READING THE MIDDLE: US WOMEN NOVELISTS AND PRINT CULTURE, 1930-1960

BY

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DISSEYRTATION

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Abstract

“Reading the Middle: US Women Novelists and Print Culture, 1930-1960 argues that the women writers of the mid-twentieth century middlebrow summoned carefully circumscribed deployments of critical paradigms such as feminism, antiracism, and anticapitalism to fulfill the American bourgeoisie’s need to elevate their leisure reading to an intellectually satisfying enterprise, with the implication that protest is a core value of the American bourgeoisie. Together, its five chapters demonstrate a new reading practice for the most widely read books of the mid-twentieth century—so many of which were written by women—that have lately fallen into obscurity. It proves that digital tools, which digital humanities scholars have been developing and refining for the past couple of decades, are ready for use as tools for scholars seeking to understand differently situated archives. Most importantly, it unpacks the paradoxes of a US conventionality that insists on subversion as one of its defining principles.

A semi-ironic play on phrenological concepts popular in the nineteenth century, the term middlebrow emerged in early-twentieth-century essays that repudiated the hold the growing and increasingly literate population of middle-class consumers were thought to have on the book industry. Early- and mid-twentieth-century culture critics fretted that the consumer power of the middle class outpaced its taste, that bourgeois participation in the literary sphere diluted the quality of the artistic output in circulation. Unlike many recovery studies about middlebrow authors such as Edna Ferber, Fannie Hurst, Pearl Buck, and Lillian Smith, my project doesn’t attempt to recuperate some overlooked formal innovation in the more subversive elements of their works. Rather, it argues that the social-critical thrust of their novels stemmed from a mainstream midcentury US commitment to progressivism, and articulates the carefully prescribed conditions under which their feminist protest could thrive.

The introduction, “Books of Permanent Importance,” discusses the decades between 1930 and 1960 as a particularly innovative era in publishing, following decades of post–civil war stagnation, in which industry leaders thought they could be committed to both art and money at the same time, true to the middle-class ideology that good work leads to financial rewards. It also establishes my contention that the middlebrow must be read in relation to its book-industry context and paratext, but that the text shouldn’t be left behind, as it allows us to consider what the patterns of the aggregate meant for the individual reading experience as demonstrated in chapter 2, “Edna Ferber and the Problems of the Middlebrow,” a version of which is forthcoming in article form in Studies in the Novel. Extremely popular for their humor, quick pace, and distinctly American settings, Ferber’s novels nevertheless ultimately critique American history and values, tackling settler-colonialism, racism, anti-Semitism, and capitalism through plot devices such as what I call the “dead patriarch trope.” Chapter 3, “Houses and Dead Patriarchs: Middlebrow Feminism and Its Race Problem” then elaborates on the patterns related to such motifs in a broader range of texts by other writers such as Fannie Hurst, Dorothy Canfield, and Jessie Redmon Fauset, using digital tools to analyze word and topic frequencies in contextual archival material to emphasize how such topics have subtly shaped by critical conversations about these works. A certain kind of feminism is a key feature, not a covert strategy, of middlebrow writing; middlebrow feminism, though invested in other types of social criticism, was legitimized by its class allegiances and its whiteness. This
complicates the legacy of a black writer like Fauset, whose novels never achieved the popularity of those of Ferber but whose books nevertheless offer important insights into the concept of middlebrow as a mode, rather than merely a tier, of writing.

Chapter 4, “They Aren’t the Whole World”: Locating the Middlebrow in Patricia Highsmith” shifts focuses to the postwar book industry, especially Patricia Highsmith, who is often categorized as a crime fiction writer—or a lesbian pulp novelist in the case of The Price of Salt—but whose status as a “hardcover” novelist brought her into the mainstream. Drawing on two of her interwar predecessors, crime writer Mary Roberts Rinehart and modernist Gertrude Stein, and situating her in the parallel rise of lesbian pulp fiction and print culture, I argue that what has been called Highsmith’s “antisociality” formed a resistant response to normality culture that was paradoxically the source of its appeal for general-interest readers. The coda, “Postwar Middlebrow Feminism and the ‘Subnormal’” likewise locates echoes of Highsmith’s “antisociality,” including the more grisly elements of her prose, and the threat of surveillance in the more traditionally middlebrow work of Lillian Smith, Ann Petry, and Mary McCarthy. Though these postwar writers espoused a riskier model of social criticism of social norms based on capitalism, white patriarchy, and heteronormativity, strengthening the force of their protest also complementarily strengthened the limitations of their feminism: both being normal and critiquing normality thus became the domain of the white woman of means.

The book manuscript will expand on the digital humanities sections, further refining the “middle-distance” reading methodology. With time increase the sophistication of my coding skills and to build larger corpora within limitations imposed by copyright, I can add an additional chapter which focuses on larger trade publications, such as Publisher’s Weekly, as well as features of other major tastemaking periodicals such as “Books of the Times” in the New York Times and reviews and short stories feature in the New Yorker. Outside of “Reading the Middle,” my article “Normalizing the ‘Variant’ in The Ladder, America’s Second Lesbian Magazine” considers the close ties between the Daughters of Bilitis’s underground newsletter’s stated purpose of connecting a national lesbian community through print and lesbian taste- and culturemaking, focusing particularly on its more cautiously conservative early years. I look forward to a distant reading of the magazine’s full run as a potential future project. Other projects on the horizon include an article I’m currently developing on pedagogy—specifically, teaching noncanonical texts that don’t lend themselves to close reading to undergraduates in survey courses that often leave little room for in-depth investigation into print-historical context; an article on middlebrow feminism in other print forms such as the advice column; and another on contemporary men novelists’ antagonist literary personae as a backlash to mid-twentieth-century middlebrow feminist protest.
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I am not much of a joiner, and I’m even less of a starter, but my dissertation writing group was perhaps just as crucial to me as my committee. You guys listened to me whine, you encouraged me, you held me accountable, you read my work, and you humored me when I insisted on pretending I wasn’t taking things seriously. Our meetings were sometimes the tether keeping me from crawling up into my own head for good. These past few months I have missed our coffee and conversation, hearing about all of the fascinating work you’re doing and hearing your thoughts about mine. Because of you all, I made deadlines I would have missed and wrote words in weeks where I would have been stuck. In other words, I got it done because I told you guys that I would, and you all acted like that was a reasonable thing for me to say. Elizabeth Tavares, Sarah Sahn, Esther Dettmar, Kate Norcross, Chris Hedlin, Heather McLeer, Silas Moon Cassinelli, Ben Bascom, and Jess Wong: thank you all.

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Chapter 1: Introduction: Books of Permanent Importance

1. Middlebrow, the Middle Class, and Female Authorship

As a term for a category of art and literature, middlebrow had a contentious start. It appeared in early- to mid-twentieth-century essays repudiating both bourgeois taste and the stranglehold that middle-class consumers with neither the refinement of the highbrow nor the raw life experience of the lowbrow were thought to have on the book industry’s flow of supply and demand: from Virginia Woolf’s criticism of the “busy-bodies who run from one to the other with their tittle tattle and make all the mischief”; to Edith Wharton’s less inflammatory but still ultimately ungenerous assertion that while the “mechanical reader” “does not seriously impede the development of literature,” the middlebrow writer is surely “a menace”; to Dwight Macdonald’s solidification of the matter in his infamous 1960 essay, wherein he declares “midcult” an “anti-art” that “doesn’t even have the theoretical possibility of being good” (2). The trouble with the middlebrow, according to its detractors, was that the consumer power of the middle class outpaced its taste; bourgeois participation in the writing and reading of literary art thus threatened to dilute the quality of artistic output and circulation, obscuring the genius in favor of the marketable.

Concerns about the brow-status of art are inevitably tied to material wealth; as Woolf derides the bourgeois “busy-bodies” who make “mischief” (meaning, write and read books), she also mocks the “betwixt and between” neighborhoods and modestly comfortable houses in which they live. Together, these critiques imply that a true artist’s temperament could not abide participation in the dull moderation of middle-class consumerism. Instead, the highbrow must
exist, or at seem to exist, outside the capitalist systems of wage-earning and merchandising.¹ On a practical level, to fulfill this requirement an artist would theoretically have to live in eccentric, abject poverty, or, more realistically and more commonly, inherit sort of trust fund or other provision that protects them from the compulsion to procure and manage income; the middle-class protagonist of Dorothy Canfield’s *The Brimming Cup* (1921) describes such lives as those “so arranged that other people did all the drudgery, and left one free to perceive nothing but the beauty an delicacy of existence” (265). The middlebrow, in contrast, is often narrated from the point of view of the middle class, whose economic comfort is too precarious to take as wholly for granted as Woolf took hers, and too complete to cast aside as it was responsible for providing the leisure time to read and write. The supremacy of wage-earning among the middle class turns into a kind of social value system, wherein the language of the workplace—productivity, worthiness, quality—is also used to describe the integrity of certain types of artistic production. Middle-class and middlebrow preoccupation with these values precludes the middlebrow artist from “riding his mind at a gallop . . . in pursuit of an idea,” as Woolf imagines of the highbrow; the balance the middlebrow seeks to strike among beauty, art, and enterprise is, for Woolf as well as for Macdonald, Wharton, and others, a nonstarter. Not only does any consciousness of the literary marketplace pollute the creative mind, but art and enterprise are so antithetical that commercially successful creative output is intellectually dishonest.

¹ For Woolf, the lowbrow isn’t an artist at all—rather he is the subject of highbrow art.
Class, then, isn’t determined merely by economics, but refers to a system of exchanging cultural capital under a broader set of conditions. In his Poetics essay, “The Field of Cultural Production: Or, the Economic World Reversed,” sociologist Pierre Bourdieu describes the “literary and artistic world[s] . . . interest in disinterestedness,” wherein art “demonstrates its authenticity by the fact that it brings in no income” (321). For him, the literary field is defined by the constant struggle between what he calls “heteronomous” and “autonomous” producers. The heteronomous write for a “mass audience,” their writing practice limited by the necessity of anticipating the demands of the market, while the autonomous write for themselves and other writers, limited only by the need to appear disinterested in the market (320). Yet Bourdieu clarifies that “lack of success is not in itself a sign or guarantee of election,” nor is “box-office success” an automatic disqualification for artistic autonomy. In other words, it is not a specific quantitative outcome that distinguishes the heteronomous and the autonomous (nor the middlebrow and the highbrow), but rather “their practice,” which often “remains determined by the negative relation which unites them” (327). Bourdieu’s notions of “disinterestedness” and “practice” articulate the stakes of middlebrow writing, often defined in large part by what it is not—that is, highbrow. Yet it also articulates how highbrow might be defined just as largely by what it is not—that is, middlebrow. Contrary to its critics’ estimations, then, the trouble isn’t that the middlebrow aims for the highbrow and falls short; rather, the middle and highbrows share an equal and opposite tension.

2 Bourdieu’s work is frequently invoked by literature scholars who focus on canonization, print culture, or noncanonical/popular work: for more on how he is generally invoked in literary criticism, see Guillory, “Bourdieu’s Refusal.”
This theory is further supported by at least one woman writer within the timeframe of this dissertation’s scope. Gertrude Stein recognized the fundamental cooperation among artists in the literary field in a speech transcribed by The Choate Literary Magazine in 1935. “[E]verybody is contemporary with his period,” she declares—no exceptions, and with no distinctions between the genius and the commercial:

A very bad painter once said to a very great painter, ‘Do what you like, you cannot get rid of the fact that we are contemporaries.’ This is what goes on in writing. The whole crowd of you are contemporary to each other, and the whole business of writing is the question of living in that contemporariness. Each generation has to live in that. The thing that is important is that nobody knows what the contemporariness is. In other words, they don’t know where they are going, but they are on their way. (151)

All artists, including and maybe especially writers, participate in a generation together, no matter their subject matter or genre or prestige. They work in tandem to form a “contemporariness” which can only be defined in hindsight. Distinctions which the “very great painter” makes between himself and the “very bad painter”—their subjective labels deployed as if they are objective descriptions—are delusions.

Considering the brows as mutually foundational to one another coexists comfortably with Jamie Harker’s point in America the Middlebrow that, though the term middlebrow is itself somewhat retroactively assigned, the tier was situated in the middle by design, not default, and curated with purpose. Harker reminds us, however, that middlebrow writers’ participation in the book industry and literary-artistic scene was heavily mediated not purely by values in
cultural capital, but by writerly identity politics—an aspect that Bourdieu’s essay doesn’t particularly address. *Middlebrow* is a twentieth-century play on nineteenth-century phrenological concepts: the belief, widely accepted as credible scientific reasoning for decades (Wrobel 162), that it is possible to rank racial types by drawing distinctions among their facial features to indicate intelligence or capacity for civilization. “[T]he lowbrowed ape,” says Lawrence Levine, was associated with the “Bushman,” while “the Caucasian [had] the highest brow of all” (222). Though phrenology had fallen out of favor as an actual science by the twentieth century, culture critics evidently still found the –brow terms evocative as labels for ranking various kinds of writing, redirecting the overt racism of the terms to their subtext. Additionally, as Jamie Harker’s *America the Middlebrow*, Janice Radway’s *A Feeling for Books*, Joan Shelley Rubin’s *Making of Middlebrow Culture*, and, less centrally but no less directly, Laurent Berlant’s *Female Complaint* acknowledge, the middlebrow in particular was also “implicit[ly] gender[ed]” (in Harker’s phrase, 19), born out of what Ann Douglas calls “the matrophobia of the moderns” in a different context (qtd. 2). Harker’s study of the middlebrow considers its feminization its most salient characteristic, just as key to its distinction as its ties to the middle class.

Harker’s argument that the middlebrow is implicitly but essentially gendered above all is corroborated by a brief look at the Dwight Macdonald’s antifoundational essay, “Masscult and Midcult” of 1960—the essay whose negative argument has often served as a starting point for scholars who seek to rouse scholarly interest the middlebrow. Within the first few sentences, Macdonald defines midcult by using a specific, gendered example: midcult, he says, means writing “like Edna Ferber and Fannie Hurst.” Ferber and Hurst were two of the bestselling
writers of any gender in the early- to mid-twentieth century, so it was apt of Macdonald to identify the two of them as prime examples of bourgeois art. Yet “Masscult and Midcult” isn’t actually about Ferber and Hurst—indeed, Macdonald was rarely interested in women writers at all, for good or ill. Rather, the essay eviscerates Ernest Hemingway and what Macdonald sees as his later-career descent into lady-novelist-like mediocrity. Macdonald wasn’t alone in his disappointment with Hemingway, as 1954’s Across the River and Into the Trees was very tepidly received by most critics. Yet Hemingway’s literary reputation somehow survived his late-career association with “midcult,” even though the seminal essay about middlebrow culture was written specifically about him. Unlike the work of women middlebrow writers who only drew six words of “Masscult and Midcult” like Ferber and Hurst, and the women modernists who later fell out of favor partly due to their middlebrow associations, like Willa Cather (as chapter 3 will argue in more detail), Hemingway’s work never descended into anything resembling obscurity, in or out of the literary academy. As Mark McGurl recently found in a comprehensive study of contemporaneous and contemporary critical reviews, awards, and popularity, Hemingway manages to transcend many of the top-ten and top-twenty lists: bestselling, most prizewinning, most reviewed, and most studied in academic publications. Hemingway’s contemporary, John Steinbeck, is the only writer who manages to transcend all of the categories in McGurl’s purview.

McGurl’s results thus suggest that, though male writers popular with the bourgeoisie and therefore degraded as middlebrow didn’t always overcome the association (see the careers of James Gould Cozzens or Dashiell Hammett), the only writers that have done so without the aid of a concerted recovery movement, feminist or otherwise, have been men. The following
graph helps visualize the discrepancy: it compares the Ngram results of a few prominent women middlebrow writers—Edna Ferber, Pearl Buck, and Dorothy Canfield—with Steinbeck and Hemingway, two men whose canonization has rarely been disputed but who were criticized as middlebrow by some of their contemporaries in the midcentury:\(^3\)

![Google bigrams of keywords edna ferber, pearl buck, dorothy canfield, ernest hemingway, john steinbeck, case-insensitive, corpus English, smoothing of 3.](image)

Google Ngrams searches the largest collection of digitized texts in the world for mentions of key names or key words and expresses the results as percentages, visualized in a line graph above. In partnership with major libraries and universities nationally and internationally, Google has digitized thousands upon thousands of books to create the largest, best-indexed, most user-friendly collection of digital content to date. Due to copyright restrictions, many of the books represented by Google Ngrams aren’t available for online perusal, and many aren’t even available for reading on paper, as they are long out of print; this tool operates within these legal parameters and practical limitations to quantify and visualize the representation of particular

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\(^3\)“Masscult and Midcult”; Granville Hicks, “Our Novelists’ Shifting Reputations,” *English Journal* 40.1 (1951): 1-7, which also notes other writers who have fallen out of favor.
keywords—called -grams, with an appropriate prefix to identify how many words are contained in each phrase—within the thousands upon thousands of books they have digitized books in their archives. The graph above shows that, while Hemingway and Steinbeck’s notoriety continued to rise steadily through 2000, the names of three women writers, whose work was published at the same time and reviewed in the same publications and who won many of the same awards, barely register over time despite their comparative initial popularity.

Further exploration of the Ngrams results reveals that most of the hits on Edna Ferber, Pearl Buck, and Dorothy Canfield come from the original texts they wrote, petering out in the decades after their peak production into the occasional biography. Steinbeck and Hemingway, by contrast, continue to have a far greater number of biographical and literary critical texts written about them and their legacies, and their work has been reprinted over and over again. Since Ngrams counts each edition and rerelease as its own book, both factors contribute to the exponentially higher proportion of Google’s corpus that’s tied to Hemingway or Steinbeck.

The matter of reprints brings up another potential obstacle for certain midcentury authors languishing in obscurity, one that disproportionately affects women writers: copyright regulations, which present significant logistical obstacles to accessing midcentury texts. As Paul J. Heald found in his study, “How Copyright Keeps Books Disappeared,” alternatively titled by an Atlantic Monthly writeup as “Our Collective Memory: How Copyright Made Midcentury Books Vanish,” copyright laws have effectively suppressed the reprinting of all but the most high-demand books published in the mid-twentieth century. Using a data-mining program

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4 The vast majority of the texts in Google Books are, in fact, books, fiction and nonfiction, but they can sometimes include bound volumes of periodicals, depending on the circumstances of their development and release.
similar to the Google Ngrams tool which he built himself, Heald found that there were almost
twice as many books published in 1910 available through online mega-retailer Amazon than
books published in 1950—a discrepancy that’s even more extreme when one accounts for the
fact that books published in 1950 far outnumber those in 1910. This pattern holds more or less
true for all years before and after 1923, the effective year for the US’s restrictive copyright
legislation. Because of the legal maneuvering required for republishing midcentury books, only
those texts commonly listed in university syllabi, commissioned by something like Oprah’s
notorious book club, or whose authors’ names have retained their cultural cache warrant the
money and time investment necessary for processing the red tape.

Even the Ngrams tool itself, which purports to broaden researchers’ and distant readers’
access to texts, uses copyright restrictions to make money: when digitizing content, Google
contracts a way to own the digitized versions of the content, allowing the private company to
maintain tight control over the ways and extent to which researchers and distant readers can
interact with the data. As long as academia and the culture at large have forgotten their popular
midcentury women writers, their works will remain obscure for at least another 70 years, when
the copyright on many midcentury books will finally expire. While scholarship on the
middlebrow has increased in recent decades, including, notably, Rubin’s Making of Middlebrow
Culture, Gordon Hutner’s more recent and more comprehensive What America Read: Taste, Class
and the Novel on “middle-class realism,” and Tom Perrin’s brand-new release The Aesthetics of
Middlebrow Fiction: Popular US Novels, Modernism, and Form, 1945–75, academic study of

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5 Repudiated by book history scholars such as Robert Darnton, A Case for Books.
literature is still disproportionately focused on a relatively small number of basically highbrow texts; those popular, broadly appealing texts written for a middle-class readership still require further attention.

2. Reading Print in the Middle

As Bourdieu’s concepts of heteronomy and autonomy imply, the linear hierarchy suggested by the terms lowbrow, middlebrow, and highbrow is a misrepresentation of the relationships among these concepts and the artistic production they signify; they operate much more like a web than a hierarchy. As Harker and other middlebrow scholars suggest, considering literary artistic production in terms of its implicit gendering further complicates any attempt to make sense of the distinctions between the categories. This dissertation seeks to meet this need in two parts that structurally mirror each other. Chapters 2 and 3 center on middlebrow women writers like Ferber, Hurst, Canfield, and others whose careers burgeoned in the 1930s and 1940s, contemporary with modernists but carrying out the “ruthlessly humanitarian” tradition started by Harriet Beecher Stowe (Harker 1-2); it also makes a brief case for a middlebrow late-career Willa Cather. The second half of the dissertation brings the concerns of the first half into the postwar, devoting more explicit attention to genre fiction and tracing the slight changes in tone in middlebrow writers whose careers took off in the mid-1940s and 1950s.

6 Indeed, some scholars choose not to use the term middlebrow at all, for this among other reasons. Gordon Hutner, for example, prefers the phrases “middle-class realism” or “better fiction.”
“Reading the Middle” is, in one sense, a feminist recovery project—recovery because it is concerned with currently neglected individual books and a currently neglected class of books, and feminist because it is concerned with women’s cultural participation in the understudied decades between the mainstream first- and second-wave feminist movements. Yet rather than performing recuperative close readings of some overlooked formal innovation in the more subversive elements of their works, “Reading the Middle” articulates the carefully prescribed conditions under which their feminist protest could thrive. I argue that popular women writers of the mid-twentieth century summoned carefully circumscribed deployments of critical paradigms such as feminism, antiracism, and anticapitalism to fulfill the American bourgeoisie’s need to elevate their leisure reading to an intellectually satisfying enterprise, with the implication that protest is a core value of the middle class.

This task calls for a reading practice that differs slightly from traditional close reading. As previous scholars have shown, middlebrow fiction, which is often formulaic—Hutner describes the texts in his purview as having “wooden plots” (6)—and rarely stylistically innovative, is at its most puzzling as well as illuminating in its print cultural context, as part of what Robert Darnton calls the “communication circuit”: that is, the cooperation among multiple media in print culture that comprises the literary sphere. To this end, I have developed a hybrid reading practice which allows me to consider middlebrow writing broadly as a network of cooperation while also highlighting specific texts that are particularly useful for understanding how the middlebrow works on a local, content level. If broad, quantitative analyses of corpora too large to physically read constitutes the Franco Moretti-inspired “distant readings” common in digital humanities scholarship, and “close reading” commonly refers to extensive analysis of
a single text, then my approach falls somewhere in the middle: “middle-distance reading.” In the chapters that follow, text-based analyses complement the contextual and print cultural material that I argue lends the texts under scrutiny their interest. Each chapter thus features a series of brief close readings of multiple novels, sometimes by multiple authors, as well as other primary print sources from newspapers, trade publications, and personal archives. I also use a few digital methods where appropriate, such as word-count and topical analyses known as “text mining,” to for mapping out the broader trends that put pressure on traditional individual reading. My project takes on more texts than is perhaps customary for a dissertation: chapter 2 considers four novels; chapter 3 touches on more than half a dozen and emphasizes two in particular; chapter 4 considers five total but two in particular; the coda treats three evenly and mentions several more. In addition, all chapters allot significant real estate to the other points within Darnton’s “communication circuit,” including trade publications, newspaper reviews, and other forms of nonfiction. I use digital tools, such as word frequency distributions in R and the topic modeling software MALLET, in addition to Ngrams, where helpful for quantifying and verifying the trends and patterns that the closer reading methods can then flesh out. Throughout, I will continue to use the term middlebrow, not despite its falseness and problematic basis in pseudoscience, but rather because of it—miscategorization, misrepresentation, and misunderstanding are important to this tier of fiction.

