current studies of the post-war novel written by men continue to marginalize 'women's writing' and tend to collapse the wealth of post-war women's writing into a few key respected women authors. Dominic Head's survey of British fiction from 1950 to 2000 (Head, 2002) includes a section on 'Gender and Sexuality', but his insistent focus on the category of 'serious fiction' limits his discussion to Lynne Reid Banks, Margaret Drabble, Nell Dunn and (oddly, given his undefined frame of the 'serious') Helen Fielding. Bart Moore-Gilbert's survey of the 1960s and 1970s novel (Moore-Gilbert, 1994) includes a strictly limited range of women writers, and does not allow Drabble or Reid Banks into the index. John Sutherland's account of the best-sellers of the 1970s (Sutherland, 1981) includes only two women novelists in twenty-four sections – Erica Jong and Colleen McCullough – although there were many more best-sellers by women writers in this decade.

If male critics have a tendency to sideline women writers, feminist champions of women's writing can fall into an unquestioning celebration of women's fiction, which does not always allow for critical readings. Early second-wave feminist literary criticism, especially Ellen Moers's *Literary Women* (Moers, 1976) and Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* (Showalter, 1977) established a school of feminist criticism which offered an alternative to the Leavisite 'Great Tradition', and which was concerned to position women writers within the literary canon. It was an important part of the feminist project to recoup and promote neglected women writers, and Virago and other feminist presses confirmed that alternative canon in publishing, but this celebration and rediscovery of the woman author left little room for criticism.

Virago's reissue of Margaret Kennedy's 1924 novel *The Constant Nymph* in 1983 was published without an introduction or context, and so could make no reference to the casual anti-Semitism that pervades the novel. Current editions of Lynne Reid Banks's *The L-Shaped Room* do not refer to the unquestioningly stereotyped representation of the black character, John, and critical reassessments hardly mention this aspect of the novel. In her introduction to the Virago reissue of Nell Dunn's *Poor Cow*, Margaret Drabble makes no reference at all to the casual racism of the narrative voice (Drabble, 1988). Adrian Henri's introduction to the Virago edition of *Up the Junction* does briefly acknowledge this racism, but evades it as an issue in its praise for Dunn's unflinching reportage (Henri, 1988).

An uncritical recuperation of women's writing can make for confusions in the assessment of these novels as 'literary' or 'popular fictions'. In a call made in 1996 for the reassessment of women's popular writing, Carmen Callil expressed an ambivalence about the category itself, simultaneously

asserting a 'venerable literary tradition' of women's genre fiction, and consigning popular fiction to the 'entertainment canon' (Callil, 1996, p. 5). Anne Cranny-Francis argues that the 'feminist generic text' can be distinguished from 'the traditional generic text', her concern is with feminist fictions which do not admit 'compromise' (Cranny-Francis, 1990). This stern admonition and this neat distinction, however, present just the same problems as the attempt to define the readership of the 'highbrow' and the 'middlebrow' in women's writing. The recuperation of neglected women writers into the categories of 'serious literature' or the 'middlebrow' does not allow for the richness and pleasures of women's genre writing, or for the ways in which feminist novelists have drawn upon those pleasures.

The pleasure of the popular text can often derive from the very restrictions of formula fiction and the play that can be made within their limits. Novelists who are acclaimed as literary and feminist writers have themselves frequently made use of popular generic forms. Margaret Atwood, Angela Carter, Fay Weldon and Jeanette Winterson are among the most eminent of the many women writers who have made use of genre fiction; all have worked with the forms of science and fantasy fiction, and have employed variants of the romance, from the bodice ripper to the story of the spurned wife. In the 1980s, self-identified feminist writers such as Zoë Fairbairns and Fay Weldon deliberately chose to write within popular forms and also strategically marketed their work as popular fiction. While women's writing continues to be marginalized in surveys of twentieth- and twenty-first century fiction, and is underrepresented in literary reviews and the academic curriculum, it will inevitably be the case that feminist scholars will tend to celebrate women writers. But contemporary feminist theory has to become more sophisticated than this, and to move beyond an unquestioning championship of women writers, to take account of the historical and social frameworks which can make some women's writing unpalatable.