In chapter 2, “Edna Ferber and the Problems of the Middlebrow,” I turn to the aforementioned Edna Ferber as a case study in middlebrow literary participation. I argue that her career provides the single most comprehensive example of middlebrow authorship, from her books’ production, to their distribution, to their reception. Ferber’s oeuvre brings together
all of the middlebrow’s competing concerns: the simultaneous edification and pleasure of a bourgeois audience, feminism and other social criticisms, and coded, gendered critical feedback to her work. Ferber has largely disappeared from conversations about the literary scene in the 1920s and 1930s, though she was a member of the Algonquin Round Table along with modernist writer Dorothy Parker, *New Yorker* founder Harold Ross, and others, and well-acquainted with other large-looming early- to mid-twentieth-century figures like Carl Van Vechten. As a writer, Ferber had little patience for pretentiousness of any kind; she called Faulkner a “tubthumper” and a “bore” in her autobiography and complained about “Dotty” Parker behind her back (Letter to William Allen White; Parker is said to have been no fonder of Ferber, despite their public social relationship [Meade]). Chapter 2 explores the mutual derision between Ferber and certain gatekeepers in the literary field, with her books’ publication and distribution delineated as context for a catalog of close readings of four of her best novels and the uniquely middlebrow style of social criticism they offered. Popular for her novels’ humor, quick pace, and distinctly American settings, each nevertheless ultimately critiques American history, tackling settler colonialism, racism, anti-Semitism, and capitalism. Ferber was master of what I call the “dead patriarch trope”—wherein the plot hinges on the heroine who thrives when her husband or father dies, because it allows her to continue to access the cultural capital that comes with being legally attached to a man but frees her from the burden of constantly placating him; it led some reviewers to label her “feministic.”

Chapter 3, “Houses and Dead Patriarchs: Middlebrow Feminism and Its Race Problem” builds on the concepts established by Ferber’s exemplary case study to consider what I call “middlebrow feminism” in a constellation of authors and texts which further establish that the
kind of criticism Ferber offered and the manner in which it was engaged was a key feature of middlebrow writing more broadly. Considering other interwar women novelists such as Fannie Hurst, Dorothy Canfield, Pearl Buck, late-career Willa Cather, and Jessie Redmon Fauset reveals a unique version of feminism in particular. This chapter argues that women writers alternated strategically between resistance and complicity with white patriarchy to create a particular thrust of middlebrow feminism that drew readers in by offering them both the mental exercise of social criticism and validation of the status quo at the same time. A type of digital analysis called a “topic model” which I generated through a program called MALLET analyzes common vocabulary in a major academic trade publication and Google Ngrams data regarding the rise and fall of each authors’ notoriety; the results show that middlebrow readers wanted a certain kind of edification to go along with their delight. The series of complementary close readings that accompany the digital analyses then show that a heavily mediated intersectional white feminism helped women authors deliver it to them.

Where 1930s and early-1940s middlebrow novelists tended to be pitted against modernism, the postwar novelists considered in the latter sections of “Reading the Middle” were contemporaneous with innovations on their other side: the lowbrow. It begins in chapter 4, “They’re Not the Whole World: Genre, Social Consciousness, and Patricia Highsmith,” by addressing the impact of the rise of the mass-market paperbacks on the midcentury book industry, their partial fracture of the umbrella category of genre fiction, and the writers who pushed the boundary between genre fiction and the middlebrow—a division which, once again, was rarely as bright and clear as the names we have retroactively assigned them suggest. The career of interest here is primarily that of Patricia Highsmith, who is often categorized as a crime fiction writer or a lesbian pulp novelist in the case of The Price of Salt but whose status as a
“hardcover” novelist—an important distinction as mass-market paperbacks were beginning to take off—and criticisms of late-modernism brought her into the middlebrow. Drawing on two of her interwar predecessors, crime writer Mary Roberts Rinehart and modernist (and fellow lesbian writer) Gertrude Stein, and situating her in the parallel rise of lesbian pulp fiction and print culture, I argue that what has been called Highsmith’s “antisociality” formed a resistant response to normality culture which was paradoxically the source of its appeal for midcentury middlebrow readers.

Though the aspects of Highsmith’s writing which have led to her canonization as a “noir” writer leant her novels a cynicism that contrasted with the humanism of the previous chapters’ middlebrow women’s writing, I submit that the paranoia, surveillance, and pathologies that lurk in her novels are deployed in service of a darker postwar revision of a similar task: to connect with readers by unsettling them.

The coda, “Postwar’s Sub-Normal Revision of Middlebrow Feminism,” then traces Highsmith’s darker take on middlebrow feminist tropes through the work of less liminally middlebrow writers like Lillian Smith (especially her One Hour), Ann Petry, particularly A Country Place in contrast to both her earlier The Street and Mary McCarthy’s The Company She Keeps. As explicit laws governing gender and sexuality institutionalized what had been more purely socially constructed for the interwar women writers of chapters 2 and 3, postwar women writers’ novels responded to a slightly different form of cultural pressure which I attribute to the “normality discourse” discussed by other scholars of midcentury popular culture. Though, on the surface, these writers seem to represent a reprisal of the humanitarianism of earlier women writers, closer examination reveals more Highsmith-like noir elements pervading the trademark middlebrow “satisfying” endings. I argue that middlebrow writers whose careers were first established in the postwar era left the soothe-critique-soothe approach of chapters 2 and 3’s writers
behind for a riskier model of social criticism of social norms based on capitalism, white patriarchy, and heteronormativity, but that strengthening the force of their protest also complementarily strengthened the limitations of the intersectionality of their feminism: both being normal and critiquing normality thus became the domain of the white woman of means.

3. The 1920s Generation of Publishing

The prehistory of all of the texts covered in this project begins with a moment of dramatic innovation in the book industry. Besides Doubleday’s inception in 1899, the publishing sector had seen few significant changes since the mid-nineteenth-century: the largest, most prestigious, and most productive houses at that time were mostly products of the civil war-era boom, headed by their now-octo- and nonagenarian founders and their sons. But the rapid rise and establishment of a new generation of houses marks, for historian John Tebbel, a “golden age” in publishing between 1920 and 1940. Though the establishment book industry could hardly have been considered to be struggling, young new-house founders—perhaps influenced by the entrepreneurial culture of the so-called roaring twenties, in which “America’s business” was famously “business”—sought to reinvent the book industry both ideologically and logistically; they saw it as their task to lead the charge into twentieth-century modernity.

The twenty-five-year-olds Harold Guinzberg and George Oppenheimer created the following mission statement for their 1925 launch of Viking Press: “To publish a strictly limited list of good nonfiction, such as biography, history and works on contemporary affairs, and distinguished fiction with some claim to permanent importance rather than ephemeral popular interest” (Penguin). Viking’s insignia, drawn by popular newspaper and book illustrator
Rockwell Kent of a *drakkar*, or Viking ship, represent the house’s pursuit of “adventure” literary publishing (“Viking Ship”; “Viking Press”) and was printed in the inside cover of every Viking release. The notion that books of “permanent importance” are the secret to “enterprise” in book publishing seems to have governed the 1920s boom more broadly: Tebbel recounts similar points of view in the young heads of startups like Random House and Harcourt. The book industry, while healthy, was due for innovation; young college men in the 1920s borrowed from the national conversation on Fordist industriousness—highlighting their books’ craftsmanship and “beautiful” covers, the material quality and profitability of the commodity they sell—as well as the vocabulary of Bourdieu’s autonomous artists—openly vowing never to “be stampeded into publishing mediocre material” (“A New Publishing House” 1190). Viking’s founders registered no awareness that two major tenets of their mission to publish books which sell a lot of copies and make a lot of impact yet are not “popular” were in conflict.

Despite the seeming paradoxes in their business model, the 1920s generation of houses found immediate, decisive success. By 1930, these houses were well-established and churning out some of the best-regarded, bestselling books of the century. Soon, the old houses began adopting the business practices of the new. The book industry was a remarkably collaborative industry at this time; trade journals such as *Publishers Weekly* feature editorials in which industry executives share marketing strategies and even ideas regarding innovation in fonts and book construction freely with one another. One editorial by Alfred R. McIntyre, president of civil-war house Little, Brown and Company called “Too Many Books!” kicked off the periodical’s first issue of 1930, offering detailed analyses of the “new” houses’ business
strategies, and sharing with the rest of the trade how he intended to implement them in his own establishment.

World War II brought a change in tone to Publisher’s Weekly, and a tweak, if not an overhaul, in the industry’s focus of resources. Throughout the 1940s, the 1920s-generation houses celebrated their 20th and 25th anniversaries, proud of their formidable lists of authors and remarkable resilience post-Depression, and optimistic about the futures of their brands. At first, the war in Europe brought about little but some ledger-keeping difficulties and supply shortages which the December 6, 1941 issue of Publisher’s Weekly called “annoying” (2107), but overall the powers in the American book trade seemed to think themselves in a golden moment of stability. For his part, Publisher’s Weekly editor and book trade spokesperson Frederic Melcher found “speculations as to what changes may be wrought” by the war to be little more than “amusing” (2081).

As hindsight might predict, the following day’s bombing of Pearl Harbor changed Melcher’s perspective, but not in the way we might expect. The PW issue directly following the crisis suggested less fear and anxiety and more excitement at the fear and anxiety of a public which was likely to turn to books for comfort and/or information. Like FDR’s infamous speech, PW’s advertising and editorials seem specifically designed to provoke war-related fear in Americans in order to quell it.\footnote{Incidentally, Lauren Berlant argues that Edna Ferber does this same thing with her novels and plays in Female Complaint.} Published only 5 days after FDR’s address, the issue began with a full ten pages of impossibly timely advertisements for forthcoming books specifically designed to stir up fear with the express goal of soothing those fears: titles such as Japan VS. U.
S. A.: Honorable Enemy?, written by authors who invoked military authority with “Lt.” and “Major” in front of their names, and copy like “Every American needs to know how to identify aircraft—quickly and accurately. Aircraft Spotter is an indispensable handbook for civilian defense” (2156).

As for Melcher, he seems hardly able to contain himself in his editorial, revealing his excitement at the positive effect he anticipates the war to have on book sales even through the veil of honor and duty to the purported mission of his industry. “The book trade has its own important part to fulfill” in ensuring “the success of this war,” he intones solemnly. This “important part,” it seems, is to sell a whole lot of books for a whole lot of money: the rest of the article focuses breathlessly on profits in publishing (“10,000,000 pounds worth of books at wholesale value”) in London since England entered the war—factoring in lost opportunity cost due to bombing casualties, naturally—and telling of the citizens’ insatiable demand for new books to read in the war-torn Western nations. Melcher pledges to “face the full responsibility” of providing the same level of “service” in the US (2155).

Most of Melcher’s predictions about the war’s likely impact on the book industry came true. The hardships of wartime rationing did have some effect on the logistics of producing and selling books. The scarcity of paper, ink, and manpower led to the first rise in prices in decades (Tebbel), and changes in the margins of book pages to save paper (Melcher). These challenges, together with the rise of television as yet a new competitor for the Americans’ increasingly scarce spare time, brought the usual handwringing about the novel’s demise (“Is the Novel Done For?”). But, as Melcher also predicted, demand for books was at a record high in the 1940s and 1950s; whether the rise in demand was actually caused by the war or merely correlated
with it, the book trade treated the two phenomena as directly related. Either people bought books about war because they couldn’t get enough of the war, both during and for years after, or people bought realist novels and romances because they were sick of the war. Regardless, in the mid-twentieth century, publishers were producing more books than ever before (Travis).

Following 1941, war permeated much of public rhetoric, including in the book industry: in the first issue of January 1944, the year of Lillian Smith’s *Strange Fruit*’s release, a Kingsport Press PSA in *Publisher’s Weekly* asserts, “Every day, every hour books are at war for the United Nations. They back the attack with a wallop more damaging to the enemy than a block buster. They are the weapon the Fascist mob fears most . . . facts to sustain the courage of the plundered, starving victims of aggression, facts to renew faith in religions officially verboten, facts to demonstrate that freedom endures, truth prevails, humanity marches on!” (59). The ad doesn’t actually push a specific title; it’s merely sounding off about the value of books in general, as if to remind those within the trade publication’s readership of their mission. In the same issue, Melcher’s editorial for the new year reads like a pep talk to a flagging homefront, the positivity of his post–Pearl Harbor writings having hardened into a kind of stoicism. He writes of setting aside “careless optimism” in favor of “sober determination,” and admits to a certain “wearying” effect the war has had on the industry and its customers. The task for 1944, asserts Melcher, is to meet the challenges, which are only increasing every year even as supplies and enthusiasm are dwindling, with “fresh resolve and renewed pledges of . . . cooperation.” This year, there is nothing more important than books, because books are how people “find their way to clearer understanding and more confident opinion and action”; they “provide facts
and interpretations” which the people desperately need to navigate the “tumult and turmoil” of the last stretch of wartime (25).

Like that of many wartime and postwar industries, particularly those which produced and distributed items of leisure, book industry propaganda touted the virtues of consumer patriotism in order to persuade the middle class that their product wasn’t frivolous. In a time when families' need to carefully budget their allotments of flour and eggs might have generated a culture of perilousness and fear, the book industry promised would-be book buyers that their product would serve as a totem to the civilized, orderly version of America, that reading could even be an act of support for the war effort. The rhetoric of the book industry’s nobler, less capitalist aspirations that Helen Woodward disdained in 1920, then, was only heightened during and post-war. Notions of duty, the need to publish books that were both pleasing and useful and call to moral instruction, were all the more reinforced by the panic that came from the uncertainty of wartime and unprecedented attack on US soil. With this came a certain book evangelism: publishers began advertising outside of their own circle in New York, and even began shipping books overseas (Tebbel; Travis). The 1920s spike in literacy was thus complemented by a 1940s spike in the availability of books, to soldiers, to the poor. By encouraging literacy, they reasoned, they were encouraging citizenship, which meant encouraging patriotism and nationalism. Thus many book publishers credited themselves for keeping the nation together psychically during the chaos of the war years; the mission statements driving the 1920s boom in publishing were doubly reinforced.

In terms of titles published, besides the surge of “Lt.” and “Sgt.” authors and pamphlets about identifying artillery the higher risk-taking business strategies ushered in by the 1920s
generation of houses required even greater commitment. The book industry’s opportunist propaganda and the government’s tighter grip on nonnormative expressions of sexuality paradoxically meant firmer resistance to censorship and sanitization of content, punctuated by strategic capitulation. In the case of Smith’s *Strange Fruit*, booksellers were arrested for selling it and the US Postal Service was barred from distributing it—a significant blow to an industry that by that point had spent decades building its mail-order consumer base. Though court hearings weren’t new to the careers of middlebrow women writers, as chapters 2 and 3 will show, the proceedings surrounding *Strange Fruit* weren’t about libel, but “obscenity”: where lawsuits against Edna Ferber and Fannie Hurst tended to be brought by disgruntled private individuals stung by their feminist satire, the controversy surrounding *Strange Fruit* was stirred up by the government panicking over the book’s potential to “corrupt the morals of youth” with its “salacious appeal” (qtd. In DeVoto 152, 153).8

4. Conventional Protest

The book industry throughout 1930 to 1960 had a way of collapsing actual and monetary value: the vigor with which the publisher’s courted commercial success for their novels was to some extent a measure of how they perceived a book’s literary quality. Without consideration of the norms of literary production that Bourdieu divided into the groups of “heteronomous,” or market-driven, and “autonomous,” or art for art’s sake, monetary and cultural value were fused into one and expressed by numbers. The paradox of the middlebrow originated in the paradox

8 Harcourt, publisher of *Strange Fruit*, dealt with obscenity charges and bans before, notably in the case of its American release of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Here, I’m referring specifically to the kind of interactions middlebrow women writers had with the state as a result of their work.
of the capitalistic philosophies governing the major publishers: the midcentury book industry tried, above all, to accrue staggering profits while maintaining the sense that their industry was one of collaboration, creativity, and high artistic principles. As McIntyre’s aforementioned “Too Many Books!,” written from the perspective of one of the adapting older houses who was observing the transitions in the book industry in real time, doing both could be a strange juggling act. McIntyre complains about the compulsion to publish a “cursed book of short stories” in order to avoid losing big-name authors who might pull their novels if their egos aren’t sufficiently appeased, and even more about publishing shoddy manuscripts because they were written by various powerful people’s wives (40). But for McIntyre, the practices introduced by the newer houses that most effectively distributed middlebrow titles such as mail-order finally gave the book industry the chance to have the best of both worlds—high sales of a moderate number of high-quality titles.

By analyzing the bourgeois navel-gazing that defines “middlebrowism” as it presents itself at the levels of the industry, the print media, and the individual texts, I identify a pattern of protest—especially feminist protest—as a core characteristic of bourgeois normativity. America loves a good underdog story. Fighting back, resisting oppression, and social change are valued here. But America also demands that her underdogs be worthy in certain ways, and fears social change beyond a recycled version of the familiar. The very concepts often held to be problematic within midcentury normality culture and contemporary neoliberalism—captured in folkways like “the bootstrap model” of success, the “American Dream,” and American exceptionalism—for their prescriptive conservatism paradoxically require an element of defiance, of rebellion of some sort of status quo, before resolving themselves into a reaffirmation
of the inherent value of those who enjoy privilege in a capitalist US. I contend that the stories mainstream US culture tells itself are almost uniformly patterned on this model; as the group whose material comfort and cultural participation depend strongest on these stories’ reality, much to Woolf’s disdain, middle-class general interest readers responded enthusiastically to protagonists that satisfied both of its parts: protest and affirmation.

I further argue that middlebrow women writers, whose mostly female protagonists were drawn in protest of America’s foundation in white patriarchy, were uniquely situated to this task. I revisit the feminist social criticism in their novels not to recoup some notion of overlooked genius in their subversion, but to suggest that subversion, within a carefully prescribed, constantly policed set of legal, cultural, and socio-economic boundaries, is the single most salient convention of the mainstream. Feminist subversion, in particular, with both its radical potential for intersectional critique and tendency to discard intersectionality where strategically advantageous, found a ready vehicle in midcentury middlebrow literature. Though the works of Edna Ferber, Fannie Hurst, Jessie Fauset, Patricia Highsmith, Lillian Smith, and Ann Petry, just to name a few such writers, are no longer ubiquitous in American popular culture or even yet the American literary academy, the stories of their careers have much to reveal about how women’s midcentury participation in literature and print culture both shaped and reflected the dueling values of the middle-class American bourgeoisie.
Chapter 2: Edna Ferber and the Problems of the Middlebrow

Contemporaneous writing about the redoubtable Edna Ferber anticipates the eventual neglect. Though she had some consistently loyal advocates among prominent reviewers and editors, much of Ferber’s critical reception has had a recurring arc: effusive praise, coupled with inevitable condescension based on the same virtues as that very praise. Margaret Gay Bara’s 1933 review of *Come and Get It* is relentlessly upbeat and agreeable, but its title, “The Ferber Formula,” suggests a backhanded swipe at Ferber’s craft, as if each Ferber novel merely fills in the blanks of a template. Bara’s conclusion that “whatever the rest of us may think or say about the importance of Miss Ferber as a novelist, the boys in Hollywood can never say she let them down” might seem like praise in the context of the rest of the overtly positive review, but Ferber undoubtedly would have recognized it as a backdoor insult, implying that her writing’s chief asset was its cross-modal marketability. Writing in 1941, Margaret Wallace calls Ferber almost the only writer who seems to be “actually writing in technicolor”; Orville Prescott can’t help liking 1952’s *Giant*, a “brisk, clever, constantly moving story.” Yet, for Wallace, Ferber’s verve can’t quite replace a “fuller knowledge of history or keener sense of character analysis.” Meanwhile, though Prescott preemptively dismisses his misgivings about Ferber as “needless carping” without detailing them at length, in highlighting his impulse to complain about Ferber’s “brisk” stories’ lack of “depth” he articulates the central tension of Ferber’s career and predicts with startling accuracy what would be her legacy: “[a]fter the last page is read surprisingly little remains in the memory.” Edna Ferber, the “well-dressed lady novelist” (Nichols)—a delineation which she courted but also disdained—was “interesting” (Prescott);
Edna Ferber was “a historical painter” (Woods); Edna Ferber was “brilliant” (Barkham), according to writers in the country’s most widely circulated periodicals. Yet for some elusive reason, in the blunt words of one critic, “she ha[d] not achieved greatness,” so indeed after her last page was written, few remembered her at all (Parker 448).

Given these ominous predictions and the swiftness with which Ferber fell into decisive obscurity in the decades directly following her death, it’s easy to forget the staggering potency of her literary celebrity in the first half of the twentieth century. By some measures, Ferber was the top-selling American author of the twentieth century, despite a modest output of twelve novels, two autobiographies, and assorted volumes of short stories and plays over a half-century. After working as a reporter in her teens, her career as a short-story writer and novelist began in the 1910s and exploded in the 1920s. A Ferber novel was sometimes a Pulitzer contender, once a winner, and very often a blockbuster film, sometimes two—with Ferber’s name in lights right alongside those of James Dean and Elizabeth Taylor (Smyth 223-26). Ferber maintained prominence throughout the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s; public and critical enthusiasm for her work was only just beginning to wane at the time of her death in 1968. Despite tremendous commercial success in her lifetime, however, dissonance in her critical reception

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9 Indeed, previous recovery movements in literature have underemphasized Ferber in favor of her more modernist contemporaries (Ferber jealously griped about the “goddess stuff” in critical praise for Willa Cather in a letter to her sister [qtd. in Gilbert 351]). Even contemporary reviewers who revisit Ferber’s work have been underwhelmed (see, for example, Jonathan Yardley’s 2006 article in the Washington Post that praises Giant the film but calls Giant the book “excruciating”).

10 By Publisher’s Weekly and New York Times figures, Ferber is only in the top 20 or 30; however, these figures don’t include mail-order or book-of-the-month club sales in their analytics—two major areas of revenue for Ferber. The Bookman more regularly ranked her at the very top (“let the critics of the fictional taste of the masses laugh that off!” [Frank Parker Stockbridge, “The Bookman’s Monthly Score,” Bookman, June 1924]), but ceased its collations in 1933; J. E. Smyth implies that, were the Bookman’s model of aggregation sustained, Ferber would occupy the top spot (18).
plagued Ferber, and anxiety about its duality permeates her work, from its production, to its distribution, to its content.