The novels discussed here uncomfortably straddle Queenie Leavis's neat divisions between the highbrow, the middlebrow and the lowbrow. Nicola Humble's study of interwar women's fiction is one of the few that addresses this categorization, but she does not challenge the terms. The central themes that she identifies in the 'middlebrow' novel between the 1920s and 1950s, 'class, the home, gender and the family' (Humble, 2001, p. 3), continue to be the focus of women's fiction after the Second World War. Humble accepts the 'middlebrow' as a critical category and identifies her task as: 'to rehabilitate both the term and the body of literature to which it was generally applied' (Humble, 2001, p. 1).

However, this rehabilitation of a 'body of literature' had already been achieved by Virago and other feminist presses (including Persephone Press, established by Nicola Beauman) some decades before Humble's own study. The novels that Humble discusses tend to be those that have been republished by these feminist presses, and are therefore by writers who have already been reappropriated into an alternative canon. In a footnote,

Humble notes that many feminist critics are uncomfortable with the term 'middlebrow' (*ibid.*, p. 2), but does not acknowledge that this category may itself be problematic in the discussion of women's writing. Alison Light, one of the critics Humble cites for her reluctance to use the term, has argued that to make a firm distinction between the 'highbrow' and the 'lowbrow' in fiction (as Jenny Hartley has argued of the readership) is not a useful project. Instead, Light suggests that it is more valuable to read across the spectrum of fiction, and argues that this mode of reading makes for a better historical understanding:

Rather than setting 'highbrow' against 'lowbrow', the serious against the merely escapist or trashy, I am drawn to look for what is shared and common across these forms ... and to see them all as historically meaningful. In any case, not only are such cultural and literary evaluations dialectical judgements – the labels of 'high' and 'low' only make sense in relation to each other – we need to realise that their provenance is always changing; terms such as 'popular' or 'mass' must open up rather than close down historical enquiry.

(Light, 1991, p. x)

The selection of texts here has deliberately involved novels which are construed as 'literary', and includes those writers who do currently appear on academic syllabuses and who are reviewed in the broadsheet press, but situates them alongside those novels and genres which few women are prepared to admit to having read. This study makes use of a number of novelists who are not generally regarded as genre writers, and puts them together with those who tend to be dismissed as writers of 'the escapist or trashy'. In situating all these writers in their historical context and identifying their writing as belonging to a current set of discourses of gender, the pattern of the 'shared and common' becomes evident.

What textual analysis can do, which readership studies cannot, is to draw together structural regularities across fictions. In reading the versions of femininity and masculinity presented in the heroes and heroines of these novels, contemporary discourses about gender and gender relations become very clear. Iris Murdoch has always been acclaimed as among the most intellectual of women novelists, while Barbara Cartland has consistently been derided as a synonym for bad romance writing. In their writings in the 1950s, however, both novelists are preoccupied with the future of masculinity in the post-war reconstruction, and their heroes and heroines exhibit very similar compromises with the brave new world of post-war Britain. Margaret Drabble and Lynne Reid Banks (now both established figures in academic courses and writings on the post-war novel) and Monica Dickens (now largely forgotten by academia, but a writer whose work continues to be in print) write in very comparable terms of the situation of the single mother in the 1960s.

Alice Walker is among the most celebrated of contemporary writers, a

Pulitzer Prize winner who is included on high school and college reading lists, while Rona Jaffe has only recently been rediscovered, but both are dealing with the problems faced by the young woman undergraduate. Andrea Newman is now regarded as a writer of torrid romances, while Marilyn French is a recognized feminist novelist, but both write about the university experience as a moment of liberation for young women. The 'chick-lit' novel has become a journalistic term for 'a gossipy genre of confessional fiction about women' (La Ferla, 2005, p. 1), but the contemporaneous narration of the resentful daughter, which is no less confessional or gossipy, is reviewed admiringly in the broadsheet press. Identifying common patterns and themes in these novels can demonstrate what were clearly preoccupations for women during each decade. The 'best-seller' is a term that tends to be ascribed to those novels that are not considered worthy of serious literary investigation, and this is even more the case for a best-seller by a woman writer. But fiction that commands such a wide level of recognition and readership merits more acknowledgement than merely as popular writing that achieves a broad market. Innovative fiction by feminist writers, Marilyn French, Fay Weldon, Alice Walker, though classed as 'literary', can achieve best-seller status. The best-seller by definition crosses class and cultural boundaries (although, importantly, not always gender boundaries). As Robert Escarpit has stated, novels which achieve that status work at different levels: '[the] crossing of social boundaries constitutes the specific phenomenon of the best-seller. Hence, there may be best-sellers at several levels' (Escarpit, 1964, p. 129).