Ferber’s eventual obscurity was foreshadowed early in her career, even before it reached its apex. In 1930, two articles by William Allen White and William R. Parker in academic trade publication *The English Journal* debate the merits of Edna Ferber as a novelist, the value of her work, and the possibilities for her legacy’s transformative influence on literature. Their exchange exemplifies the larger canon formation project of early-twentieth-century literary criticism, as literature was just beginning to take hold as an academic discipline. John Guillory identifies two major categories in the “new literary pedagogies” of these decades, both influenced by Matthew Arnold: “the first associated with the name of F. R. Leavis and *Scrutiny*, the second with the New Criticism” (134); identifying and classifying the major authors of the twentieth century thus far was a central critical project both within and outside the academy during this time. Women writers posed a special challenge for this cataloging project, both in criticism broadly and in the *English Journal* specifically: while words like “universal” and “timeless” appeared in discussions of Faulkner and Hemingway, women’s writing was often perceived by these (largely, though far from entirely, male) critics as specifically “women’s culture” (in Lauren Berlant’s phrase from *The Female Complaint*). If the central question of canon formation was “what counts as good literature?” then the complementary question of whether

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11 *The English Journal* is difficult to classify. It’s currently indexed by JSTOR’s Data for Research initiative as a scholarly journal, though it wasn’t peer-reviewed. It appears to be comprised largely of articles written by university professors, but occasionally other literary critics and personalities such as White contributed, and there is even the occasional essay or short story by a fiction writer. As far as I have been able to determine, it’s something like an early- to mid-twentieth-century version of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*.

12 In the context of American literature specifically, Gordon Hutner’s *What America Read* lists several examples of book-length works of this type from the 1930s, including Granville Hicks’s *The Great Tradition* (1933) and Russell Blankenship’s *American Literature as an Expression of the National Mind* (1931), among others (49-50).
or not it was possible for women writers to write it animated a significant portion of the discussion.

White, a highly visible and respected editor, book club board member, and general industry personality (though also a somewhat frustrated would-be novelist), was famously nervous about a “large-scale female takeover of the industry” (Ehrhardt 14), but he must have made an exception for Ferber, because he was a great supporter of her career and perhaps her closest friend.13 Though “by no means a deep or original thinker,” according to his biographers, White was renowned for his small-town, middle-American values (Vaughn 335); over a half-century career as a writer, pundit, and networker of writers, he became something of an authority on the middle-class American scene. It’s unsurprising then, given White’s interests, that he was such a loyal champion of Ferber’s work, as she explicitly revealed herself as a novelist for and about what she “with poise and frankness . . . calls the ‘middle class,’” a “passionate democrat,” and “a provincial American” (Woods).

White opened an issue of the teachers’ trade publication early in the year with “A Friend’s Story of Edna Ferber,” one of many instances in the mid-twentieth century in which he publicly advocated for her in writing. For White, Ferber was a “modern O. Henry,” indeed, superior to “a Sherwood Anderson,” possessed of “[Sinclair] Lewis’ talent” but with a style that goes “beyond photography.” He writes:

13 On the evolution of White’s politics, see Sally Foreman Griffith’s Home Town News: William Allen White and the Emporia Gazette (1989), especially the chapter “The Making of a Progressive.” White and Ferber’s friendship is well-documented in biographies and autobiographies of each, as well as their extensive correspondence preserved in both the Edna Ferber Papers in Madison, WI and the William Allen White Papers at the Library of Congress.
Of the first dozen chroniclers of the America that has grown up in this century, Edna Ferber would be in the first five if the rating were made on popularity, artistic accuracy, and a deep understanding of the significance of the American scene. Any of her books read five hundred years from now would tell the reader something that no book by any other author could tell of our America. (100)

If his appeal to “five hundred years from now” seems grandiose, White closes the essay with the invocation of God and an exclamation point. Still, as bold as White’s argument is, it nonetheless includes an if. “Ferber would be in the first five if,” he says, registering doubt about the inevitability of his view, shifting the article’s occasion from general appreciation of Ferber to manifesto on her behalf. Though Ferber had garnered little but accolades and awards in the preceding five years, White’s essay meant to defend her against some future degradation, as though he sensed a backlash was on its way.

Parker replied to White a few issues later; with his title, “A Stranger’s Story of Edna Ferber,” he announces his position as the more objective and rational assessor of Ferber’s literary worth. Parker wrote as a frequent contributor to the Journal and other similar publications. Like White, Parker speaks of Ferber mostly in terms of other established novelists, though his essay keeps its comparisons mostly limited to women authors. “I fervently wish Ferber would be a George Eliot” he despairs, but, bluntly, “she has not achieved greatness.” Though Parker acknowledged Ferber’s skill in drawing “vivid,” multidimensional characters, as nearly every critic of Ferber did, he summed up her inability to transcend from

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14 My archival research suggests that Parker may have also served as the executive secretary of the MLA: an address to the South-Central MLA transcribed by South Central Bulletin in February 1956 was given by a William Parker described in much the same terms as the William Parker of the English Journal.
general decent quality to a higher plane thusly: “All of her characters we recognize in a superficial sense, many of them we recognize in an intimate sense, but none of them we recognize in a very intimate, ultimate sense” (450). Ferber’s downfall, then, lies in the elusive difference between “intimate” and “very intimate, ultimate.” For Parker, Ferber is “scarcely significant,” her writing “uneven” and “crude,” her books marked by their “cheap titles.” Though he grants that “[s]he has made . . . a few sane, critical gestures,” in his estimation, “they have passed unnoticed” by her reading public and by critics. His unwavering conclusion attempts to close the entire matter: “Edna Ferber cannot . . . be taken seriously as a critic of modern life” (448).

As far as the weight of Ferber’s presence in mid-twentieth-century literary sphere was concerned, both White and Parker underestimated Ferber. White’s passionate defense of Ferber turned out to be premature and Parker’s condescension overly dismissive, for in 1930, her career was still in its early stages. Though not all were best sellers, and later releases like Great Son, A Kind of Magic, and Ice Palace were panned, by her death in 1968, her two-page obituary in the New York Times hailed her as the “the greatest American woman novelist of her day” — no mean designation, despite the gender qualifier, considering that her “day” included such figures as Edith Wharton, Gertrude Stein, and Willa Cather—making much of the fact that her books were “required reading in schools and universities.” But various versions of Parker’s criticisms persisted, even sneaking into the obituary itself, which concedes that “her novels were not profound,” damning them with the faint praise of “minor classics.” Within a few short years, the name “Edna Ferber,” which once stood for an entire swath of literary achievement, was unrecognizable (Gilbert 12).
Film scholar J. E. Smyth blames literature, film, and history critics for Ferber’s neglect, and their insistence on “equat[ing] popularity with mediocrity (19). Yet as the introduction pointed out, this hasn’t been the case across the board, particularly when it comes to male authors like Hemingway and Steinbeck. In her biography of her famous great-aunt, Julie Goldsmith Gilbert tried to speculate about why Ferber fell so quickly out of favor, and why so many of her former friends seemed to see it coming. One book-industry executive speculated that Ferber didn’t have the “universality” of William Faulkner (12)—a curious word choice, considering Faulkner’s reputation for complicated prose and almost exclusively Southern focus, contrasted with Ferber’s wide-ranging American settings and almost too-accessible plots. Perhaps this gentleman meant to refer to the same intangible quality Parker described with his opaque phrase “very intimate, ultimate.” Gilbert hints that Ferber’s gender, as well as the feminist themes in her writing, led partially to such unfavorable comparisons. Much has been written about the implications of a male-dominated print industry and literary critical circle, and indeed, even those who championed Ferber were prone to gendered condescension: Grant Overton from the *Bookman* pictured Ferber “giggling in a corner” with Kathleen Norris, despite the fact that anybody acquainted with the sharp-tongued Ferber would know better than to accuse her of silliness. The criticism lobbed at Ferber often encompassed her looks, unmarried status, and lack of social graces as much as her books themselves.15

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15 Ferber was, by all accounts (even occasionally her own), rather unpleasant in manner. Gilbert’s occasionally resentful biography shows how Ferber’s renowned dry wit could sting when unleashed on the real-life people around her. She was financially independent from her teens, but had maintained significant trouble ties with her widowed mother and sister all her life in a combination of fierce independence and total deference that generated much anxiety for her and those close to her. Her feminism, which emerged in a time of relative quiet on the activism front, earned her many enemies, and was even occasionally wearying to her friends. Though Ferber insisted repeatedly that she didn’t regret not having married, she was frequently prevailed upon to explain her failure to conform to the expectations of a heteronormative society, given her family-focused books.
The problems of Ferber’s legacy exemplify the problems of the middlebrow. Her popularity, her anxiety about that popularity and film adaptations of her work, the gendered criticisms of her literary persona and derision for her books’ mode of distribution touch on all of its major facets. Since work on the middlebrow tends to take a broad view of mid-twentieth-century print culture rather than focus on individual careers or texts, Ferber hasn’t emerged as a single figure for extensive study within that framework; the current, growing body of scholarship on Ferber more commonly invokes “women’s culture” (Berlant), domesticity (Edmunds, Zink), Jewish studies (Batker, Shapiro), “class” defined more broadly (Haytock), or focuses on Ferber films (Smyth).

Still, scholarly interest in Ferber is growing; 2014 even saw a book-length study by Eliza McGraw, *Edna Ferber’s America*. Prompted by Ferber’s explicit interest in social justice, Ferber scholarship presently features contrasting approaches to the perhaps well-intentioned but often unfortunately executed racial themes in her work; because of Ferber’s previous neglect, even within feminist recovery movements, it’s tempting to be defensive of her. Lauren Berlant’s chapter on Ferber in *The Female Complaint* repudiates the blackface in *Show Boat*’s minstrel scenes; meanwhile, Donna Campbell briefly concedes *Cimarron*’s similarly “stereotypical representations of Native an African-American characters” (33) but ultimately finds that Ferber “represented race in ways that disrupt the status quo” (42). What Mollie Wilson called Ferber’s “vaudeville-era tolerance for ethnic stereotypes” (qtd. in McGraw 7) and Carol Batker characterized as Ferber’s depictions of nonwhite characters as “grossly racialized” J. E. Smyth argues was Ferber’s effort to be “the only important American author to create mixed-race
heroines who were active historical protagonist rather than passive, tragic mulattas or voiceless, vanishing Americans” (12).

I argue that Ferber’s simultaneous progressivism and regressivism are the direct result of the inherent contradictions in Ferber’s middlebrow mode of writing, which in produced a feminism startling in its directness, if insufficiently intersectional by current standards. Scrutiny of her work as a case study in print culture coupled with middle-distance readings of her novels productively illuminates the tensions in middlebrow literature’s dueling values: its pursuit of the artistic satisfaction in critique as well as popular appeal. Middlebrow scholarship offers a vocabulary by which we might discuss the micro- and macro-level tensions in Ferber’s work without overemphasizing either Ferber’s efforts at critique or her shortcomings as a proponent of political progress. Rather, this chapter shows that Ferber leverages the strategies common to the middlebrow—inattention to formal innovation, affinity for romance, and championing of the bootstrap model of upward mobility—to criticize and please the bourgeoisie simultaneously. Dissonance in Ferber’s reception thus replicates the duality in Ferber’s novel production which grows out of her commitment to providing middle-class readers both the comfort of aesthetic pleasure and a scolding reminder of the problematic histories—including the settler colonialism, slavery, patriarchy, and capitalism that brought US middle-class comfort about.

This chapter, then, has two parts. First, I contextualize Ferber’s place as a middlebrow writer in the mid-twentieth-century book industry by offering a brief history of her career arc and the conversations about her as a writer that circulated in print. For the trouble with Ferber was the trouble with the middlebrow at large: aesthetic and artistic risk-taking so calculated it
hardly seems like risk-taking at all. Publishers, authors, and tastemakers worked in tandem to define, destabilize, and redefine the criteria for quality literature which would amuse a broad public seeking a diverting way to spend its leisure time. Ferber and her work are situated at the nexus of this delicate cooperation; indeed, Ferber was often the standard by which its success (or failure) was measured. As the introduction mentions, the formidable Dwight Macdonald names Ferber on the first page of his notorious “Masscult and Midcult” (1960); in his equally inflammatory “By Cozzens Possessed,” he invokes Edna Ferber, not midcult, as a shorthand for middlebrow style. Macdonald’s definition of “midcult” as that which reminds one of Ferber the “notably untalented lady”—with Ferber’s supposed lack of talent yoked to her “lady”-hood as if they reinforce one another—falls within Jaime Harker’s rubric of “implicit gendering” (19) in middlebrow reading and writing. Neither “Masscult and Midcult” nor “By Cozzens Possessed” have anything to do with Ferber’s work itself, or even mention her at all beyond these early allusions. Rather, “you write like Edna Ferber” is merely an insult aimed at Ernest Hemingway, for what Macdonald sees as late-career missteps, and James Gould Cozzens, for his inherent mediocrity. As I will discuss in detail, positive reviews of Ferber’s work tended to include heavily gendered qualifiers, as reviewers were hesitant to align themselves with a certain type of fiction. When critics talked about Ferber, they were talking about the middlebrow, and vice versa.

The second part of this study then shows how such class- and gender-based anxieties, which saturate production and distribution of Ferber’s fiction, present themselves in several of her key texts in the form of particularly middlebrow versions of feminism and social criticism more broadly, with particular focus on her post-1930 novels, when her power in the book
industry was at its peak. Ferber most deftly integrates her competing goals for entertaining and instructing in her post-*Cimarron* novels, when her power in the book industry was at its peak: *American Beauty* (1931), *Come and Get It* (1935), *Saratoga Trunk* (1941), and *Giant* (1952). These four books, in which Ferber’s social criticism is at its most subtle and profound as well as most obvious and banal, aptly demonstrate both Ferber’s art and her project as a “chronicler of America” (as the *New York Times* obituary characterized her). Though Ferber implied that that it was a happy accident that each of her novels was a portrait of a different region of the US, she nonetheless insisted that her books’ “sound sociological basis” was purposeful (*PT* 170): “I can project myself into any age, environment, condition, situation, character or emotion that interests me deeply” Ferber boasted in her first autobiography (277). Thus Ferber’s stories are often told through white women, strangers in new regions with a keen ability to read people and places. Readers get a critical view of the region through their intercessor’s eyes, and especially its “working people . . . those who got the tough end of life” (170).

Like most middlebrow writers, Ferber offers little formal innovation. While she took enough thematic risks to saddle her with multiple libel lawsuits from the angry capitalists she satirized, her novels’ tidy resolutions undermine those gambles—an aspect of her writing she occasionally rued (*PT* 344). Yet when read in the context of the dissonance of Ferber’s literary persona, patterns emerge which make a form of close reading useful, and even crucial, though

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16 *So Big* and *Cimarron* also feature briefly here. *Dawn O’Hara* (1911) and *Fanny Herself* (1917) were more amateur efforts published with modest success by Stokes; in *The Girls*, Ferber was still an up-and-comer; *So Big* brought her the legitimizing power of the Pulitzer; *Show Boat* cemented her crossover success in theatre and film; *Cimarron* finally introduced America to the Ferber it would know and love for the majority of her career, and announced that she was here to stay. By *American Beauty*, then, Ferber’s place in the book industry was well-established, and we can begin to see some patterns emerging.

17 “Connecticut was hopping roaring mad” about *American Beauty* (*PT* 344) and Texas “scream[ed]” with “rage and anguish” at *Giant* (Prescott).
the object of inquiry is a career instead of a single text. By reading several of her novels as a group this way, we can synthesize her contradictory interests and crystallize the dualism that her reception replicates. Achieving middlebrow moderation in a novel required careful organization, the kind of strategic alternating between accessibility and uncompromising frankness which Ferber excelled at and her publishers and public most appreciated. This balance, however, didn’t always come easy. It’s the chief source of tension in her oeuvre as well as her middlebrow mode of writing, and the aesthetic compromises Ferber made in its pursuit may have contributed to her abrupt fall out of cultural memory.

1

“If you write with humor, with lightness, entertainingly, you’re not counted serious. If your writing is easy and pleasant for a great many readers, a phrase comes to be used on you—a phrase I’ve begun to hate with a deep, strong, almost nauseating hatred. I don’t even like to say it, the silly hybrid!”

Edna Ferber, on the term best-seller to Robert van Gelder

Before Ferber was the highest-paid writer on Doubleday’s list, she was a teenaged reporter for the Appleton Crescent with a reputation for her incisive style and relentless drive—or, her impertinence and manliness, depending on who you asked. She transitioned to short-story writing in the 1910s, but her early training would have lasting influence on her style. For Ferber, journalism and fiction may have differed only in that the cast of characters in fiction
were technically made up. Her narrator is always omniscient, observant and thorough yet concise; dialogue tends to appear in short, isolated patches where it aids or confirms the description in the prose; in neither mode of writing did she especially bother with the pretense of objectivity. The qualities that impressed her colleagues at the *Appleton Crescent* enough to keep her on despite her gender and scandalously young age proved to be widely appreciated when deployed in fiction. Ferber soon garnered national celebrity with her creation of Emma McChesney, her first smart-aleck female protagonist doing a traditionally male job, in a short-story series for *American Magazine* that famously captivated the attention even of President Theodore Roosevelt (“What are you going to do about Emma McChesney?” he asked during her audience with him [*PT* 196]). Her first major book would be a compilation of these stories, described by reviewers as “charming” and “as American as apple pie” (Herman), though critical enthusiasm would wane as she published two more extremely popular successors.¹⁸

Ferber would not remain an unthreatening lady writer of short stories. By the mid-1920s, Frank Nelson Doubleday was grooming her for long-term prominence as a novelist on his list. Where Ferber’s first publisher, Frederick A. Stokes, a longstanding house established during the Civil War era, was content to have her churn out reliable short story collections each year (her autobiographical novel *Fanny Herself* having been something of a commercial flop), Doubleday was a much younger company that pushed her to do more. Though she’d been working as a writer for well over a decade before she met him, Ferber credited Russell Doubleday (brother of Frank Nelson Doubleday, her point of contact at the house) with heralding the half-century

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¹⁸ Ferber’s early novella *Dawn O’Hara* preceded *Roast Beef, Medium* (1914). Her very first compilation was called *Buttered Side Down* (1912); unlike the Emma McChesney volumes, the stories it contained were discrete.
career she would go on to enjoy because of his encouragement in her writing of the Pulitzer Prize-winning *So Big* and its several kindred investigations of various pockets of American cultural life. Unsure of her manuscript, the title of which is derived from “the early and idiotic question invariably put to babies and answered by them, with infinite patience,” she had scrawled a note on *So Big* asking him not to publish it because “[n]othing happens” and “nobody . . . cares” about “a little truck farm south of Chicago” (*So Big* 3; *PT* 280). Doubleday, after responding warmly and with great enthusiasm, published it anyway. It sold well over a million and half copies, Ferber’s first major best-seller. Ferber hints that it was the power of the text that captivated the publisher as well as the public, relating that everyone who read it felt moved to weep: “I pictured the offices, damp with tears, the water mounting, mounting, like a scene out of Alice in Wonderland” (281).

Though she perhaps overestimates the originality of her text’s subject matter—considering, for example, that writers such as Sarah Orne Jewett and Willa Cather had long written about farmers’ beleaguered yet persevering wives—her nod to Doubleday suggests some awareness of her publisher’s role in finding her a market. As a publishing house, Doubleday was a product of a liminal moment in industry history; it was neither precisely of the 1920s generation nor of the post–civil war generation. Yet though it was established in 1899, 20 years before Tebbel’s so-called Golden Age, its narrative anticipates that of the houses of the 1920s boom: a young up-and-comer, Frank Nelson Doubleday, had a vision for a new direction in the publishing industry, and left the longstanding house in which he had been brought up (Scribner’s, in this case) to rent a room and hire a secretary of his own. Doubleday’s bottom line and prestige grew immediately and exponentially after it took a few chances on some new
authors who delivered on both counts time and again. Before Ferber, there was Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, and Theodore Dreiser: realism with enough quality to satisfy critics and enough accessibility to connect with a reliable repeat audience. Though his historical account lists Doubleday among the “old publishers,” Tebbel lists Doubleday among the chief forerunners of his Golden age. It’s fitting that Ferber, who I am arguing is the quintessential middlebrow figure, published with the house that in many ways was the model for the new generation houses that marked the era in publishing. Doubleday’s merger with Doran—its paycheck to Ferber among the chief concerns of the deal (Tebbel 112)—and the administrative changes that took place in 1927 further cement its ties to the new 1930s publishing.

Doubleday was unlike many of the 1920s houses such as Viking and Random house in that Frank Nelson Doubleday’s chief priority as a publisher was never purported to be aesthetic value. Doubleday had no mission statements about “books of permanent importance,” nor insignias with larger symbolic meaning imprinted on the intellectual property it distributed. When it came to book production, Doubleday’s claim to distinction was its pure-business approach. Effendi, as the founding proprietor came to be called (a nickname affectionately bestowed on Frank Nelson Doubleday—FND—by avowed Ferber fan Rudyard Kipling), spearheaded major innovations in book distribution and book selling, namely, mail-order book catalogs. For example, Doubleday was heavily involved in the Literary Guild, the Book-of-the-Month Club’s chief rival, and eventually bought it outright and continued to expand it, along with near a dozen other smaller reading groups. Mail-order distribution was designed to reach potential readers who “would never enter a bookstore,” whether because their town didn’t
have one or they were merely disinclined to visit it (Beckett 49). The catalog alone, however, would not suffice; the function of the Guild was to also help these readers decide what to buy, and why. The Guild performed the double operation of cultivating taste for a certain tier of fiction and then selling it to the market it created for itself. Indeed, Ferber was a major benefactor of this key innovation in book distribution, which brought her books to farms south of Chicago and eventually became the norm for circulating middlebrow literature. Ferber saved a clipping of one review which asserts, “news of a new novel by Edna Ferber means a great deal to a public which is immeasurably bigger than the usual book world” (Heinemann). Indeed, Parker’s comparison of her books to trinkets and collectibles, “antiques you might find in Grand Rapids,” nods to the manner by which Ferber’s readers obtained her works. This mode of distribution was the perfect opportunity for Ferber: while Doubleday wanted to sell books to these customers, the sort that “nobody cares” about, at a discount in far-flung places across the country, Ferber wanted to write about them, and her journalist’s voice allowed her to do so in ways they would find compelling and authentic.

This quality in Ferber, which made her a Doubleday darling but also degraded her status to mail-order-book writer, paradoxically also separates her from the genre writer. Ferber

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19 Doubleday wasn’t the first or only publisher to use mail order, but he perfected the system and deployed it most effectively. Though mail order services and the book clubs that went with them purported to guide the public in its selection of books, to teach their members how to identify books of quality, they were received by some critics under a cloud of suspicion due to their close ties with the publishers; for example, as the Literary Guild became more and more obviously a Doubleday marketing mechanism, it lost credibility and membership. See Janice Radway, *A Feeling for Books*.

20 Indeed, many people found Ferber’s stories so authentic that they wrote to her and asked if she had somehow based her novel on them or their family’s lineage (PT 389). One woman with the same surname as the fictional family in *American Beauty*, astonished by the accuracy with which Ferber captured her family’s character, wrote to Ferber in 1931, asking “[a]re you an Oakes?” and promising to “readily forgive [her] for saying the Oakes nose is a hooked nose” if she confirms that *American Beauty* was based on her family. Mrs. R. Lee Wright, Letter to Edna Ferber, 23 Nov. 1931, Edna Ferber Papers, Box 5 Folder 11, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI.
wasn’t formula fiction in the dime novel sense, and her rate of production wasn’t even close that of some of her older contemporaries such as Kathleen Norris. Meticulously researched, her novels could not be produced in a year. Yet her method to writing novels was fairly predictable, and reliable for her distributors. “Reliable” is a key word here: advertising copy for her new volumes spun this formula as quality booksellers could count on. Though Doubleday didn’t share Viking’s commitment to artisanship in its business, Ferber novels were bound with care, featuring gold leaf details, embossed spines, illustrations by acclaimed artists, and modern, sans-serif color fonts on the title pages. Mail order thus got Ferber’s novels perched attractively on middle-class shelves, and the praise of serious critics and reviewers from “the usual book world” ensured their top priority in advertising and editorial space in the country’s largest newspapers and magazines. Inevitably, Ferber herself became a culture-industry consumable, a literary celebrity whose health or whose new apartment interested outlets like the New York Times.21

Yet Ferber’s very ubiquity was key to her degradation, according to her; she occasionally expressed bitterness that her widespread commercial success wouldn’t guarantee her a transcending legacy. “‘[B]est seller’ . . . is a hateful, slurring, derogatory phrase” she complained, “which means out today, gone tomorrow” —as if, on some level, Ferber feared Prescott’s prediction that her work, though beloved in its day, wouldn’t be remembered after she was gone. “I’ve never told anyone, not one soul,” Ferber told the New York Times, “what a man said of my work in a letter . . . that it was probable that I would not be appreciated in my

21 “Edna Ferber Leases Park Avenue Suite” 18 Dec 1940; “Edna Ferber Is Improved” 9 Jan 1949
country and in my time. The man who said that was Rudyard Kipling, and his letter is in the
Doubleday, Doran offices” (Interview by van Gelder).\textsuperscript{22} Ferber thus invokes Kipling’s authority
to counteract the liability that came with mass appeal, which signaled the approval of
populations whose judgment, according to reigning tastemakers, was suspect.

One such tastemaker, and a giant among them, who lamented that Ferber “has been too
popular” was Henry Seidel Canby. Canby might have been Ferber’s greatest advocate, since,
unlike some of his peers, he was not at all predisposed to dismiss the middlebrow. Indeed, he
was in some ways a key spokesman for it, as a founding board member of the Book-of-the-
Month Club (Radway 188) and editor of the \textit{Saturday Review of Literature} (Hutner 15). Yet when
Canby pondered Ferber’s talent directly alongside that of William Faulkner, the contemporary
whose name and “universality” would be invoked contrastingly at her funeral and in whose
shadow she often dwelt, he found her wanting. A 1931 edition of the \textit{Saturday Review of
Literature} features side-by-side reviews of Faulkner and Ferber’s most recent works (a collection
of stories called \textit{These Thirteen} for Faulkner, \textit{American Beauty} for Ferber) a coincidence of
occasion that, taken together, reads as a primer on the state of American fiction and the
contrasting values of these two types of novelists.

Faulkner, Canby claims grandly (though characteristically irritated with Faulkner’s
preoccupation with “pornography”), is “a genuine and really important creative talent in the
field of American literature” (“A Collection”). Ferber, meanwhile, in a piece titled “Gusto vs.
Art,” is encouraged to “hide away from \textit{The Ladies Home Journal},” to distance herself from “the

\textsuperscript{22} According to her niece Julie Gilbert, Kipling’s praise of Ferber was in fact “twice told” (305); Kipling’s “dogged”
careless millions” who read her books in order to “lift her reality into that higher and finer stage in which it becomes a creative element in the true but unreal world of the finest fiction” (“Gusto”). Faulkner is thus a master and innovator; Ferber, a fledgling still learning her craft who must be safeguarded from writing to popular taste—invoked here via middle-class “ladies’” magazines. Amongst this advice, however, Canby offers an important hypothesis for Ferber’s success, and the middlebrow more broadly:

Her art is naturally primitive and objective, slap-dashed in broad strokes, with little thought of a third dimension in her composing. But her craftsmanship has become too sophisticated and tricky. She dangles stock characters and stock situations before the door of the museum in which she has collected so much that is novel and vivid and well-observed in American life. . . . External reality, when once you learn to capture it, is a bait for any public; but it requires eminent self-control not to play with it, not to use it to make trite characters and stock situations sure-fire situations for public taste.

By “tricky,” Canby means that Ferber is “a showman for her novel, playing up romance and sentiment, writing by climaxes, twisting and inverting the order of her narrative so that her goods may be displayed” to middle-class consumers “who have to be tricked into reading” it. Canby seems to want Ferber to choose: does she wish to edify or delight, “gusto” or “art”? Her attempt to do both has left the bourgeoisie no smarter and failed to dazzle serious culture critics.

Ferber’s own assessment of her reception was strikingly similar to Canby’s—perhaps the only reviewer to ever call her “too sophisticated”—and aligns with Parker’s estimation that her “sane observations” “passed by unnoticed.” In this, her “Friend” White sold her short when he
claimed “she rarely has an agenda.” As Ferber repeatedly emphasized to everyone who would listen, her immediate characters and micro-level plots were meant to stand in for a larger portion of America. Donna Campbell distills Ferber’s carefully cultivated “person[a] of insider and outsider”: for Campbell, Ferber posits a “deep complicity and sense of identification between herself and America, which she saw as a ‘Jew among the nations,’” cultivating an ethos of one with “native knowledge that assured the authenticity of her scenes.” Those scenes are narrated, however, through the perspectives of outsiders, allowing her to “interrogat[e] the conventions of the genre in which [she] wrote” and criticize her own characters even as she drew them up (26). Campbell’s reading of Cimarron suggests that Ferber was a satirist before she was a sentimentalist. According to Ferber’s interpretation of that novel’s reception, recorded in her published autobiography as well as unpublished letters, readers and reviewers misunderstood the book’s “ruthless purpose” completely.

For Ferber, widespread misunderstanding of her fiction arises not because her writing is “cheap” or unremarkable, as her critics asserted. Rather, in her estimation, the trouble was that she was just too good for everyone. She was too good of a writer not to sell novels: after all, her manuscripts captured the hearts of even the most business-oriented of publishers, and as she asserted to a reviewer, “there’s no point in writing if you can’t sell your stuff” (Rev. of Great Son 96).23 Yet she was also too good, according to some criterion of her own, for certain types of writing-for-hire, like advertising copy for film adaptations (Gilbert 76), screenwriting (Schatz ix), and war propaganda (PT 232). Finally, and most embitteringly, Ferber was too good for her

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23 The review is overall fairly unflattering toward Ferber’s (largely panned) Great Son; it is, of course, careful to note that Ferber is “still single” at the age of 57. Smyth also cites this review on page 10 of Edna Ferber’s Hollywood.
adoring public to truly grasp her vision. *Cimarron*, the 1929 novel that proved that her Pulitzer acclaim was not a fluke, but merely a beginning of a long trajectory, was, in her words, a “malevolent picture” of “American womanhood” in Oklahoma (*PT* 339), though “only about nine people knew what I was driving at” (qtd. in Gilbert 313). Her gift for clever locutions and vivid description was too distracting, both for the pompous reviewers who condescended to her in gendered codes as well as the general interest reader who loved her. Yet, in defiance of Canby’s encouragement, she also had no interest in writing more like Faulkner, nor was she impressed by writers like him, for “if a bore is windy enough and repetitious enough he usually is mistaken for a brainy fellow” (170). What Canby interprets as “tricking” readers into liking her books Ferber casts as authorial multitasking, edifying her readers while maintaining a principled stance against boring them. According to Ferber, what good was cleverness without liveliness or interest, and why shouldn’t “malevolent pictures of American womanhood” in various pockets of the US be emotionally captivating as well as intellectually challenging?

Perhaps this is why, however wealthy and powerful she would become, Ferber would always consider herself an underdog. Some scholars have speculated that Ferber was “inordinately sensitive to adverse criticism” (Shapira 18); indeed, it seems that she would have to internalize negative criticism to an unreasonable degree if she were still to consider herself an disadvantaged after all of her success. Furthermore, Gilbert bolsters such speculation in her 1974 biography of her famous aunt when she suggests Ferber’s vanity yielded a low tolerance for dissent. Yet, in grappling with the duality in reviews and reception of her work, Ferber concluded that being misunderstood was paradoxically a sign that her work had achieved its purpose. In a musing on “the first rules of writing,” she recalls her tenure as the Appleton
Crescent’s first-ever female reporter as the first time she had been thought “strange,” “offensive,” and “a freak” by a large audience (PT 103), finding a sort of rebellious validation in these ventriloquized remarks and drawing parallels between them and the sexist, anti-Semitic hate mail she would receive throughout her life. Ferber thus ascribes to some extent to the notion that one has to be offensive in order to write respectably, just as one has to be exceedingly special to appreciate the ordinary. Marginalized as she often found herself because of her ethnicity, gender, and unapologetic disinterest in matrimony, Ferber felt herself just enough of a “freak” to be perfectly poised for this kind of work. Though heavily invested in the middle-class fantasy of the American dream, Ferber made it her life’s work to investigate the American social contract’s weaknesses, especially where it failed women, the poor, and/or racialized others. For Ferber, who frequently called America “the Jew among the nations” (PT 13), the most privileged of Americans weren’t as much its heart and soul as they supposed. Her work catalogues a series of attempts to draw out American failures as well as its resilience; as she put it, her books “had power they had theme they had protest” (KM 125).

Yet, in our haste to do justice to the “ruthless” social criticism embedded in Ferber’s work and foreground the efficacy of her novels of “protest,” it would be a mistake to completely set aside Ferber’s equally vocal protectiveness of her novel’s readability, or to ignore the critical sacrifices she made in favor of genre conventionality and the satisfaction in uplifting resolutions. For while the archival evidence shows that Ferber was indeed frustrated with contemporaneous interpretations of her books, it also shows Ferber’s equal pride in her ability

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24 Encouraging her, for example, to “stay in the ghetto where she came from” (PT 340).
25 For more on this theme, see Shapira, and Shapiro, “Edna Ferber: Jewish American Feminist.”
to draw characters out of her imagination that “have taken on such proportions of reality” that her readers “accept” them as “human beings with three dimensions who walk talk breathe live suffer exult die, much as the reader has done or will do” (KM 162). Thus Ferber’s literary project was neither exclusively critical nor exclusively commercial; rather, it was precisely about the tension between the two.

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Taken together, Ferber’s novels form what she called a “kaleidoscopic” US made up of smaller groups and regions (KM 9). Herself a Hungarian-Jewish woman born in Kalamazoo, Michigan, Ferber trained her journalist’s eye on various nonurban regions of America, especially those heavily populated with ethnic white immigrants. In each novel, one central family lineage stands in for a regional type; each has an argument or a critique to offer, and the family’s fate in each ultimately show how to recuperate whatever is valuable about that group or region’s interpretation of the American experiment. Though Ferber took on such polarizing topics as settler colonialism and monopoly capitalism, she kept her shrewdest criticisms confined to the subtext. Though comfortable with unsubtlety in her individual characters—a vivid description of Clio Dulaine in Saratoga Trunk looking “beautiful and queenly,” with eyes “[b]ig and black and soft, and what they miss you could put in your own eye,” supposedly comes from a background character, though it reads suspiciously like the voice of the novelist herself—Ferber made her reader work for the weightier messages, to attend to or disregard them at will.
Flashes of humanity, and even interiority, are granted to minor, marginalized characters who suffer the collateral damage wrought by the ambition of the novels’ more privileged subjects, but they quickly fade into the background, subordinated to the central plot events concerning the upwardly mobile protagonists. In *Come and Get It*, for example, we follow spinster stenographer Josie Sinnott, fired abruptly after twenty years’ service by the new heir of the paper mill company she worked for, as she takes up her new position as a menial office girl; we are invited to pity the deterioration of the working-class woman’s dignity—her broken heart, newly “yellow-tinge[d]” face, and swiftly graying hair—in a brief two paragraphs of the 500-plus page tome. In *Giant*, Leslie Benedict (née Lynnton) “long[s] to ask” third-generation *vanquero* Angel Obregon what her husband’s thriving ranch pays him in wages after viewing his dismal living conditions, clearly suspicious that the amount is inhumane. But she stops herself because “this would be disloyal” to the Benedicts, and drops it (169); so, too, does *Giant* lose track of the Obregons. Through careful management of her micro-level plots and the intimate relations of her individual characters, Ferber gave her novels their “sound sociological basis,” their “certain note of rebellion against the idle luxurious world,” without turning reader attention away from the delights of the main characters’ romantic arc—what she called the “stories’ readability” (*PT* 170).

Ferber’s texts strove for a certain rapport with their presumably middlebrow readers; though there was much she left opaque, in other ways she seems to consciously be trying to guide readers through certain aspects of her books in terms she thought would be familiar to them. For example, the design and structure of the kinds of big-ticket items that marked prosperity in middle-class American society, such as houses, feature prominently in Ferber’s
fiction. The Benedicts’ house in *Giant* is as senselessly, wastefully massive as everything else wealthy cattle ranchers own in Texas; it’s repeatedly contrasted with the “flimsy” shacks of the barrios where the domestic and ranch employees live (21). Clio Dulaine surveys the decay of her mother’s old house in New Orleans with dismay; by restoring it—painting the outside, affixing some shutters, repairing the furniture, and scrubbing away the twenty-year-old bloodstain of her murdered father from the carpet—Clio finds closure for her mother and herself.

*American Beauty*, a novel about a house, opens with one of Ferber’s favorite images: a young, capable white woman, deftly maneuvering a speeding automobile around the countryside, representing both the ingenuity and the excess of America, and providing Ferber the opportunity to overtly place her female protagonist in a literal driver’s seat. “Candy Baldwin drove with that relaxed insolence which marks the expert” (2) around the familiar farms of her father’s home region, her tone strangely soothing as she condemns him and his lineage for its violent seizure of the land he remembers so fondly. Her father True, though a successful capitalist who overcame childhood poverty, can only “uncoil” “like a weary and ageless reptile” in the passenger seat (2). True isn’t the slightest bit intimidating to Candace, for like the dilapidated, centuries-old houses that “shrink in withered dismay from the vulgar red stare of gas filling stations,” the old man is “swiftly deteriorating.” Both house and man are beaten as they have fallen out of favor with the modern generation.

While, in the case of *American Beauty*, houses and cars are a point of commonality among Ferber, her characters, and her readers, scenes set outside of middle-class wealth require translation, as in *Giant*, Ferber’s exposé of the material excess and anti-Mexican racism of
Texas—which reviewer John Barkham gushingly proclaimed superior to “anything our material culture has ever produced.” Middle-class, liberal-arts-educated Virginian Leslie, having been whisked away to Texas by her near-stranger of a new husband, tries to act as the voice of liberal reason in an antiquated, patriarchal, and explicitly racist community; the narrative assumes some reader identification with her position, but Ferber must explain the crooked Texas capitalists more thoroughly in order to satirize and criticize them. Leslie’s new environment is introduced by the “celestial traffic” of private airplanes “glittering” overhead on their way to Jett Rink’s party, and in a rare moment of mild formal experimentation, Ferber essays a stream of consciousness:

biggest airport in the Southwest . . . private pre-opening celebration . . . two thousand invited guests . . . magnificent banquet in the Grand Concrouse . . . most important citizens . . . champagne . . . millions . . . first Texas billionaire . . . orchids . . . caviar flown from New York . . . zillions . . . lobster flown from Maine . . . millions . . . oil . . .

strictly private . . . millions . . .

biggestmillionsbiggestbillionsbiggesttrillionsbiggestzillions . . . (11)

Ferber intuits that this is how the middle class understands the very rich: as silver glints overhead, as vague phrases they overhear in bits and pieces, at once overwhelming and irrelevant to them. Similarly, when a later passage makes a great fuss about Mott Snyth’s playful pun on a French word, Ferber takes great pains to ensure readers’ comprehension by providing, over several pages of dialogue, extensive clues for the French word’s English translation, making some aesthetic sacrifices in the process. “He pronounced the abbreviation of her name so that it became a French noun unflattering to her figure” (15), the narrator
laboriously explains, interrupting the text’s otherwise quick pace. “Mott Snyth, don’t you go
calling me Vash, like that, front of company,” demands Vashti Snyth, to end the couple’s half-
serious bickering match. Then, she continues, obviously for the unknowing reader’s benefit,
“You and I ain’t the only two in Texas know the French for cow” (16). The content of Mrs.
Snyth’s warning that the French language isn’t the privileged knowledge of an elite (and, it’s
suggested, regional) few starkly contrasts with the paratextual evidence that the line itself is
only there to provide a necessary vocabulary lesson to its reader.

What advertising copy in Publisher’s Weekly framed as Ferber’s signature style might also
be called predictability, in that the local (usually love) plots of Ferber’s works tend to follow
roughly similar lines. Ferber’s 1963 autobiography, A Kind of Magic (which, unlike her first, was
neither eagerly anticipated nor terribly well-received) has tucked in its third chapter a perhaps-
unintentional summary of the basic plot of nearly every novel Ferber ever wrote:

I once knew a woman who fell in love with a drunkard. Today a victim of this
illness is more tactfully and technically termed an alcoholic. This man was charming,
drunk or sober; strikingly handsome, intelligent, and absolutely no good. She knew this
and naturally he knew it; and certainly all her friends and his knew it. They rallied to
prevent her marrying him.

“Look dear,” they said, “we know he’s fascinating and brilliant and of course
he’s terrifically good-looking, but he’s—well, forgive me darling, but face it—he’s a
drunk.”

“I’ll cure him.”

51
“You know perfectly well he’s tried everything[. . .] He’ll ruin your life just as his is already ruined.”

“I love him.”

“Why can’t you love Martin or Giles or Greg? They’re such nice sane boys and crazy about you.”

“I love him.”

So she married him. Her friends were right and she was right. She loved him, she wrestled with the hopeless situation for years, she tended him, enriched his life and it was like pouring Chanel Number 5 into the Ganges. So, having tried and failed (see adage re Loved and Lost) she left him and they both lived more or less happily apart forever after. (37)

Perhaps most instructive for reading Ferber’s work is her sarcastic interjection “(see adage re Loved and Lost).” The bemused tone gently mocks the well-worn clichés of storytelling as well as the naiveté involved in proclaiming oneself having a learned a life lesson. As a cliché, the “adage re Loved and Lost” is as middlebrow as it gets: a Tennyson reference, just the kind of canonical touchstone which an educated, middle-class reader might have at the ready. Yet the phrase accurately signposts the true direction of the story—the woman really did love, and lose, and learn from it, and go on to a state of slightly qualified “happily . . . forever after.” This woman’s story can be captured in a bromide, Ferber suggests, because people’s lives follow comfortable patterns, tethered to the same old stories, because that’s how they like them. The most resonant realism, for Ferber, contains an element of the cliché, and it retreads the same well-worn themes, because that’s how people choose to order their lives.
Similar asides appear throughout Ferber’s fiction, sometimes deployed to provide insight into a character, as in Giant when Ferber uses the phrase “like those in a Grade B movie” to describe the bowed legs of self-conscious cowboy Mott Snyth (8). Snyth is elsewhere marked by his awkward use of thesaurus words and constant need to prove his worth; readers later learn the precariousness of his place among the rich Texas cattle-holders, as a menial worker who acquired his ranch by marriage to the owner’s daughter. So the narrative suggests not that the cheap “Grade B movie” accurately imitates life in the case of Mott Snyth, but rather that Mott Snyth has taken his cues from such sources to conceive his life. In American Beauty, similar asides are used more powerfully and with more complexity. For instance, Candace refers very early in the novel to “what the dreary writers call the Soil” (4-5), which turns out to be the novel’s actual subject. Though only a “dreary writer” romanticizes land, according to Candace, the writer of American Beauty fixates on one particular patch of land, the house that gets built on it, who builds it, and who tears it down. With a cheeky acknowledgement of the cliché nature of her own subject matter, Ferber signals that she intends to trouble her romance even as she spins it. Those who understand the land and its fraught history are the heroes of the tale—Temmie Olzsak, her son Orrange, and, to a lesser extent, Candace. The characters who idealize it without considering its past, by contrast—Candace’s millionaire father True, Temmie’s obstinate husband Ondy, the eighteenth-century Captain Orrange who stole the land in the first place—are old and old-fashioned, “dreary” obstacles to real progress, even though their whims paradoxically generate the major events of the story.

Thus Ferber guides her readers through her novels, helping them comprehend the larger message of her novels within the local plots, which invariably center on a “woman in love with
a drunkard,” a man in some wayward form or another: a clever, energetic female protagonist with an unintelligent male boss, a shiftless son, a selfish husband whose sensitivities are unaroused by beauty or art. A Ferber heroine is independent, even defiant. Clio Dulaine of Saratoga Trunk, for example, distinguishes herself amongst snobby society women unfavorably disposed toward her by taking a brisk morning walk—perhaps an allusion to Elizabeth Bennett. And she is likely to be married to someone she shouldn’t be, someone “handsome” but “absolutely no good”—too uncurious, unattuned to the subtle beauty of nature or art to be her intellectual or spiritual equal. In Clio Maroon née Dulaine’s example, bystanders gossip about her control over her powerful husband, tittering at the way she subtly pinches him to correct his uncouth behavior in public. As one critic complained, Ferber “seems to feel men are only excess baggage in her tidy little feministic world. Thus in her books, without exception, women are the builders, men are picturesque—but really useless” (Nugent).

Though Ferber had little patience for “feminism” as such, as her earlier short stories evince with their mocking portrayal of suffragettes as idle rich women seeking excuses to host luncheons,26 the indignant critic identifies an undeniable corrective thrust in Ferber’s plots, the morals of which were always predicated by the fall of a patriarch and triumph—if not fully realized, at least gestured toward and hoped for—of the ideals of the inevitably savvier matriarch. Pervus DeJong’s death in So Big leaves Selina free to modernize his primitive approach to running their farm with wildly successful results; Ondy Olszak’s death, combined with True Baldwin’s frailty of health, in American Beauty allows Orrange Olszak and Candace

26 See, for example, the hopelessly daft women of “the movement” in Roast Beef, Medium, who make themselves ridiculous when they attempt to life-coach factory women.
Baldwin to embark on a fresh start. *Come and Get It*’s Lotta outlives two generations of suitors, to her great relief: middle-aged Barney dies in a freak accident, freeing her to marry his son Bernie, a bore (and a boor) whose funeral Lotta also eventually attends, looking “too marvelous in black” (502). *Giant* chronicles disaster after disaster for its main male character, until the final paragraphs bring hope in the form of his demise: Bick Benedict moans “Things are . . . kind of slipping from under me” and that he’s “a failure”; Leslie counters that his failure makes possible a better future for their children, that “after a hundred years it looks as if the Benedict family is going to be a real success at last” (447). Thus in Ferber’s fiction, husbands and fathers embody the core obstacles to be overcome by those closest to them. In so doing, each individual family will likewise fulfill the task of the new generations of America more broadly: to rectify the damage wrought by its predecessors.