There is a distinction to be made between the British and American markets for the popular novel; a best-seller in either country was not likely to be defined by publishers as an 'international best-seller' until after the 1960s. The exchange of fiction titles across the Atlantic was limited until arrangements were set up between publishers in the post-war period. These exchanges were to accelerate sharply from the early 1970s; the integration of British and North American publishing companies with a series of takeovers in the 1980s established the basis for the current global market in fiction. The 'paperback revolution' was instrumental in establishing the conditions for a more international circulation of titles, at least for English language fiction. Penguin Books, launched in Britain in 1935, was a key player in the widening dissemination of fiction, in producing affordable paperback versions of novels. By 1945 it was producing at least 100,000 copies of each title. In Britain the success of Penguin was followed by the formation of Pan Books and in America by the paperback company Pocket Books. Corgi books, produced by Transworld, then followed in 1951. By 1997 Transworld were the most successful global publishing corporation, and dominated sales in popular fiction. The paperback marked a shift in methods for the distribution of books (Philips, 1990, p. 146), and brought modern advertising and marketing techniques to the gentlemanly world of publishing.

Publishers in Canada and Britain had begun to exchange manuscripts of popular romance novels since the Second World War, when an arrangement was established between the Canadian publishers, Harlequin, and the British Mills and Boon for the North American rights to Mills and Boon titles (*ibid.*). For much of the 1950s and 1960s, however, British and American publishers tended to stick to their own territories, and there was a limited cross-over of titles. Popular magazines and journals such as *Reader's Digest* (which launched its condensed books list in 1954) were read widely on both sides of the Atlantic. It was through this kind of material that debates surrounding such issues as the Kinsey Report, abortion and contraception could become part of popular discourse in both Britain and America. It was only such hugely popular book titles as Rose Franken's 'Claudia' series or Betty MacDonald's *The Egg and I* which could reach a global English-speaking readership, their popularity confirmed and promoted by film versions of the texts.

George Greenfield explains the circumstances which constrained the exchange of book titles between Britain and America until the 1970s:

For many years, there had been a gentleman's agreement that for most general trade books, including fiction, the American publisher would concentrate on his home territory and the Philippines, while the British publisher would have the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth.

(Greenfield, 1989, p. 129)

This 'gentleman's agreement' was finally brought to a halt in 1976, when the United States Justice Department declared that it constituted a cartel. By 1977 it was estimated that about 12 per cent of British publishing was owned by American companies; British publishers also made inroads into American publishing companies. Pearson, who took over Penguin Books, acquired the Viking Press in New York. Steven Connor has written of 'the increasing permeability of British and American markets' (Connor, 1996, p. 27) in post-war writing, but that increasing permeability can be precisely dated, and was strictly limited prior to these British and American acquisitions. It was only in the late 1970s that there was a wide-scale interchange of commercial titles, and an organized global market for book sales. Sheila Rowbotham has argued that 'national boundaries cannot contain the movement of feminist ideas' (Rowbotham, 1989, p. 13); it was the relatively new interchange of books between America and Britain in the early 1970s that did much to facilitate this movement. The women's movement both promoted and benefited from an international traffic in feminist theory and fiction. Widely available in cheap paperback editions, a feminist novel such as *The Women's Room* could now be marketed as 'an international best-seller' (French, 1978, front cover), and become required reading for women's groups on both sides of the Atlantic.

In the 1980s, a series of mergers and takeovers saw publishing in the hands of powerful 'Conglomerates and Aggregates' (Greenfield, 1989, p. 136). The effect was both to ensure much more traffic between British and North American titles, and to promote the international best-selling title. Successful popular novelists such as Danielle Steel could be marketed to enjoy unprecedented sales in a global market. This context also allowed for the marketing of fiction to become much more sophisticated, and to address texts and genres to niche audiences. The 'chick-lit' novel and the resentful daughter narratives of the 1990s could be targeted at very precise generations and market groups.