*American Beauty*, in particular, wastes no time simultaneously introducing a problematic patriarch and the thorny piece of American history it takes on. Cowed by illness and general obsolescence, and horrified at the Polish immigrant women he can see laboring in farm fields which used to belong to his friends and neighbors, True Baldwin fitfully lectures his daughter Candace on the virtues of his early rural life. His conviction that women’s labor should be invisible and done in their homes is couched in concern for their safety, as he disdains those he sees as ethnic and religious outsiders: “What right have [these Polacks] got in New England, anyway?” Candace responds warmly to her father’s tantrum, calling him “darling” telling him to “relax”: “But, dear, the Poles must have paid their hard-earned dollars for [their farms]. And anyway, when you come right down to it, how did you precious Puritans get your land? Grabbed it from the Indians, that’s how. . . . Tell you what I think, Dad: I think those early New
Englanders hated New England” (4-5). Candace skillfully manipulates True, needling him with her flippant progressivism and thereby renewing his interest in New England so that he might be persuaded to undertake a restoration project in the region. The novel’s critique of US settler-colonialism is thus articulated within an intimate exchange that models how a sensitive, liberal-minded woman of the new generation might redress the sins of whatever wayward patriarch preceded her: by telling him exactly what he doesn’t want to hear in ever more soothing tones, until he can be convinced to fork over the resources she needs and he controls. Though it’s unlikely that True fully grasps the larger lesson Candace tries to teach him in their opening conversation, he does eventually agree to bankroll the rejuvenation of one particular patch of land with a thorny history—indeed, by the end of the novel, he is acting as if the project was his idea all along.

If Ferber is the single largest-looming figure in middlebrow literature, as I have been arguing that she is, *American Beauty* is the single novel of hers that perhaps best represents what Ferber most cared about and excelled at, though others were much more popular. *American Beauty* centers on a centuries-old house in New England and the first and last generations of the family that was born and raised in it, from Captain Orrange Oakes, who would commission the building of the house by slave labor, to Orrange Olszak, who would commission its tearing down by a young woman architect (Candace), herself the daughter of a neighbor of the estate (True). The title, taken from a description of the house’s “uniquely American beauty,” articulates Ferber’s muse in two words. Yet, true to Ferber’s commitment to social criticism, the title is ironic, too, in that the house’s American beauty is brought about only through the ugly exploitation of labor, in both its physical construction and domestic maintenance. The house,
repeatedly described as “the most beautiful in America,” along with everything in it, no matter how mundane (“the most beautiful knocker in America”; “the most beautiful fanlight in America”) is physically embedded in America, “made of the bricks shaped from the very earth on which it stood, the wood in it was hewn from the forest’s timbers, the gigantic foundation stones were wrenched out of the soil or torn from its ledges” (41). The “very earth,” however, was ill-gotten, swindled from the Weantinock Indians who used to dwell there; the hewing, wrenching, and tearing were “herculean” feats performed by slave labor (42). We are told that one slave was named Esau, though he is only afforded two sentences of the story; Ferber wants readers to think of the “Negro slaves” as people with names, but not to dwell on them to the point that they get distracted from the romantic story of the house. As Ferber tries to captivate us with the story of the Oakes and the house that went with them, she also wants to occasionally remind us that “uniquely American beauty,” though indeed impressive, is fabricated through theft and destruction. By the end of American Beauty, Candace and Orrange Olzsak—she of a formerly poor Anglo- lineage and he of mixed Puritan and immigrant blood, for Ferber the very picture of a resilient American generation—tear down the walls of “the most beautiful house in America” with the intention of starting fresh, using their vision and True’s wallet.

Ferber later regretted the “false” and “sentimental” ending to American Beauty (PT 344), but restoration of order, the reestablishing of harmony, and renewing hope for the next generation are key to the satisfying endings in all Ferber stories. After spending her text convincing her readers of all that is unsavory about a particular portion of the American scene, Ferber’s novels end with confidence that the new generation can atone for the old. Candace and
Orrange will restore the farm to its former glory—though there is no trace of the Weantinock Indians left, the disappearance of the previous generation of Oakes settlers and the young people’s respect for the land’s history and sensitivity to the nuances of its “American beauty” are enough to constitute a recuperation as far as American Beauty is concerned. Likewise, in Giant’s final lines, the “success” Leslie envisions for the next generation of Benedicts is to be brought about by her son Jordan’s pursuit of a happy life for himself, benefitting from the resources of his wealthy father but cognizant of the collateral damage wrought by that wealth’s accumulation. Thanks to Leslie’s liberal, temperate influence, Jordan becomes an altruistic physician instead of landowner like his father; what’s more, Leslie sees his son by his Mexican wife Juana (whose racist grandfather calls him a “cholo”) as a uniquely American symbol of the inevitable future reconciliation of the poor and prosperous, the racially privileged and the oppressed (445). Though characters like Angel Obregon and his wife remain in devastating poverty, the mere existence of Jordan and Juana’s offspring offers hope that, as families and individuals become more heterogeneous, society will come around in favor of tolerance.

Keeping the more-progressive future Benedicts in the foreground and allowing the notion of a living wage for the present Obregons to fade into the background renders Giant’s ending sufficiently optimistic for Ferber’s purpose.

Even in Saratoga Trunk and Come and Get It, though progress is less far along, offer hope for a heretofore unrealized future. Clint Maroon argues that he and Clio “make peace with our conscience” regarding their sometimes-unethical path to extreme wealth and power by using their money to fund “museums and paintings and libraries” in Saratoga Trunk. In his attempt to unburden himself to a younger generation through a throng of reporters, Clint predicts, “We’re
getting along toward a real democracy now,” that once there is “no such thing as a multi-millionaire in America,” “[t]hese will be known as the good new days and those were the bad old days,” (350). “You’ll live to see it but I won’t,” he intones. The previous century of “grabbers” would soon give way to a new redistribution of wealth, but when that happens, it will be thanks in part to the success of such “grabbers” in “streamlining” education and government (351). In *Come and Get It*, healing to the intertwined Glasgow and Bostrom family lines comes in the form of the analogous toppling of a beloved pine tree as well as Lotta’s perception of the value of her wealth in the context of the Depression (not explicitly mentioned, but ever-present).

These restorative conclusions could perhaps be termed “feministic” in that they are predicated on the destruction of a patriarch, but Ferber’s feminism has more layers than that; the dead-patriarch trope is less a fantasy setting for the advancement of women than it is an exposure of the ways in which the heterosexual contract fails women who don’t outlive their husbands or fathers. In this respect, Ferber’s fiction differs from her anecdote in *A Kind of Magic*, for women rarely live “happily . . . forever after.” Though Ferber’s heroines are always innately gifted with some transcendent wisdom, or quickness of mind, they often wind up imbricated in, and even an accomplice to, the failures of the patriarchs they attach themselves to. Each heroine’s limits are self-imposed, her maneuverings to improve her husband in a humanistic sense hampered by her unwillingness to sacrifice the security of his affection. In *Saratoga Trunk*, which claims that “[c]ertain wise ones among the fraternity said it was Mrs. Maroon who really ran the show,” Clio decides to hold her tongue and let her husband Clint pontificate about their early life as con artists for a roomful of reporters; her “inner secret” (7) and “searching eyes”
express her restraint in letting him lecture, despite her discomfort with his revealing speech.

More revealingly, in *American Beauty*, Orrange Olszak, though educated only through his mother’s efforts in defiance of his father’s protestations, and having inherited from her alone his sensitivity and deep appreciation for the history of the farm where he was raised, is shocked that his mother is only 52 at her death, for “he had always thought her a very old woman.” Temmie Olszak, who dies at the kitchen table which was the site of so much of her labor, looks decades older than her husband, worn down by her endless tiptoeing around his stubbornness and temper (which Ferber constantly attributes to his Polish ethnicity), cooking only his favorite foods, and physically standing between him and little Orrange when he tries to “cuff” him (246). Orrange was ignorant of the version of his mother who had arrived at the magnificent Oakes house as a young orphan, a vibrant force for positive change in the otherwise oppressive atmosphere of the failing estate, undeterred by her guardian aunt’s cruelty toward her. Hopeful about the possibilities for the restoration of her family home’s former glory, young Temmie is likewise invested in rectifying the damages wrought by its greed. The confluence of these desires generates Temmie’s sensitivity toward the much-abused Polish farmhand Ondy Olszack, and their eventual matrimony. By marrying Ondy, Temmie simultaneously restores an Oakes matriarch to the house’s master bedroom and reaches out to those disenfranchised by Oakes carelessness. But, as Temmie’s weariness—the chief characteristic her son would remember her by—attests, her attempt to hold all of her competing interests together takes a

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27 Edmunds has more on Temmie in her chapter “Freaked: Eastern European Immigration and the ‘American Home’ in Edna Ferber’s *American Beauty*” in *Grotesque Relations*. 
toll, and her early death left her dreams of restoration and harmony unrealized until her son
and Candace were able to take up the project.

Unlike Temmie, who handled Ondy’s temper with kid gloves, Giant’s Leslie vocally
defies Bick and his colleagues, calling them “cave-men,” mocking their inflated perceptions of
their own “massive brains” in a rousing speech (308). She even demands physical removal from
the ostentatious house that so repulses her, moving the Benedicts’ day-to-day domestic life to
the more reasonably luxurious guest house and leaving the mansion to loom nearby like a
mausoleum of past Benedict capitalists. When Bick asks her, “When the hell are you going to
settle down and behave like everybody else?” she responds, holding a history book on the
Spanish land grants which preceded the Benedict dominance over Texas land in front of her like
a shield, “Never” (313). But she capitulates immediately when he threatens to hit her and
commands, “Get back into bed.” Moments later, she attempts to reengage him in conversation,
only to find him in an unconscious state of sleep, totally inaccessible to her. Her defeat in this
scene colors her approach to him for the remainder of the novel, when readers learn that her
reputation for chic aloofness among her acquaintances actually results from her constant
repression of the disgust and unease she feels in her surroundings. An incident near the end of
the novel reveals the extent of the deterioration of the once-vivacious Leslie’s morale. While
waiting for service at a diner with her daughter Luz, daughter-in-law Juana, and grandson,
Leslie and her company are removed by the proprietor, who even punitively shoves the little
boy to emphasize his point: “We don’t serve Mexicans here.” Where newlywed Leslie, who
once passionately exclaimed to her husband’s associate that Texas’s Mexican families are “more
American than you are,” might have protested such a gross display of racism, middle-aged
Leslie fears her husband’s temper and begs Luz and Juana to conceal the event from Bick until after a sensitive party is over, effectively silencing Juana to spare Bick distress.

Ferber’s feminist argument thus goes beyond the elevation of talented individual women characters above the comparatively lackluster men in their lives, to a continuous critique of patriarchy and marriage as systems that impact both men and women, which she projects future generations will have the capacity to revise. As Rozia maliciously burns Temmie’s cherished antique Oakes finery in *American Beauty*, Clio burns her mother’s furniture in *Saratoga Trunk*, and Lotta’s future in-laws become the gruesome casualties of their yacht’s combustion, so too, Ferber argues, will the women of the younger generations watch previous generation’s most precious institutions incinerate before rebuilding. Yet while each of these stories ends with some restoration of harmony, and though the women characters are its catalysts instead of obstacles, they are nonetheless sacrificed in equal measure with their male counterparts along the way. By ignoring their impulses to agitate for dramatic social change in favor of a strategic, intimate approach to reform which they hoped would better preserve their immediate family harmony, Ferber protagonists fall short of the final push to an unambiguously happy ending; so too do Ferber’s books fail their feminist protagonists. As Karie speculates to Lotta in *Come and Get It*, “I guess it turns out your ma’s the one to blame, in the end” (348).

Ferber’s protagonists’ struggles to improve their environments without sacrificing the good humor of the men who are their points of access are awkwardly analogous to Ferber’s strategies for subtly edifying the readers who bought her books without sacrificing their good humor. Those who were unpersuaded by Ferber, however, didn’t appreciate being made the
objects of her satire: “Connecticut was hopping roaring mad” about *American Beauty* (PT 344) and Texas “scream[ed]” with “rage and anguish” at *Giant* (Prescott); she kept a lawyer on retainer to defend her in frequent libel lawsuits. Yet the contempt for certain character types that populate America in Ferber’s books is always in the service of recuperating and reaffirming the inherent good taste which Ferber associates with the middle class. *Come and Get It*’s Bernie, Lotta, and Karie order champagne with beef and demand ketchup in fine Paris restaurants while making inane observations like “[Europeans] don’t have much use for bathtubs, but boy, they certainly know how to live”; “I’m sick of all this fancy stuff”; “Listen to that little kid speak French, will you!!” (385); meanwhile, back at their Wisconsin mansion, Tom Melendy marvels, “I’ve been in fourteen rooms—fifteen counting the kitchen. . . . There isn’t a single book in the house” (401). Ferber separates true middle-class values from the blustering of unscrupulous fools who happen to have money and leisure time, gesturing toward the cultural capital which is as essential as economic capital to class status. By prompting disidentification with the Glasgows, along with the Benedicts, the Oakes, and the Dulaines, Ferber prompts disidentification with the ruthless monopoly capitalist in favor of the well-rounded everyday American possessed of intellectual curiosity, critical thinking skills, and a healthy life-balance of meaningful work and pleasure.

If some critics deemed Ferber a failure in the pursuit “greatness,” perhaps it is because they were working from a rubric irrelevant to her fiction’s intervention. In the case of Ferber’s kaleidoscopic America, *middletrow* is more than a convenient label for a tier of fiction; it’s a way of life. The chapter that follows explores the concept of an “authentic” middle class further, for though Ferber was the most commercially successful woman writer of the mid-twentieth-
century, her work’s thematic elements and reception recur in a proliferation of woman-authored texts.
Chapter 3: Houses and Dead Patriarchs: Middlebrow Feminism and Its Race Problem

Chapter 2’s close look at the key decades of Edna Ferber’s career demonstrated that *middlebrow* is a mode of writing as well as a tier, a set of rhetorical strategies deployed to simultaneously educate and appease bourgeois audiences in midcentury America. Focusing on a portion of one author’s career showed how the refrains of the middlebrow Darntonion communication circuit presented themselves at the sentence level of individual texts. This chapter scales up on chapter 2’s thesis; a blend of close and distant reading methods—what my introduction calls a “middle-distance reading,”—shows that Ferber’s novels’ content, circulation, and critical reception typifies those of a sizable coterie of midcentury women writers. It traces the echoes of her reception, self-perception, and fiction through a series of other careers, such as those of Fannie Hurst, Dorothy Canfield, a founding member of the Book-of-the-Month Club and bestselling author, and Willa Cather, who has generally been recovered as a modernist but whose post-1930 reception tracks closely with that of her middlebrow friend Canfield. By outlining the parallels between these women’s careers and Ferber’s we can see that, though Ferber was an outlier in terms of her commercial success and heightened literary celebrity, her career’s trajectory in midcentury publishing represents a pattern rather than an exception.

Specifically, middle-class literature during this period teems with the sort of mediated feminist protest chapter 2 identified in Ferber’s work: critical of white patriarchy, attentive to the previously unacknowledged class limitations of the then-recent (what we now understand as first-)wave mainstream feminism, yet tempered by its ultimate prioritization of aesthetic
accessibility and bourgeois entertainment value over social criticism. A number of scholars have taken up the feminist themes in the work of women writers such as Hurst (Thompson, Harker, Haytock), Ellen Glasgow (Kornasky, Walker), Pearl Buck (Zhou), Frances Newman (Mendelman), and Ferber (Ann Shapira/o); indeed, the feminist thrust is difficult to miss in the work of an overtly activist writer like Canfield. The accumulation of such individual studies suggests that middlebrow literature’s feminist streak is not a fluke, but a key feature of this tier of writing. Yet while many midcentury women novelists used their talents for invention to effect social change through art, most of their books call for social revision, rather than revolution. They challenge readers by encouraging small tweaks to the status quo that would expand the autonomy and agency of a certain type of women, but stop short of alienating them by pushing progressivism too far for middle-class readers to remain comfortable with their existing condition.

This chapter’s argument thus unfolds in two phases: the first delves into middlebrow feminism’s surprising dominance and the vehemence of its critiques of US midcentury society, while the second considers middlebrow feminism’s significant limitations, the extent to which it left the lived reality of the majority of US women unexplored despite its pretenses at authenticity. I argue that, deployed the right way, the feminist strains in the fiction of middlebrow women authors could have been part of their appeal, an asset to their positive reception, rather than a liability. In other words, middlebrow novels succeeded because of the cultural work they appeared to be doing, particularly when it came to women’s empowerment—rendering feminism not only present in middlebrow fiction, but essential to it.
Yet its effectiveness rested on its espousal of middle-class values, and less explicitly but even more urgently, on its overwhelmingly white point of view.

To illustrate this argument, I borrow briefly from quantitative, digital distant-reading methods such as text mining and topic modeling to ask simple questions of corpora of midcentury books and periodicals, which help elucidate the contextual framework for a series of more local analyses of particularly noteworthy individual authors and texts.\(^\text{28}\) This practice is designed to produce quantitative visualizations of the aggregate archive without detaching text from paratext, in order to preserve the richness of analysis of the more traditional analog methods of reading characteristic of middlebrow studies. The measuredness of this approach is partly prompted by practical limitations: post-1923 copyright laws make building the corpus necessary for a pure distant reading of midcentury middlebrow fiction totally unrealistic for the time being. This approach offers its own crucial benefits, however, as it facilitates both a thorough exploration of how texts work on an individual basis as well as a broader view of how texts work in tandem to constitute a collective movement and how individual women writers might have been viewed in relation to one another. Further, it allows for the foregrounding of a less-ubiquitous writer, such as Jessie Redmon Fauset, who never rose to Ferber, Buck, or Hurst levels of fame but whose work nevertheless articulates important conflicts and concerns of middlebrow feminism and thus requires further consideration.

Thus, this chapter tells two stories: one literary-historical about a segment of middlebrow writing and one methodological about how we can understand its texts and

\(^{28}\) Using the source material for Google ngrams and unigrams obtained from JSTOR’s DFR, specifically; I will give more thorough details later in the chapter.
contexts by highlighting a select handful of writers whose careers began early in the century and carried through the middle, whose work served a middle-class audience’s paradoxical desires for both progress and pleasure and suffered dualism in their critical reception as a result. Fannie Hurst is perhaps the closest to equality with Ferber in terms of commercial and critical success, the two are often paired together both in contemporaneous writing and in current scholarship, their constant comparison encouraged by the parallels between their careers’ timelines, their shared Jewish backgrounds, and their twin pseudo-anthropological interests in pockets of the American landscape—particularly those from the underclasses with dreams of upward mobility.29

Dorothy Canfield (also known as Dorothy Canfield Fisher) also features fairly prominently as a writer who was active as a curator of the middlebrow culture she was simultaneously participating in as a novelist. Meanwhile, her friend and frequent correspondent, Willa Cather, stands in for writers who are now considered modernist, but were in the 1930s and 1940s nearing the ends of their careers and sustained a kind of demotion from high-art to middle- by reviewers frustrated by their later offerings.30 Sharon O’Brien and

29 Macdonald’s disdainful invocation of “Edna Ferber” in “Masscult and Midcult,” for example, was followed with “or Fannie Hurst”; F. Scott Fitzgerald complained about “Edna Ferber, . . . Fannie Hurst, Mary Roberts Rinehart—not producing among ‘em one story or novel that will last ten years.” Other examples include Jennifer Haytock’s recent The Middle Class in the Great Depression, and in scores of introductions and lists in any number of essays and books about middlebrow fiction. Ferber and Hurst’s Ngrams parallel one another (though the lines reinforce Ferber’s supremacy as the most prominent among her cohort, the shape of their notoriety has tracked together). They are mentioned almost an identical number of times in the New York Times between 1930 and 1960 (again, with Ferber slightly ahead of Hurst at 2098 and 1966 respectively), with similar headlines, down to the Robert Von Gelder interview.

30 Loren Glass, following Catherine Stimpson, separates Gertrude Stein’s work into the categories of “good” Stein and “bad” Stein—code for “popular” Stein and “obscure” Stein, respectively—with commercial successes like The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas on the “bad” list and avant-garde works like Making of Americans on the “good”; with almost no revision, the two categories could also articulate the distinction between which works of Stein had middlebrow appeal and which didn’t. More on this in chapter 4
Stephanie Thompson (citing Joan Acocella) separately identify the 1930s as the period in which Cather’s reception took a decided downturn, a change of heart by critics that led to Cather’s near-obscurity before feminist recovery efforts revived academic interest in her in the 1980s. Though the recovered Cather has been retroactively designated a modernist writer, Mark J. Madigan’s description of her relationship with the Book-of-the-Month Club (tense, before 1931’s *Shadows on the Rock* selection) and what Joan Acocella calls critical “irritation” with her “huge popularity” (25) aligns closely with the style of writing associated with the middle-class tier of fiction—indeed, returning to our control of Hemingway and Steinbeck per the introduction, that both escaped this kind of long-term degradation for their late-career offerings, despite Hemingway’s poorly received *Across the River and Into the Trees* and Steinbeck’s descent into Kathleen Norris-style book-a-year production in the 1950s reiterates the suspicious correlation between female authorship and the degradation of books with middle-class appeal.32

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Middlebrow feminism starts with the implicit gendering (to once again use Harker’s term) of the contemporary critical discussion of midcentury women writers. Most studies acknowledge the feminization of middle-class writing, or, as Laurent Berlant put it in *The Female Complaint*, middlebrow writing’s ties to “women’s culture”; many studies even place gender at

31 Also: Cather’s supposed downturn correlates interestingly with what Tebbel saw as a major restructure at her publisher, Knopf, inspired by the success of the 1920s cohort and their balanced approach to risk-taking in their author lists.

32 Steinbeck’s literary celebrity suffered a brief downturn, as Granville Hicks notes, but his recovery was much quicker and more thorough than that of his female counterparts.
their center: Jamie Harker’s *America the Middlebrow*, Janice Radway’s *A Feeling For Books*, and Joan Shelley Rubin’s *Making of Middlebrow Culture*, for example, have been imitated by numerous other smaller-scale projects (Haytock’s *The Middle Class in the Great Depression*, Deborah Williams’s *Not in Sisterhood*, Stephanie Thompson’s *Influencing America’s Tastes*, Erica Brown and Mary Grover’s *Middlebrow Literary Cultures*, and others). We know that women were and remain a huge consumer base for the book industry, the primary patrons of book clubs and recipients of mail-order books, and the most loyal readers of many types of genre fiction. Yet Harker’s perception of the gendering of middle-class writing as “implicit,” rather than given, rings true because, with the exception of the occasional one-off essay, the communication circuit wasn’t necessarily reflecting on women in fiction and publishing in midcentury as much as might be expected considering the volume of self-reflective essay-writing in the midcentury book industry.

For example, in the *English Journal*, an academic trade publication that regularly hosted essays on contemporary American authors—including chapter 2’s essay debate between William Allen White and William Parker about Ferber’s relevance—gender terminology isn’t overwhelmingly present. Of the most common words used in the journal from its inception in 1916 until 1960, *boy* ranks at number 96, *man* at 139, and *girl* at 157. Neither *women* nor *woman* appear until 704 and 919, respectively, and *mrs* clocks in at 593. No other gendered terms—say, *gender*, *sex*, *masculine*, or *feminine*, for example—appear at all in the top 1000 words. Even

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33 The *English Journal* is difficult to categorize. The content wasn’t peer-reviewed, but its audience was clearly academics, as well as secondary and post-secondary teachers. Founded in the early twentieth century, the journal focused largely, though not exclusively, on pedagogy, and on the concept of “literature” as an academic discipline. The essays about the relevance of a particular author, then, were a way for those in field to cooperate on the definition of what counts as “literature,” and what literature as a discipline should concern itself with.
specific men’s names, like “Robert” (357) and “James” (409) are more frequent than discussions of women in general, and no women’s names appear until “Elizabeth,” outside of the top 1000. Meanwhile, neutral terms like human, person, or synonyms for writer—author, etc.—are scattered throughout the top 1000.

While we don’t see explicit, self-conscious engagement with “women writers” as a super prominent keyword or concept in the English Journal, through a method of digital analysis known as “topic modeling” we can see some patterns emerging which suggest a latent paradigm of the gender of good writing. Data for Research, a fairly new initiative by the popular academic database JSTOR, holds hundreds of digitized full-text scholarly periodicals and distributes them to researchers in formats suitable for text mining, including the 9,220 articles published in the English Journal from its founding to 1960.34 MALLET, a topic-modeling program, applies a statistical model called latent Dirichlet allocation (LDA) to a tagged lists of unigrams (or, as we call them in the analog world, “words”) to determine which words in a corpus (or, group of texts) tend to be strongly associated with one another. These word associations are called “topics.” More than just counting which words are more common than

34 This might not necessarily be a format that’s readable by human eyes. In this case, DFR provided word counts—that is, they counted the words in each article, tallied them, and presented them in order rather than in their original sentences. For example, the passage “That Sam-I-Am! That Sam-I-Am! I hate that Sam-I-Am!” would be represented something like:

I 4
that 3
Sam 3
Am 3
hate 1

For topic modeling, the word counts were “re-inflated” so that the line in the file would read something like:

I I I I that that that Sam Sam Sam Am Am Am hate

All words are represented, but they are no longer in sentence form. For the purposes of digital analysis, this doesn’t matter; it only matters that the words occurred together in the same unit, which, in this case, was articles.
others, the topics show how certain terms are organized into themes. In the case of the *English Journal*, for example, topic 8 reads:

8 0.50015 story life love young characters miss character woman man father family death book people mother plot lives real girl wife son hero town picture small end theme makes home live finds women tragedy finally house marriage romantic tale tells

Of the 50 topics MALLET generated in this particular trial, topic 8 was the only one where *women* were high enough on the list of key terms to appear in the weighted list.\textsuperscript{35} It’s depressingly unsurprising in its strong associations with the gendered categories of romance, marriage, love, and motherhood—stories about women which define them in terms of their relationships with men. It’s also consistent with the earlier finding of the relative frequency of the word *mrs*. More interesting, and more telling, is something like topic 24:

24 0.60051 man men years great made truth artist long english found mind century age human wrote journal common generation ago state born political called back life moral dead law lost movement early left religious created knew place theory find god

Here, we see *man* and *men* are the anchor words in a common article topic that speculates on significant, broad impact. This topic suggests that men tend to be strongly associated with

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\textsuperscript{35} Another note on the data: MALLET’s “stop” words were removed—words like *the, a, of*, etc., which tend not to carry a great deal of meaning but are so frequent they would overwhelm many of the topics if included in the analysis—as well as the *word null* to correct a quirk of my particular dataset. Capitalization was ignored, and “stemming” was flattened out—meaning, the tense endings of words were not counted as differences (i.e., *read* and *reading* were both counted as the same word). These restrictions aid greatly in ensuring that digital textual analysis produce meaningful results, but are of course imperfect and occasionally vulnerable to idiosyncratic, unforeseeable errors.
words like *great*, *artist*, *truth*, and *life*—the very words which, in chapter 2, Parker asserted he couldn’t bring himself to associate with Edna Ferber.\(^\text{36}\)

Looking more closely, it becomes clearer that midcentury reviewers and critics in the progressive era circled the so-called woman question as such by pretending to evaluate authors on a case-by-case basis. Disdainful reviews of women middlebrows (or former highbrows who suffered late-career demotions, such as Cather) were not necessarily rants by conservative misogynists who simply couldn’t conceive of a compelling woman writer, but rather philosophical essays by liberal culture critics adopting the position of objective, rational appraisers of art. Individually, they don’t necessarily read as inflammatory or misogynist, but, taken together, we begin to see the patterns emerge in their criticisms which constellate a systemic devaluation of writing by women.\(^\text{37}\) Subtle infantilization of mid-career adult women authors, preoccupation with their outfits and marital statuses, and conclusions which grasp for some intangible quality of profundity or meaningful universality the essayists can’t quite name but insist is missing comprise the kind of implicit gendering that Harker names and most

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\(^\text{36}\) Of course, the strength of this association could be bolstered by a generic use of the word *man* as a shorthand for something like *humankind*—and indeed, *human* also appears in topic 24, as do religious terms—which, though still problematic from a feminist standpoint as the last couple of decades have seen a decrease in the popular conflation of *man* and *human*, would somewhat dampen speculation that the terms of greatness are correlated with masculinity, specifically. But, considering the overall lack of emphasis on gender as such in the *English Journal* suggested by a basic word count—*human*, for example, is higher on the word-count list than *man*, as are gender neutral synonyms for *author* like *writer* and *poet*—I’m inclined to think that *men* and *man* weren’t typically used as a catch-all in this manner.

\(^\text{37}\) This is not to suggest that there were no middlebrow men who were disdained by critics (see, as the intro mentions, James Gould Cozzens, Dashiell Hammet, and many others). Rather, it argues that it’s not a coincidence that a mode of writing and distribution dominated by women was often degraded, no matter who performed the actual writing itself. Some attempted recuperations of middlebrow men like Cozzens further support this case, considering the gendered terms on which reviewers sought to distinguish and separate him from Ferber and Hurst, specifically, and middlebrow women, generally. For more on this, see Kate MacDonald’s *The Masculine Middlebrow* (2011); for a contemporary account, see Granville Hicks’s “Our Novelists’ Shifting Reputations,” *English Journal* 40.1 (Jan 1951): 1-6.
scholarship at least peripherally acknowledges. To find individual examples, we need only to grab any *New York Times* review of what we now think of as a middlebrow woman’s book. Even sympathetic figures like Carl Van Vechten, the well-known patron of women’s and Harlem Renaissance writing in the early and mid-twentieth centuries, and Granville Hicks, a teacher and pundit whose socio-political views were so left-wing that he suspected that they cost him his position in academia (“Assumptions” 709), fall back on gendered codes in their writings. The conflictedness and condescension in the writings of even those whom we would expect to be open to and even appreciative of the middlebrow project makes the eventual obscurity of the hugely famous women writers they discussed, which can appear puzzling on the surface, seem rather inevitable.

“Some ‘Literary Ladies’ I Have Known,” in which Van Vechten name-drops women writers and industry personalities over several pages, gives us a sense of how mid-century women writers might have been viewed as a group by one of the men who was most instrumental in the success of many of their careers. Like Ferber’s “Friend” William Allen White, Van Vechten was a powerful figure in mid-twentieth-century publishing and literature, though, also like White, his most significant contributions were in his behind-the-scenes networking and essay remunerations on the industry, rather than his own creative output. Appearing in the *Yale Library Gazette*, the article probably served as an accompaniment to the artifacts of his correspondence with several women authors which he bequeathed to the Yale Library for preservation, more as a nostalgic headnote than argumentative essay. Van Vechten would likely have been considered a sort of expert on literature’s “ladies” at the time, and
indeed, his body of work makes a case for him as a progressive champion of authors whose identities might have otherwise rendered them marginalized.

His summary of these authors, however, meanders rather bewilderingly from exceedingly detailed descriptions of various uneventful luncheons (“Fannie Hurst was not a hearty eater”) to an all-too-brief recollection of the time F. Scott Fitzgerald threatened Gentlemen Prefer Blondes author Anita Loos with a butcher knife, prompting her to leap out of a window in terror (“Fortunately, the room was on the ground floor” [115]). Overall, he lauds all of the fifteen or so writers he mentions, from major high-art figure Gertrude Stein to the little-known Ettie Stettheimer—often marveling, in the process, at his own foresight in discovering, promoting, or otherwise aiding them in their success. Indeed, there are so many names, so highly praised, that based on this essay alone one might think the literary world was entirely matriarchal. But, in keeping with what we have seen in critical praise of middle-class, midcentury women writers, his raving is undermined by what appear to be offhanded word choices: “vain” and “smug,” words that were often associated with Ferber, are here applied to Gertrude Atherton, Cather, and poet/novelist Elinor Wylie. Van Vechten describes many of the writers’ looks and offers appraises their beauty with equal or greater enthusiasm than their talents (Atherton had “beautiful shoulders” and a “fine set of teeth”; it was of course only because Cather “had lost a good deal of [her] youthful look” that she disliked his photographic portrait of her, and so on). If in attempting to extoll the virtues of midcentury women writers Van Vechten manages to undermine them with sexist rhetoric, it’s hardly any wonder that other figures less personally invested in the elevation of women writers should exhibit similar or even more pronounced tendencies.
Hicks, for example, no doubt wrote “The Case against Willa Cather” in 1933 as an isolated opinion piece on one author he found overrated and retrograde in her politics. Sharon O’Brien marks the 1930s—which she asserts is the point that Cather’s novels began to resemble, according to H. L. Mencken “using the worst epithet he could imagine,” those of a “lady novelist” (114)—as the decade of Cather’s “decanonization.” O’Brien even gives Hicks partial credit for Cather’s downfall. What O’Brien calls Cather’s “decanonization,” however, could also be viewed as Cather’s move toward a more committedly middlebrow cycle of literary production and distribution: her 1931 novel, *Shadows on the Rock*, an instant best-seller according to *Publisher’s Weekly*, was her first Book-of-the-Month Club selection (by her longtime friend Dorothy Canfield). Indeed, the negative shift O’Brien identifies in Cather’s reception on the bases of gender, politics, and taste correlates rhetorically to those of middlebrow women writers: as an example, O’Brien recounts the now-notoriously masculinist language Hicks used to contrast Cather with a “good novelist” in his review of *Shadows*; he is made of “stern stuff,” while Cather, by contrast, is all “softness” (116).

Indeed, Hicks’s “Case against Willa Cather” is startlingly identical to Parker’s case against Edna Ferber in “A Stranger’s Story of Edna Ferber” from three years earlier. Sentences like “Miss Cather . . . has been barred from the task that has occupied most of the world’s great artists, the expression of what is central and fundamental to her own age” (708), and his concession that he was “charmed” by her books’ “authenticity” but strongly questioned their “significance” ring eerily similar to Parker’s assertion that Ferber “has not achieved greatness” for her “pleasing” but “scarcely significant” stories. Like Parker, Hicks assumes a common point of view with the *English Journal*’s readers, leaving understood the specifics of what makes
an “artist” “great,” of what kinds of experiences or characters Cather would have to write about in order to write with “significance”—as if they are givens needing no explicit articulation. Though Hicks doesn’t offer a positive counterexample in the piece, near the conclusion he does helpfully identify another woman writer he fears fell into the same trap of mediocrity that was Cather’s alleged undoing: Elizabeth Madox Roberts, author of *A Buried Treasure*, which one reviewer called “a charming genre study” (J.D.A.). Hicks was hardly anti-women writers, nor anti-middlebrow, as a later essay endorsing Ellen Glasgow testifies; indeed, according to Hicks, Cather was the one who was insufficiently progressive in politics (O’Brien; Acocella; Williams). It seems unlikely that Hicks would have considered women writers’ systemic devaluation a worthy cause, let alone imagined himself a contributor to it, yet his objections to Cather are coded so profoundly similarly to scores of critics’ objections to so many other women writers, it’s hard to make a “case” for a coincidence.38

Turning to the review mill of the midcentury *New York Times* reveals more backhanded praise and condescension for another woman prominently featured in Van Vechten’s essay: Fannie Hurst (whose “face and figure,” one interviewer notes irrelevantly, “has real vitality” [van Gelder]). Ultimately, for the *New York Times* reflecting on Hurst’s life in her obituary, Hurst’s work, which took on such weighty issues as race, patriarchy, and poverty, amounted to “heart-throbbing love stories that were read under every hair dryer in America,” the guilty pleasure-reading of idle housewives. One reviewer compliments *Back Street*’s “refinement” and

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38Another example: William Lyons Phelps, “Dorothy Canfield Fisher.” He wants to argue that she is a great novelist, but spends most of the piece remembering her as a “bashful” young girl and explaining that her weaknesses include a “certain diffuseness,” and excess of “womanly sympathy.” Put this in-text?
the maturation of Hurst’s style, as if *Back Street* were the sophomore offering of a young up-and-comer instead of the seventh novel of a 15-year publishing veteran (Bruce). Another suggests that Hurst’s “imagination (an exuberant one) is apt to set her technique tasks for which it is not quite equal” (Forman), as if he were a creative writing teacher evaluating a precocious pupil. The same Margaret Wallace who would later express disappointment in Ferber’s lack of “keenness” in *Saratoga Trunk* opens her review of *Back Street* thusly:

> Although Fannie Hurst can create an enormous and minutely faithful study of a social background: although she knows the characters that people it, down to the last detail of the clothes they wear, and the food they eat, and the thoughts they think, she has never drawn from her vast and cleverly assembled knowledge any conclusions notable for their depth or validity.

Meanwhile, Wallace loves Dorothy Canfield’s “ambitious” and “charm[ing]” *Bonfire*, but expresses her admiration by contrasting it with the whole of Canfield’s preceding body of work, which she characterizes as “broad” and “simple”; another reviewer rhapsodizes over *Her Son’s Wife* for several paragraphs only to capriciously conclude that “Canfield has not quite achieved the masterpiece one feels she may someday write”—thus recasting Canfield as an eager youth with tremendous potential instead of an established literary figure (“Dorothy Canfield”).

Reviewers and critics seem to use the same handful of words over and over again in their assessments of writing by key middlebrow women: “charming,” “clever,” “authentic,” and, above all, “vivid”—positive words, somehow deployed as insults when contrastingly juxtaposed with “significance,” “greatness,” and “validity.” We can read of how middle-class
fiction was received and/or perceived—contained within a specific sphere of quality—and we see that it’s often in gendered terms. But expanding on a few well-chosen examples of the artifacts that inspired the commentary under review above, taking a closer look at the text and paratext housed by the context, enables an even fuller understanding of the flow of communication between these elements. For these elements generate and refine each other simultaneously—a “circuit,” as Darnton famously put it, but perhaps also a network. To this end, I turn to the texts themselves to investigate how middlebrow novels’ often explicitly feminist thrust at the level of content could have encouraged or responded to gendered criticism and a sexist culture more broadly. By looking a little more closely, we can get a better sense of the specific strategies by which middlebrow women writers responded to sexism at multiple levels—on a broad, cultural scale, in art, literature and education, and even in the home among individuals. If facing sex-based opposition at various levels was part of the experience of any midcentury woman writer, perhaps middlebrow feminism was the ultimate form of resistance, in that it called for a change in culture while simultaneously participating in it.

Women writers even did it to each other: Ferber and Dorothy Parker despised each other, despite their belonging to the same literary social group, the Algonquin Round Table. Hurst, for example, though critical of the “enormous minority” of women’s voices in literature, partially blamed women’s lesser abilities for the oversight; meanwhile, in one op-ed, Canfield compares twentieth century women with “sitting hens,” and frets that American women will fill the time saved by their dishwashers and washing machines with frivolous pursuits: “yet more bridge-playing, frequent[ing] yet more assiduously the beauty parlors” (“Life’s Changing”). Cather once said that “it is a very hard thing for a woman” to write a “male narrative”—almost as if she, too, doubted whether she was made of the “stern” enough “stuff.”
As Harker argues, the progressivism characteristic of middle-class writing presented an opportunity to bring women’s experiences to the forefront. If, as contemporaneous reviewers (Bruce) and contemporary critics (Kingham, Rubin) seem to agree, middlebrow writing aspired to a Drieser-like realism, perhaps for women writers chronicling the American middle class the problems of American women were essential to the so-often-called vividness of their characters which earned them such begrudging accolades: after all, the experience of an American female protagonist would necessarily involve some sort of conflict with the patriarchal, heteronormative society and detail her strategy for finding autonomy within a system designed to squelch her agency. Speculating on the literary legacy of the twentieth century, modernist writer Gertrude Stein once griped to genre writer Dashiell Hammett, “The men all write about themselves” (5), implying with Everybody’s Autobiography that it was the task of the woman author to write more broadly in the twentieth century; indeed, in the case of widely circulated, middle-class literature, the predominance of female authorship suggests that others may have shared her view. Fannie Hurst, for example, held that “women . . . are the culture bearers of our time,” though she rued their “enormous minority in the world’s history of creative art,” adding a more explicitly political (though tamely so) observation to Stein’s prediction. Putting Stein and Hurst together, women of the twentieth century would write about men, as they had long been thoroughly trained on male interiority by male authors; women of the twentieth century could theoretically write about women with an unprecedented and overdue degree of authenticity but need not be limited to “writ[ing] about themselves.” As even the famously anti-feminism (or at least feminism-skeptical) Cather conceded that it was a “disadvantage to be a
Lady Author,” this task would necessarily involve some level of trailblazing, and with that came a certain amount of social criticism.

Cather, Canfield, and Hurst might be considered three middlebrow feminists on a spectrum. At one end was Cather’s fervent anti-didacticism, her resistance to the label “woman writer,” which Thompson speculates came from a fear of being “automatically enrolled one in a community that was limiting and belittled” (14). At the other, Cather’s friend and opposite (or mirror image, depending on whether you ask Janis Stout or Mark Madigan), Canfield, a celebrated and self-proclaimed activist whose frequent public “plea[s]” for women “to meet unhappiness with active resistance,” whether in convocation speeches at women’s colleges or her didactic novels, helped govern some of midcentury middlebrow literature’s key cornerstones (NYT article). Canfield had no patience for sexist dogma, even suggesting in one op-ed that the notion of the subservient housewife was never anything more than the wistful fantasy of men: she hypothesizes that “hairy, gnarled old hunters” of pre-history, too, wished they could “do away with” their wives’ creative ambitions so they will “stay in the cave, as mothers should,” and lets us know exactly what she thinks of their views by having the men declare, in the next sentence, how they love to eat “entrails, especially entrails.” Hurst falls somewhere in between; she aspired to disinterest in the Bourdieu sense for her books, as she claimed in one interview: “I never talk over a story with an editor. I’m a lone wolf. . . . I don’t care about fashions” (van Gelder). But so too was she “really very clearly aware” that, among highbrow critics, she was “not a darling.” She embraced the aspect of her literary celebrity that made her a feminist spokesperson as “a furnace” that “warms [her]” (van Gelder), speaking at women’s colleges, feminist fora, and speaking out explicitly against systems that disempowered
women, including the institution of marriage: “[t]he marriage covenant is worn out” she insists to the Boston Globe, adding, with the language of an activist, “we win even if we lose at trying something else, because we [women] cannot be worse off” (“Marriage”).

Consumers embraced all three women’s work, and though sexism in critical reception might seem like an obstacle, when it came to marketing the middlebrow feminist, publishers used other markers of legitimacy and middle-class American nationalism to present these stories in a way that audiences would respond to, framing a book’s socially critical aspects as proof of its depth and quality. Thus women’s partnerships with their respective firms were remarkably stable: writers of multiple best-sellers brought enormous amounts of money to the houses and, in return, the houses provided the writers with the industry support they needed to withstand the libel lawsuits, misogynist hatemail, and critical pushback that besieged them. Ferber certainly had such a symbiotic relationship with Doubleday, as chapter 2 mentioned, but this was similarly true of Willa Cather and Knopf, Dorothy Canfield and Harcourt, and Hurst also with Doubleday. Thus, whether purposely evangelical or not, overtly feminist themes were safe in the book industry, even in a time (post-suffrage and pre-New Left) when mainstream feminism is not thought to have been especially active—with the help of the new-house business model that championed innovation and new frontiers in text, the female-centeredness, and even feminism, of middlebrow women writers’ novels could be deployed as an asset, rather than a liability.
So, where and how does feminist thinking emerge at the textual level in a middlebrow novel? And where is it tempered to preserve audiences’ good will and comfort? Some scholars of literature have recently made use of the work of sociologist Erving Goffman (Alworth, Love), drawing on his book *Stigma* to argue that stigmatized traits require careful management in literature as well as the real-life contexts Goffman attended to. Goffman showed how agitation for acceptance of one stigmatized trait—femaleness, for example—means offering nonstigmatized traits—which can come under vague umbrella phrases as “good breeding,” or being well-dressed, etc.—as a store of credibility, or even a kind of collateral.40 In the case of middlebrow novels, social criticism in was couched in terms of middle-class material entitlements and the values they represented. Thus detailed catalogs of big-ticket items—of houses neat and white, roaring automobiles swiftly maneuvered (and notably not by chauffeurs), meals hearty but not rich or gluttonous, dresses with impeccable tailoring and construction though neither excessive nor especially luxurious—abound. As Dianne Harris argues in *Little White Houses*, “[a]rchitecture is not benign, even (and sometimes especially) when it is spectacularly beautiful or when it is so ordinary we hardly notice it.” Her thesis, which was referring to real-life postwar Americans’ real-life houses, seems to be an undercurrent in middlebrow women’s writing, which relied on the protection that material signifiers of middle-class loyalty provided in order to do much of its cultural work. These descriptions, and this highlighting of the manufacturing quality of houses, clothes, and other

40 Indeed, Carter’s *Heart of Whiteness* covers this as well; Carter features more prominently later on in this chapter.
material items connects labor and taste. In other words, the “detail[s] of the clothes they wear, and the food they eat” in middlebrow novels served not only as a benign tool of realistic storytelling, as Wallace conceives of it in her aforementioned review, but also a claim to middle-class legitimacy and shared values with their audience.