To achieve a wide readership, however, these must be texts that engage at some level with women's concerns, however romantic or aspirational those fictions might be. The novels discussed here are those which clearly touched a chord with women readers; they express the anxieties of negotiating contemporary modes of femininity. Because they are effectively romance fictions, these texts offer a form of ideal femininity and, to some extent, advice about how to acquire it. The politics of feminism have been such a dominant discourse in the latter half of the twentieth century that the model heroine is inevitably in dialogue with the challenges of the women's movement. Feminism, as a political project, can only allow for contradiction to a limited degree, while fiction can articulate the unacknowledged tensions of the impact of new ideas of gender on women's lives. While all these novels are preoccupied with female experience, they may not necessarily be feminist fictions. Although they may well represent ambitious and proactive heroines, that ambition may not be articulated in terms of a feminist politics. As Clare Hanson has argued:

there is no necessary relationship between women's novels and feminist novels: in other words, *women's novels* are not necessarily feminist – although they can be so. However, it is wrong to argue that women's novels are not of interest to *the feminist critic*: they are of interest precisely because of the centrality they attribute to women's experience.  
(Hanson, 2000, p. 1)

There is, as the situation for women changes and the focus of these novels shifts, a constant subtext of engagement with the feminist ideas. The Women's Liberation Movement was such an unavoidable undercurrent of women's experience in the latter half of the twentieth century that it is constantly acknowledged in women's writings, whether it is recognized as significant or not. The conflicting expectations of femininity in the late twentieth century presented women with contradictory demands, and the anxieties of how these could be negotiated are articulated very directly in these fictions. Those expectations and the discontents of women change markedly as the twentieth century progresses. The chapters here are roughly divided into a chronology from the 1950s to the present, and are organized

around the sub-genre of women's writing that marks each decade. These are not firm divisions; authors and genres are not neatly contained by historical decades.

The immediate period after the Second World War experienced a sharp transition in gender roles in the aftermath of war service for men and women, which necessarily impacted on women's relationships with men. Women writers from across the spectrum of literature, from Barbara Cartland to Iris Murdoch, are preoccupied with what it means to be a man in the post-war context. The 1950s is the decade that is now demarcated as the era of the 'Angry Young Man'; although angry young men are to be found in women's fiction of the period, they are not the Jimmy Porter or Arthur Seaton figures written by contemporary men. Instead, the ideal hero is a good citizen, who is explicitly selected by the heroine for his potential as a loving father and husband. This was the period of the height of the 'Doctor and Nurse' romance novel, the Mills and Boon genre which first established the exchange of popular titles between Britain and North America. The doctor and the nurse are icons of a time in which the preferred masculinity and femininity were models of welfare state citizenship and personal responsibility. The hero is configured in the post-war novel in terms of his consideration and social contribution, and is hardly associated at all with wealth and consumption, as he is so markedly in the fictions of the 1980s and after.

By the 1960s, active female sexuality could be explicitly addressed in women's writing, but a clash of moral discourses is very evident in contemporary writings on young women, in journalism and in fiction. The narrative of the single mother expresses the sexual anxieties of a generation of young women and also provided a site for the negotiation of changes in moral attitudes. The apprehensive pregnant women in these novels offer a sharp contrast to the received notion of the 'swinging sixties' as the era of the pill and sexual liberation. These novels are all directly concerned with issues of contraception, reproductive rights and support for single parents, but these are written about as entirely individualized experiences and not recognized as causes for political action and collective campaigns, as they would later become. These are pre-feminist novels, written before the surge of feminist activism in the late 1960s; nonetheless, the pregnant single woman does provide an image of female independence, if this is an independence that is not so much chosen as necessitated.

A decade later, the single woman has her ambitions focused on college. The growth of higher education in the 1960s and early 1970s saw a rise in women undergraduates in both Britain and America, and an emergent genre, the 'college girl' novel. These narratives initially appear to be about a new-found independence for women, but read as a genre, it is clear that this independence was not entirely unproblematic. The 1970s were declared the 'decade of women' by the United Nations; the impact of feminism had by this time become unavoidable, and rights and opportunities for women



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