This is important, because the feminist tropes traceable in middlebrow fiction rely on reader identification with an archetype of a diamond-in-the-rough female protagonist with some special fiery quality in her soul, who climbs various social and economic ladders through grit and determination following the death of whatever man held her back in the first chapter. We see the Ferberian dead-patriarch plot device and the constant foregrounding of middle-class material culture emerge again and again: the feminist heroine drives around in automobiles to show she’s in control and comfortable with modernity; she amasses wealth through clever strategizing, hard work, or both; she dresses smartly and tastefully to show her sound judgment and business sense; she wrestles with an abiding philosophical or political problem to show she has depth. We find versions of her in Hurst’s upwardly mobile Bea Pullman in *Imitation of Life*, and Dorothy Canfield’s “superhuman” Mrs. Bascom in *Her Son’s Wife*, in Kathleen Norris’s Susannah Farjeon of *Bread into Roses*. There are even traces of her in Cecile Auclair in Cather’s *Shadows on the Rock* and Olan in Pearl Buck’s *The Good Earth*.

The dead-patriarch and upward-mobility tropes are often interconnected: middlebrow women heroines often need the former in order to effect the latter. Their stories gain

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41 Canfield’s *Bonfire*, by contrast, totally upends the trope with Lixlee and Anson’s relationship: the minute Lixlee feels taken for granted, she makes it her life’s mission to gaslight Anson until she has shredded his self-confidence and he descends into madness. Her disappearance—to prey upon another vulnerable man, it is implied—is what restores peace in their community.
momentum in the second couple of chapters, when they experience the relief that was previously just out of the fantasizing Louise Mallard’s reach in “Story of an Hour”: in a rather literal interpretation of “death to the patriarchy,” women writers dispense with husbands and fathers in early chapters to make room for the female protagonists’ development. In *Imitation of Life*’s example, the A-plot—Bea Pullman’s empire-building—can’t begin until after her husband’s death by pneumonia. Bea’s courtship and betrothal to dull, unpleasant Mr. Pullman are hardly even events in the story; her marriage just sort of happens upon her and she adapts to it, accustomed to suffering in a male relative’s servitude since her mother’s tragic passing had left her alone with her tyrannical father years before in the first pages. Hurst draws a bright line connecting Bea’s subjugation by her father and her husband in two passages that describe Bea’s anxiety about sex. First, while observing her mother in her coffin, Bea imagines her mother submitting sexually to her father, wondering if she enjoyed it, disbelieving that she possibly could have. On her own wedding night a scant few pages later, Bea feels similar anxiety and disgust while waiting for her new husband; she finds his porn, which prompts her contempt for him—though she mentally disciplines herself for such thoughts, and decides illogically that the maid must have left it there as some sort of cruel joke (“those darkies!” she huffs). It’s clear that marriage is far from a happy ending or self-actualization for Bea; she has merely exchanged one master who vaguely repulses her for another.

Mr. Pullman’s death, however, and her father’s permanent invalidity after a stroke render Bea her own master for the first time, free from her obligations to have the sex she hated with Mr. Pullman and to defer to his authority in their financial planning—two forms of release continually yoked together in the text. Meanwhile, Delilah, a mammy-esque black woman who
asks Bea for a housekeeping job, has also been recently unburdened of her dead-weight husband and, like Bea, is left with a child to feed and raise on her own. Delilah quickly becomes Bea’s most important relationship, and together, they turn B(ill) Pullman’s limp syrup-selling trade into B(ea) Pullman’s multi-million-dollar franchise of pancake restaurants.

Crucially, however, the two women’s partnership is not equal. Bea replaces Bill as an even better breadwinner for her household, while Delilah replaces Bea as a more-capable but no less deferential and self-sacrificing housekeeper and nurturer for both of their children and Bea’s invalid father. Delilah’s face on the logo and Delilah’s cooking behind the griddle facilitate the pancake franchise’s explosion, but it all amounts to Bea’s success—especially since Delilah nobly refuses to accept even a small pay raise. The white matriarch’s elevation thus relies on her black domestic worker’s benevolent commitment to remaining in her place; Bea’s arguably feminist triumph must be foreclosed to Delilah in order to be brought about. *Imitation of Life* criticizes white patriarchal capitalism by contrasting the cooperation between Bea and Delilah with the coercion between Mr. Pullman and Bea, yet praises the system for its efficiency by demonstrating white women’s potential for upward mobility should they secure for themselves a subservient domestic laborer. *Imitation of Life*’s thesis, as far as Delilah and Bea’s dynamic is concerned, seems to be that white women make kinder masters for black women than white men—a feminist argument of sorts that doesn’t go as far as relinquishing its white privilege.

Yet, upon closer inspection, even the white female protagonist’s triumph is half-baked—the obstacles in the way to some unspecified self-actualization are too great and the sacrifices she makes to get along too compromising for her to finish her story self-actualized and whole.
In the case of Hurst’s Bea, though death freed her from an insipid husband and tyrant father, wealth freed her from the burdens of daily wage-earning, and Delilah freed her from her domestic obligations, she finds she still cannot move along the full spectrum of agency on both domestic and public fronts. At the novel’s conclusion, Bea has a large house in New York in the same neighborhood as all of the other rich entrepreneurs, but still hasn’t the home she has supposedly been striving to earn enough money to enable. After spending well over a decade building an empire, Bea finally pauses to reach for a sexual and emotional connection; her employee, Fred Flick, offers her an opportunity to revise her earlier attempt at a heterosexual domestic partnership.

As with Mr. Pullman, Fred Flick emerges less as a fully fleshed out character than a catalyst for Bea to understand her sexuality and a counterpoint for signaling Bea’s economic status. Where with Mr. Pullman, Bea had been the young, economically dependent virgin, with Fred, she is the older, wiser, successful capitalist; where she had been trained to defer to her foolish husband and serve him, she retains Fred Flick as a subordinate on her payroll; where she had shrunk from Mr. Pullman’s touch, she reaches out and “put[s] a hand on [Fred’s] knee” so there is “no mistaking” her desire for him; where her first marriage had been an arrangement between Mr. Pullman and her father, Bea explicitly proposes to Fred herself, explaining that she wants to have in her home, mentally renovating her house’s top floor into a library and placing him in it as if he was a desk or painting (255-56). Had Bea succeeded in securing Fred’s affection, her story could have come full circle, the connection between women’s economic independence and sexual autonomy more complete. Instead, she finishes the novel much as she began it: grieving and bewildered. Her hopes for fulfillment are paid forward to the next
generation, as Fred Flick’s romantic affection is denied to Bea and instead awarded to her pampered, carefree young daughter Jesse. Meanwhile, Delilah has died, estranged from her own beloved daughter, Peola, who is passing as white in another state.

Other dead-patriarch stories might be called tragedies from start to finish: for example, in Back Street, a very different Hurst novel, though Ray’s troubles are certainly her father’s fault, his death doesn’t free her so much as leave her vulnerable to a series of misfortunes stemming from her “fastness”; Ray lives a miserable, lonely life in near-poverty as the kept woman of a stingy thousandaire and dies a miserable, lonely death in abject poverty as the widow of nobody. So too in Buck’s The Good Earth does Wang Lung outlive Olan, repaying her for her years of physical and domestic labor, her intelligence in guiding him toward good business decisions, and her constant self-sacrifice by tormenting her for the size of her feet, bringing in a concubine to love instead. Only through Olan’s delirious mumbling on her deathbed does Wang Lung learn how deeply miserable his indifference made her. These books, which seem to emulate, in some ways, the tragic ending of Wharton’s House of Mirth, explore the negative case of patriarchs who either stay alive and oppress their heroines, or whose death merely precludes the protagonist from harboring any illusions about herself and her situation.

The “satisfying” ending, then, that was so crucial to the middlebrow novel’s appeal wasn’t necessarily a purely happy one for its plucky white female protagonists—the aesthetic pleasure and comfort it brought to bourgeois audiences need not be at the level of a happy plot. Perhaps it couldn’t be, for, in addition to lending the finales a somber rather than romantic tone, the ambivalently tragic endings may have also helped temper what might have otherwise been
viewed as stridently feminist stories. Ending the triumphant white feminist’s bildungsroman in
tragedy allowed the novels to be thoughtful, and even critical of white patriarchy, but
ultimately nonthreatening in that they fail to go so far as to imagine alternatives—even within
their own universes. Readers get to identify with the white protagonist, become absorbed by
her journey, and triumph in her triumphs, but ultimately they don’t have to fear her power in
the end. Middlebrow feminist failure is thus a double failure: not only does Hurst’s feminism
rely on racial exclusivity to grow, it still can’t ultimately flourish under the limitations imposed
upon it by middle-class normativity.

4

This careful balance of resistance and consolation—being feminist, but not too much,
and offering one’s class status as a mitigating or even legitimizing variable—is how Julien
Carter argues that Italian and Polish immigrants became white, how Harris argues that “the
postwar home constructed race,” and how I argue that women writers rendered middlebrow
feminist resistance palatable to a comfortable American public. According to Carter in The Heart
of Whiteness, which outlines the ways in which race, sexuality, and gender are interrelated and
concurrently negotiated, whiteness was the most central of all the mitigating factors deployed
to legitimize certain kinds of marginality, both in real life and in pop culture. As Carter
demonstrates, the middlebrow’s middle-class values came with their own exclusions—while
certain provisional groups were able to leverage their middle-class entitlements to manage their
marginality, doing so didn’t make the American public more racially tolerant so much as folded
a few more groups into its understanding of whiteness. And indeed, as Lawrence Levine reminds us in *HighBrow/Lowbrow*, race and whiteness are key parts of the phrenologically derived term *middlebrow* itself.  

Middlebrow novels were often written from an almost exclusively white point of view. Ferber, Hurst, Buck, and Canfield positioned themselves as anthropologists of sorts, writing with fascination about underprivileged underclasses to which they largely did not belong but felt themselves guardians of/intercessors for. In *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, Gyatri Spivak calls white Western women writers, using Charlotte Bronte and Jane Austen as her specific examples, “not-quite-not-native informants” (113) and their protagonists “not-quite-not-male[s]” (116). For Spivak, white women writers fall between the oppressed and the colonizing oppressor—but not squarely in the middle. Thus the “not-quite-non-native informant” could be more crudely rendered the “not quite not-a-white-man,” or “almost a white man.” This distinction is important, because Spivak’s readings belie white women’s authority to speak for their non-ruling-class subjects in their novels. Her findings about Jane Austen and Charlotte Bronte could apply, with little revision, to mid-twentieth-century women novelists like Hurst, Buck, and Cather, whose casts of characters include domestic workers, Chinese families, and indigenous peoples in the US.

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42 Levine never explicitly calls it racist, however, leaving it to the reader to parse the racist implications of his representation of the facts: “From the time of their formulation, such cultural categories as highbrow and lowbrow were hardly meant to be neutral descriptive terms; they were openly associated with and designed to preserve, nurture, and extend the cultural history and values of a particular group of peoples in a specific historical context”—he elsewhere identifies “the Caucasian circle” as the “particular group of peoples” in question, especially those “closer to western and northern Europe[an]” heritage (222-23). See introduction.

43 Spivak defines the “native informant” as “the privileged or exceptional subject of knowledge,” referring to white men (both certain white men and white men in general) who claim to be experts on the people they have colonized.
Because of its relative comfort with feminism, its ostensibly liberal and progressive agendas, and its own battles with marginality, scholarly analyses tend to minimize the problematic racial aspects of midcentury women’s writing. Carol Batker, for example, goes so far as to place Edna Ferber alongside Jessie Fauset and Zitkala-sa as three women-of-color activists of the twentieth century (citing Ferber’s Jewishness as a nonwhite credential). J. E. Smyth goes even further, defending blackface in Ferber as a tool through which she “expose[d] the history and contemporary legacy of racism,” without critiquing the racism inherent in blackface itself. Similarly, Jennifer Haytock insists that middlebrow women writers, as a general category, “are as concerned with race as they are with class, gender, and domesticity” (19). Indeed, Hurst’s Delilah and Pearl Buck’s pro-Chinese tomes were considered full-on advocacy for antiracism, despite Hurst’s failure to provide Delilah any sort of real interiority or autonomy and the well-documented problematic white-savior implications of Buck’s work. But many argue that Buck’s self-identification as “Chinese,” for example, represents an appropriation of Chinese culture rather than an homage to it, that her tendency to “speak for” and “speak as,” to use Spivak’s and Toni Morrison’s respective phrases, cast a bleak shadow over her humanistic intentions. Lauren Berlant heaps Smyth’s share of scorn on blackface in Show Boat in The Female Complaint; Dude criticizes Hurst for ___.

Even though middlebrow literature, and middlebrow feminism, overwhelmingly tends to cohere around a white point of view, white women weren’t the only writers who participated in the middlebrow mode. Jessie Redmon Fauset, for example, best known for her important role as a participant in the Harlem Renaissance, wrote novels that bring middlebrow values together arguably more smoothly than any number of the more popular examples by white women.
writers. Her career as a woman of color serves as a more useful point of study for exploring the ways race shapes middlebrowism (as opposed either recuperating white women’s work through revisionist readings or merely blasting it and stopping there). Fauset’s role as editor of Crisis magazine put her at the center of writing and innovation in the New Negro movement in early- to mid-century America: like many midcentury women writers, including Ferber, Hurst, Canfield, and Buck, Fauset was a journalist before she was a novelist. Like Cather, Fauset has been the subject of significant feminist recovery efforts: her Ngrams profile suggests some buzz about her work in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s (with small divets and jumps around 1924, 1928, 1931, and 1933, the years in which her four novels were released), followed by a long dip, until an upswing in the 1980s that even exceeds her original notoriety (which consist mainly of anthologies and literary criticism).

![Graph showing frequency of keyword usage over time]

*Figure 2. Google Ngram Viewer, keywords Jessie Fauset, corpus English, smoothing 3*

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44 Jennifer Haytock discusses Fauset as a middlebrow writer, but her analysis includes some factual inaccuracies. Jamie Harker also writes persuasively about Fauset in the context of the middlebrow.
Fauset’s novel-writing career initially looked promising. Supported as she was by various prominent industry personalities, securing a publisher in Boni and Liveright proved fairly easy. With her connections and writerly reputation, her first novel, *There Is Confusion*, was highly anticipated. Yet Fauset’s middlebrow problems emerged early: the grand party thrown in her honor right before *There Is Confusion*’s publication later became a major point of contention amongst its attendees, as there was a faction among those present whose chief intention (as expressed in writing in their private correspondence, now housed in the archives at Howard University) was to minimize Fauset’s skill and undermine her achievement before it was even manifest.45 Despite the buzz about her talent and prospects, Fauset never met with the widespread embrace she might have reasonably expected. If we compare her Ngram profile to that of our benchmark Ferber, for example, we can see that Fauset hardly registers; the boost she gets in the 1980s from purposeful recovery efforts doesn’t even match the levels of Ferber’s relative obscurity.46

45 A letter to Alain Locke before the party registers her excitement about the occasion and his attendance; a letter to him after his negative review of her novel presents a marked contrast in her level of warmth. Alain Locke Papers Box 1-1 Folder 45; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.  
46 Compared with chapter1’s control of Hemingway, she doesn’t even come off the bottom line.
Figure 3. Google Ngram Viewer, keywords edna ferber; jessie fauset, corpus English, smoothing 3

Though Fauset’s novels provocatively considered the American middle class, and though her considerable abilities as a wordsmith were widely considered top-notch, her work had none of the comfortable distance and anthropological posturing of her bestselling white counterparts. General interest readers were trained to identify with white protagonists who sympathize with and champion people of color and those systemically marginalized in the United States; they weren’t, however, equipped to process the notion of a black American middle class narrated by a black American middle-class author. Fauset’s more direct (and, I would subjectively argue, more effective) engagement with American racism and classism exceeded critics’ usual vocabulary for assessing middlebrow writing. Reviewers were less concerned with “charm” and “significance” in Fauset’s work than with their utility as informational tracts on American blackness for white America’s enlightenment. They fretted that her characters were “a little too correct in speech and deportment”—a criticism never levied at a white writer, even if she wasn’t writing about white characters—and, by projecting
that “her type of stories” will soon be “more typical of her people,” effectively confined her novels to a niche audience (Brickell on *The Chinaberry Tree*, 286).

Meanwhile, the Harlem Renaissance coterie who constituted much of Fauset’s literary circle was similarly less interested in her fiction than might be expected, especially Alain Locke, her colleague and friend. Locke was put off by Fauset’s prose for all the same reasons reviewers were occasionally put off by middlebrow writing in general: it was, according to him, “sentimental,” her art “slowly maturing,” even four novels and decades of writing and teaching into her career. The New Negro movement championed experimentation, high art, and modernism: while Fauset’s education, interests, and work for *Crisis* may have fit with these terms, her mode of writing was middlebrow, a disconnect that predicated her underwhelming commercial and critical success as a novelist. Comparing her Ngram to that of Claude McKay, whom Locke compares favorably to Fauset in his review of *Comedy, American Style*, for example, yields results rather similar to that of Ferber:

![Figure 4. Google Ngram Viewer, keywords jessie fauset; claude mckay, corpus English, smoothing 3](image-url)
Even a more-experimental woman novelist such as Nella Larsen of *Quicksand* and *Passing* fame leaves her behind after 1985, though the two were comparable in their lifetimes.

![Graph showing frequency of keywords over time](image)

*Figure 5. Google Ngram Viewer, keywords jessie fauset; nella larsen, corpus English, smoothing 3*

Mason Stokes takes umbrage at New Negro public opinion on Fauset in his essay, “There is Heterosexuality,” identifying “prim” as a keyword (634). McKay reportedly called Fauset’s novels “precious” and Fauset a “pretty” and “dainty . . . primrose” against the backdrop of the “blaz[ing] summer heat” of the rest of the Harlem Renaissance. Wallace Thurman more harshly declared that “Fauset should be taken to Philadelphia and cremated” for her “ill-starred attempts” at writing (qtd. Stokes 635). Fauset, however, was often similarly unimpressed with her (male) detractors, as an angry letter to Alain Locke and a few subtle jabs nested in *Comedy, American Style* testify. Locke was the one with the tendency to “play safe with grand white folks,” according to Fauset, though she doesn’t elaborate (Letter to Locke).
Like Fauset’s reviewers, Fauset’s publishers struggled to find the vocabulary to appropriately categorize and market her work. Ads either euphemized her novels’ characters race or scrambled to reassure readers of their normalcy despite it; regardless, her stories’ could only be discussed in terms of their blackness. One advertisement from Fauset’s first publisher, Boni and Liveright, makes *There Is Confusion* book seem like an encyclopedia of some new species of person, rather than a middle-class realist novel, yet simultaneously avoids explicitly stating that the book centers on black characters: “Miss Fauset has produced a novel of definite interest. . . . Our nation is for the most part lamentably ignorant of the aspect of American life which it portrays” (Display Ad 40). “The aspect of American life which it portrays” is, of course, the black middle class, but the ad deals exclusively in obfuscating phrases like “an independent society” to refer to the book’s central characters. Her later publisher, Frederick A. Stokes, took a more prescriptive approach, characterizing *The Chinaberry Tree* as “A story of seven Negroes—strong, normal and intelligent” (Display Ad No. 79). Though all of the pieces were in place for Fauset to be a major success as a writer of middle-class fiction, the black avant-garde cohort’s derision for her style combined with white booksellers and publishers’ panic about representing a black authoress to leave her behind.

In a 1930 essay for *Opportunity*, Sterling Brown worries over “who should be a fit audience” for black writers, and lists some problems he identifies with criticism of black writing. Among them: “We look upon Negro books regardless of the author’s intention, as representative of all Negroes, i.e., as sociological documents” and “We criticize from the point of view of bourgeois America, of racial apologists.” For Brown, bourgeois America is synonymous with racial apologia in addition to “personal complacency” and “evasion of life.”
And though he is as critical of the black bourgeoisie as the white, his essay nonetheless articulates Fauset’s problem with audience for her black middle-class novels. As Thadious Dais points out in her introduction to *Comedy*, “opposing critical views of Fauset’s novels have never been reconciled,” her “achievement” always “contested” (xxxi), in part because “her progressive critiques of race, gender, and class ideologies were circuitous, and her messages of female emancipation, development, autonomy, and empowerment were coded” (xvi).

White reviewers indeed received Fauset’s novels consistent with Brown’s estimation of their prejudices; they struggled to wrap their minds around the idea of a story about black characters that wasn’t also about a certain kind of poverty and tragedy: “If ‘The Chinaberry Tree’ is not as picturesque or colorful as many portrayals of Negro life, it is certainly more intelligent,” one reviewer said—and this particular reviewer elsewhere diplomatically defines the “picturesque” as depictions of “uneducated Negro groups” (“Ends of Desire”). When it came to black writers and protagonists, white audiences wanted Bigger Thomas, not people like Angela and Ginny, two black women who fall in love with complementary men and live happily in snug little houses in nice black neighborhoods forever after. For his part, Brown was also critical of these such characters, though not as severely as mammy-esque characters in white writers’ work—he eviscerated Hurst’s treatment of Delilah and Peola in *Imitation of Life*, for example, calling them “stereotypes” and taking exception to Hurst’s degrading attempt at dialect with insulting lines as “She am an angel.” (Hurst responded by calling Brown “ungrateful”).
Reading Fauset as a middlebrow writer provides a framework for understanding the rhetorical choices she made that baffled her avant-garde-valuing critics. Perhaps what Locke saw as “pandering to white folks” could also be understood as Fauset developing a middle-class feminism that differentiates between core values and outside societal pressure. For Fauset’s middlebrowism, sometimes pejoratively characterized as “sentimentality,” had a unique sincerity in that it argued that middle-class values could be housed within the soul, independent of all social constructions, including race and even class itself. Wanting the material trappings of middle-class elitism and embracing one’s jealousy of whiteness, like Olivia in Comedy, American Style, leads to depravity and ruin, as she finishes the story miserable and exiled after driving her youngest son to suicide. Embodying the middle-class values surrounding family and productive citizenship naturally, however, especially if one’s upbringing didn’t necessarily teach such values, is the path to a happy ending, like Laurentine and Melissa of The Chinaberry Tree who, despite their births in illegitimacy and the well-publicized sexual transgressions of their single mothers, reject the legend of their “bad blood” and seek healthy domestic partnerships and happy, productive, modern lives.

Fauset develops this paradigm through a series of revisions to the tropes I have outlined above. The image of the little white house, for example, is more than merely iconic in Fauset’s rendering. House and home influence nearly every event that transpires in Fauset’s novels; it’s essential to her protagonists’ characterization in the beginning, the object of her quests throughout the middle, and the site of her prize (or punishment) in the end. The Chinaberry Tree opens thusly: “Aunt Sal, Laurentine, and even Melissa loved the house.” These eight words are a concise summary of the entire novel: it names the three women whose lives it chronicles and
their relationship with the culturally loaded object that connects them while simultaneously identifying which of them is the novel’s ultimate protagonist: Melissa, the only one for whom “Sal” is “Aunt,” but who doesn’t actually appear as a character for several more chapters. The first several pages are devoted to describing the house in detail, with special emphasis the agency of those who built and shaped it, and its evolution as they evolve; it’s not that there was a swing in the backyard, but that “someone had placed a swing on the back lawn” (1, my emphasis). Colonel Halloway, a pillar of Red Brook’s white community, had built the house specifically for Sal, the black woman he loved all his life but could not legally marry. “[H]e had fetched” the striking chinaberry tree in its front lawn” for Aunt Sal’s sake” because she reminded him of a “white lady birch” and “he saw nothing incongruous in its application to this Negro maid” (2). When Halloway becomes the novel’s dead patriarch, the tree remains, casting a shadow over the house which the women who dwell there think of as a sheltering shade; it reminds Laurentine of Halloway’s “brooding kindness” (6).

More than a convenient holding pen for Halloway’s mistress, the house serves as a manifesto co-authored by Sal and Halloway, a monument to their relationship that functions as a replacement for the institution of marriage. The “trim,” “white” house constantly reminds the town’s middle-class population of a partnership they’d preferred to deny (1); the chinaberry tree in the front yard reminds those who dwell within the house of the pleasure and comfort that partnership afforded the individuals in it. Where the houses Harris describes in Little White Houses signal their owners’ belonging to a respectable American middle class, the house with the chinaberry tree in Fauset’s novel, though it too has white siding and trim shutters, highlights its owners’ exclusion, as well as their resistance to that exclusion. It’s radical in its
utter conventionality, and reveals the authenticity of Sal, Laurentine, and Melissa’s middle-class values in contrast to the hypocrisy of the mob’s condemnation of alternative paths to familyhood. While flaunting middle-class anti-miscegenation sentiment and by extension its racism and sexual paranoia, the house reaffirms the core virtues of traditional domestic middle-class life by standing as a symbol of the sincerity and worthiness of its dwellers.

The younger women of the house, with varying levels of awareness of their mothers’ transgressions, seek to secure the comfort of the white house with the chinaberry tree for themselves as adults. As Melissa’s relationship with Malory Forten progresses, she gets “down to the only job in the world that seems to her really worth while,—that of building her home” (271). The word building here refers not to actual construction but furniture- and drapes-buying, picture-hanging, decorating, and painting,—for Melissa, these things are even more foundational to a home than the house’s actual foundation. They are the pieces of the house which signal what sort of house this is. In thinking about “building her home,” Melissa muses on material items, but weaves into the list of things she wishes to buy a certain ambience, the kinds of transactions she and her husband will have among them. She’ll be “the sweetest housekeeper,” the wife who “hustl[es] her husband off to work,” who, in return, exuberantly shouts “What a wife!” when he comes home for lunch to find everything tidy and comfortable and baked beans ready to eat out of green ramekins. Melissa explains ramekins to Malory: “Why, they’re ramekins, like cups, only of course they aren’t cups”; “[t]hey sound terrifying to me,” he replies (272). By buying the trappings of a particular kind of home—on sale at Barton’s—Melissa will buy the wholeness and balance promised to the middle class, which, for Malory, represents some sort of brave new world.
If Fauset’s take on the material signifiers of middle-class status was more earnest, her revision of middlebrow feminism was likewise more complex. The dead patriarch trope, for example, when deployed in a Fauset tale, though similarly necessary for the advancement of the plot, is less likely to be an unequivocal gain than in the novels of her white counterparts. The patriarch’s death is inevitable, but rarely a cosmic act of some sort of justice: men, in Fauset’s novels, aren’t dangerous or burdensome; they’re often just too weak to weather the storms of life. They tend to perish after falling mysteriously ill—in more than one instance (Plum Bun; Comedy, American Style) both mother and father fall ill, and the father is the only one who dies. Taking Fauset’s work as one’s sample, one might conclude that maleness correlates with some sort of susceptibility to disease and weakness, or that femaleness is connected with some immunity to viral attack. Fauset’s dead patriarchs tend to be fairly flat, two-dimensional characters—they’re instrumental and archetypical, rather than actual full characters—who share a few key traits: they are noble, they are darker skinned than their wives and daughters (with the notable exception of Halloway), and, most of all, they are oppressed at work and at play, and yet find ways to be content.

Similarly, the young heroine’s initial suitor rarely perseveres to the end of a Fauset novel. As foreshadowed by his terror at ramekins, Melissa’s Malory has a weak constitution; he’s shaken by Melissa’s revelation of her cousin Laurentine’s illicit parentage, and wrecked by the revelation that Melissa is the product of an affair between his father and her mother. Their siblinghood derails their plans for matrimony, but Malory attributes his grief equally to the revelation of Melissa’s “bastard” status: “You’re bad, bad, all of you!” he cries with “loathing” before dumping her on the side of the road (331). In response to his outburst, Melissa is “sorry
for him” (335), dismissing his invectives as the hysteria of a feeble mind: “He wasn’t very—solid—she thought. Imagine, imagine any one becoming so cruelly so revealingly bitter over a thing that neither he nor she could help . . . he really wasn’t very strong—all nerves and ideals[. . .]” Melissa then turns to Asshur, whose “nice, keen sense of values” were “unperturbed by the world’s standards of weights and measures”—his sense of “honor” contrasting with the “false pride” of those who would make a fuss about the parentage of a girl so empirically good as Melissa (336). For Fauset, “class” is an innate paradigm of ethics, with its economic, material, and generational dimensions as mere byproducts of those core values.

Whether they are late saints or living disappointments, patriarchs are consistently simple in Fauset’s novels. Passion, intelligence, and complexity are the exclusive domain of female characters, unknowable to their male counterparts. As Malory explains to Melissa, he is made of “dark, vacant spaces,” and she the “light, richness, life itself” necessary to “fill” them; he is “a shell” and she is “what it contains” (217). In *Comedy, American Style*, Olivia’s race-based self-hatred combines with her sociopathy to bring her family pain instead of “light.” Her depravity, however, is enabled by her husband Christopher’s failure to recognize the red flags in her personality that hinted at her pathological interiority; he’s blind to them, the narrator explains, because the very notion of a female interiority (the same that Zora Neale Hurston identified as that which white publishers typically won’t print) exceeds his understanding. Olivia’s father, meanwhile, is remembered by her mother with reverence as the best, most gentle man who ever lived, yet his absence also serves as a foil for Olivia’s mother’s

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47 I hope it’s clear that I’m using “patriarch” to describe head male domestic partners—not just all male characters.
survivalism: she lives through the illness that killed him, raises Olivia alone, and carves out a niche for herself in the elite black community at the local college, none of which she could have done had he lived. In this, Fauset’s books are perhaps more overtly feminist than any of the others, even as her resolutions are perhaps the most romantic, most sentimental, and least critical of the individual men who benefit from patriarchy.

Instead, Fauset uses these domestic partnerships and romantic attachments to articulate what Stokes calls a “new heterosexuality” specifically for black women in the twentieth century. For Stokes, those romantic and sentimental endings are “more queer intangible bugaboo than safe, reassuring pattern” (67); he quotes Deborah E. McDowell, who argues that Fauset “questions whether sexual expression for women should be attached to the moorings of marriage,” whether “sexual respectability” might be found by a woman’s own agency outside of such institutions. This is a direct reversal of, say, Hurst’s handling of female sexuality, which Traci B. Abbott distills thusly: “the path to finding and securing a male partner through one’s sexual desirability is the same as . . . being sexually autonomous” (635); for Abbott, Hurst was interested in exploring “the discrepancy between desirability and actual desire” (639). Unlike the mistress in The Chinaberry Tree, whose relationship is necessarily marginal but considered a mutual expression of sexual desire on the parts of Aunt Sal as well as Holloway, Hurst’s Ray Schmidt of Back Street boils with resentment of her married lover but mistakenly believes she accesses “sexual respectability” by submitting to him completely: by building her life around him without demanding any of the material comforts typical of such exchanges in return, she out-wifes his wife. That Walter keeps her on as his lover suffices for her to delude herself thusly, even though she is miserable throughout their affair and he deliberately keeps her in
poverty, to the point where she finishes the novel desperately scraping for coins on the ground. A Fauset protagonist has no such delusions—and never dives for dropped coins in the street. Where Ray is all alone, often at war with the other women in her family such as her stepmother and sister, Melissa and Laurentine forge their story’s most intimate, most lifesaving bond: soon after Malory’s cruel treatment of her, Melissa hears Laurentine call her “darling,” and “she hoped she’d do it again.”

5

“So in spite of other intentions I seem to have pointed a moral” Jessie Fauset says in her introduction to *The Chinaberry Tree*. Yet perhaps Fauset’s moral, whether or not she intended it, was an inevitable result of the mode of writing in which she was participating, woven deeply into its design. *Comedy, American Style’s* self-referential contents page suggests that Fauset was more aware of her novels’ form than her blasé concession in *Chinaberry’s* introduction: labels like “The Plot” and “Curtain” highlight her stories’ very formuleity, but its irony suggests a critique of the hegemony of that formula. In the template Fauset draws on to write her novels, morals are inevitable. Except Fauset’s “morals” coddle neither white supremacy nor black masculinity: for when Fauset’s characters patronize a fashionable restaurant in *The Chinaberry Tree*, she notes that “they entered through the back door” and quietly turns a brief spotlight on the apologetic face of a nearby white woman when they are inevitably escorted out instead of served by the haughty waiter. Instead of identifying with the basically liberal white characters they had been groomed to recognize, perhaps white readers saw themselves too much in the guilty-faced white woman: when Leslie’s party was kicked out of a restaurant in Ferber’s *Giant*
after standing up to a proprietor unwilling to serve Mexicans, white readers could feel indignant on white Leslie’s behalf and admire her for her restraint and resilience; Fauset, by contrast, calls them out for silently feeling bad as they complicitly finish their own filet mignon. *Imitation of Life* highlights the innate goodness of a black woman who won’t accept a raise when her employer’s wealth grows as a result of her domestic work; *Comedy* highlights the irony of a pompous white man telling a wronged black woman not to feel bitter (288).

“The history is there,” Fauset points out in *Chinaberry’s* introduction, “but he [the black American] doesn’t think of it”—in the previous example, Laurentine and Stephen would no more have entered through the front door than crawled through a window; they entered the restaurant the way they were accustomed to entering restaurants. Fauset’s novels often refuse to “think of” “the history”—she lets her characters chat with one another about drapes and dresses, reflect on beautiful weather, and thoughtfully contemplate their relations and friends without constant sociological analysis of the limitations or burdens of their blackness. Fauset refused, in her words, to “play safe with the grand white folks” by dwelling on her characters’ lack of whiteness, as she elsewhere suggested that the black education system and more “picturesque” black literature did (Harker 54). Yet so too does Fauset remind her readers of “the history that’s there” in her heroines’ first-round suitors, in the chinaberry trees that loom, and in the tragedy of a younger, darker-skinned son’s suicide in response to his self-hating mother’s rejection.
Bringing Fauset’s houses and dead patriarchs to bear on those of her white contemporaries, especially those who themselves wrote about “the race problem,” like Hurst, both underscores the subversive potential of middlebrow feminism and reveals the impenetrability of its limitations. There is but one article in the *English Journal* before 1960 bearing Fauset’s name, a brief honorable mention on the author’s way to a fuller description of Nella Larsen as writers who “s[seek] to give in fiction a serious approach to problems as they s[ee] them” (Brawley 198). The publication spilled no ink building cases “against” her; Van Vechten didn’t mention her among his list of “literary ladies”; Margaret Wallace never praised her prose’s vividness while lamenting her lack of depth. These were all left to black reviewers in black periodicals, like Brown’s in *Opportunity* and Locke’s in *Crisis*, who rose enthusiastically to the occasion.

The feminist protest embedded in midcentury women’s writing about the American middle class helps to move American culture along a predetermined path of progress; in so doing, it ultimately supports the scaffolds of normativity, rather than dismantling them reaffirming rather than radicalizing the bourgeoisie. World War II would bring with it an intense nationalist fervor that would further entrench circulating myths about the US middle-class households as the heart and soul of America while simultaneously fretting about women’s places within and without them. In the next chapter, I show how interwar middlebrow self-consciousness carries through the postwar, using the work of Patricia Highsmith, contextualized by two earlier women who I consider her two formative predecessors, crime writer Mary Roberts Rinehart and modernist Gertrude Stein.
Chapter 4: “They’re Not the Whole World”: Genre, Social Consciousness, and Patricia Highsmith

“Probably the story of crime has always had a greater appeal to people of intelligence and achievement than has been supposed,” Mary Roberts Rinehart speculates in her feature Publisher’s Weekly editorial, “The Repute of the Mystery Story” (1930). Rinehart wrote with the authority of one of the most prominent crime writers of the early- to mid-twentieth century. She was credited with inventing the had-I-but-known school of detective fiction, which became a major hallmark of the genre. Genre fiction, the umbrella term for books that adhere most rigidly to the conventions of various story types such as crime, westerns, and romance, was the “Masscult” in Macdonald’s “Midcult and Masscult.” These were books sold to the “several million” Americans who are not “literary people,” but rather people who can be convinced to buy books that “have no relation to literature” but suffice for “entertainment and a few pleasant evenings, a good story, a good cry or two an good laugh or two,” according to respected advertising executive Helen Woodward in a 1920 address to an assortment of New York book publishers.

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1 See Jeanne Ewert, “Hardboiled (Had I But Known),” Paradoxa: Studies in World Literary Genres 16 (2001): 11-25. The phrase also serves as the title of one of Roberts’s biographies, written by late 1980s and 1990s detective novelist Charlotte MacLeod: Had She But Known: A Biography of Mary Roberts Rinehart; in it, MacLeod perhaps intentionally imitates Rinehart’s affected writing style, opening with an anecdote about her birth “under the sign of Leo,” sighing over the “future glory” that awaited “this chubby, blue-eyed baby who was to become the most lionized woman in America.” This last is perhaps an overstatement, but if edited as “the most lionized crime writer in early-twentieth-century America,” could be considered accurate.
If the highbrow disdained the middlebrow, as has been thoroughly established, then the middlebrow disdained genre fiction—or, perhaps more precisely, the middlebrow viewed genre fiction as a guilty pleasure or “vice” as Rinehart’s article’s caption reads, the sort of thing appropriate to indulge only in moderation. Rinehart’s defense of crime novel thus differs slightly from contemporaneous defenses of more trenchant middlebrow fiction: where pro-middlebrow treatises argued for some estimable artistic vision in the novels they sought to recuperate, Rinehart seeks mainly to prove that crime fiction isn’t actively detrimental to the intellect by citing negative-case studies such as Theodore Roosevelt (the same President, incidentally, who Edna Ferber was proud to count among her fans) and other “great men.” Further, Rinehart distinguishes “good” crime stories—she is careful not to call them “novels”—from the mediocre, as well as from irredeemable modes such as “the sex book.” Genre fiction, in this case crime fiction, thus seems to represent yet another liminal level of categorization that disrupts the alleged linearity of literature’s hierarchy of quality.

As with other designations of status within the field of cultural production, however, the supposed boundaries between genre and “better” (what we now understand as “middlebrow”) fiction were often blurred and sometimes seem to prompt more squabbling among publishers’ marketing departments, authors, and critics than consensus. Publishers, as the copy in the Publisher’s Weekly article shows, often aligned with authors to seek a middlebrow audience for certain works of crime or romance fiction that seemed particularly well-suited to the crossover. At other times, publishers and authors were at odds, for example when a publisher wanted to market a book a certain way, or solicited a certain kind of book from an author who was indignant at what such moves suggested about their status as creative artists. Meanwhile, when
a critic wanted to insult a middlebrow author, calling their books genre fiction was a good shortcut for doing so subtly. Macdonald, for example, draws a distinction between Masscult and Midcult in that he uses two separate terms to refer to them, even though the overall thrust of his argument is that they are one and the same—it’s just that midcult tries to disguise itself as something other than masscult.

In the post–World War II US, more than a decade after Rinehart’s career peak, advancements in the manufacturing process for paperbacks added a material dimension to these feeble divisions. Paperback novels had previously been tested and deemed unsuccessful by leaders of the book industry, notably Fredrick A. Stokes (Tebbel 63), but in the 1940s book makers adopted a cheaper, more efficient printing process that included brightly colored linings for paperback covers so that they were sturdier and more attractive than earlier incarnations but also easier to mass produce than hardcovers. Publishers had long signaled their estimations of books’ relative prestige through their physical craftsmanship—Viking, for example, argued in its debut press release (mentioned in chapter 1) that its attention to design and artisanal bindings reflected the high quality of its selective list—but the paperback innovation emphasized these distinctions more than ever. Beyond the small touches like Ferber’s color title page for *American Beauty* and the gold leaf details in the spine of *A Peculiar Treasure*, books could now be distinguished at a glance by size, shape, shelving and shipping methods, and a whole new tier of pricing. Since most middlebrow books—the prizewinners, the formal
“bestsellers,” the book club selections—were published in hardcover, publishers could round certain works of genre fiction up to middlebrow by printing them the same way and selling them at a similar price point.

This makes a postwar writer like Patricia Highsmith difficult to classify retroactively. Almost all of her work has close ties to the kind of “stories of crime” Rinehart referred to in her article, and in the current age of self-service bookstores, she is typically shelved in the “mystery” section, which would make her an epitomical genre writer. Scholarship on Highsmith, though not overwhelming, is fairly robust in anthologies and articles about crime fiction and noir, and even more so in film studies, as her most famous work was brought to the cinema by Alfred Hitchcock. Her biographers are unanimous in their descriptions of Highsmith’s jealous protection of her status as a “hardcover” writer, however, and the high importance she placed on her higher-art connections in the industry, such as her time at Yaddo writers’ colony and acquaintanceship with late-modernist Truman Capote—whose In Cold Blood itself owes some of its interest to its generic elements, though he is rarely referred to as only a genre writer and never experienced the constant threat of obscurity that plagued Highsmith.

Highsmith herself was very explicit that she considered any categorization of her writing an insult, as her afterword to the 1989 edition of The Price of Salt details, fashioning herself as a fragmented remainder of the American expatriate writers’ coterie of the modernist age. During the height of her career from the late-1940s through late-1950s, however, her

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2 Many paperbacks sold just as many and more copies than the hardcover books listed in, say, The New York Times’s list for example, but only books that had an initial hardcover run were counted in such lists.
publisher relationships and the marketing and categorization of her work varied. Perhaps the most widely written-about aspect of Patricia Highsmith since her death, in and out of academia, is her biography: the strange, sometimes disturbing personal life of a seriously unpleasant person right out of Djuna Barnes’s Book of Repulsive Women. Second to this are Strangers on a Train and The Talented Mr. Ripley—two texts which feature male protagonists desperate to live the lives of the upper middle class, embroiled in twisted, psychopathic crimes. A relatively recent special issue of Post45 devoted to Highsmith considers her work in terms of “queer consumerism” (Esteve), novels of “microworlds” almost like speculative fiction (Seltzer), and animal studies (Trask, who also wrote about her “anachronistic ‘queering’” in “Patricia Highsmith’s Method”); its introduction calls her, most importantly, a “disrupter of categories” (Perrin). Though Highsmith’s novels feature an undeniable formula—one that she had so mastered that she even penned a mystery-writing instruction manual later in her career—the recent uptick in scholarly interest in her has been roused by her anti-formulaeity. Thus Highsmith has been called, in addition to a noir (Rzepka) or psycho-thriller (Simpson) crime writer, a “late modernist” (Nabers; Nadel), a lesbian pulp novelist (or “lesbian book-writer,” as she put it)—and “middlebrow” (Levay).

Indeed, it’s possible that, of all the categories she has been drawn under, “middlebrow” is the most counterintuitive, considering its association with the kind of heteronormative suburban conventionality Highsmith openly abhorred. Yet, in her lesbian romance The Price of Salt, her thrillers Strangers on a Train, The Talented Mr. Ripley, and even the lesser-known Sweet Sickness, Highsmith continually interrogates artistic production with the middlebrow’s
suspicion of both high and low art and using the middlebrow’s trademark sleight of hand for examining the everyday as both critic and luminary of mainstream US culture.

The genre conventions which mark Highsmith’s approach to storytelling leant themselves to what Michael Trask calls her “antisocial” ethos. Far from chapters 2 and 3’s “ruthlessly humanitarian” women, Highsmith’s lack of interest in social criticism has made her difficult to “rehabilitate,” also in Trask’s term. Where interwar middlebrows carefully balanced criticism and comfort to in an effort to advance their progressive agendas, Highsmith gleefully “embrace[d], rather than debunk[ed] the mores of postwar society” when it suited her, rejecting almost all organized efforts to effect social change, whether on behalf of the oppressed groups she could be said to belong to as a lesbian woman (see: Little Tales of Misogyny), or those she, too, held in contempt as an unapologetic and well-documented anti-Semite and racist. For example, Highsmith’s views on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict neatly illustrate the difficulty of “rehabilitating” her from a neoliberal perspective: among the first of public intellectuals to condemn the violence against Palestinians as a genocide, Highsmith dedicated one of her later books “To the courage of the Palestinian people and their leaders who struggle to regain a part of their homeland,’’ a line which appears on the surface to demonstrate some social consciousness. But a fuller view of her biography and writings makes it clear that she personally loathed all people of Jewish association of any country of origin, which recasts such sentiments as less civic engagement and more antagonism.

Though her observations of middle America did indeed work to highlight its more unsavory elements—what Bran Nicol is likely referring to when he says the “criminal impulses
that erupt in ordinary life”—edification was not among her purposes: when Highsmith mused that, since humans eat animals, including veal and lamb, animals should be fed human embryos, she wasn’t so much advocating vegetarianism—Highsmith’s fondness of steak is as well-documented as her dislike of Jews—as she was taking some strange pleasure in the idea of feeding fetuses to animals (Wilson). Yet, building on Nicol’s description, the moments many readers and critics find disturbing in Highsmith’s point of view are those in which Highsmith draws out the grisly logic lurking just below the surface of benign, every day interaction. In other words, Highsmith didn’t invent alternate antisocial worlds so much as begin with the premise that mainstream American culture was already antisocial, that normativity was nothing more than perversion that evades surveillance. For Highsmith, eating lamb or roe was the same as eating a human embryo—and she was comfortable with that. Thus I argue that Highsmith’s bibliography—particularly *The Price of Salt*, but also *Strangers on a Train*, the Ripley series, and *Sweet Sickness*—presents a darker postwar revision of the antimodernism and antipatriarchy of middlebrow fiction. Considering Highsmith as a middlebrow writer whose social criticism was less affirmative of the American bourgeois but no less carefully balanced than her interwar counterparts allows for a nuanced reading of her multiple strains of protest—and indeed, doing so even helps make visible the antisociality of other postwar middlebrow women writers.

1. Stein’s Crime Story and Harcourt’s “Magic”

“She spoke to me about Gertrude Stein and Oscar Wilde,” recalled Irma Andina in Andrew Wilson’s biography of Highsmith. Stein is a recurring peripheral figure in
conversations about Highsmith, frequently cropping up as a point of comparison. Both writers shared a love of early comic books (Schenkar 157) and even some mutual acquaintances (233); once-partner actress Tabea Blumenschein, remembers her as being “a bit like Gertrude Stein,” “tough but so handsome” (Wilson). Highsmith’s character Therese in *Price of Salt*, perhaps the closest protagonist to autobiographical that she ever drew, is marked by her familiarity with and enjoyment of Stein’s work, juxtaposed with her complete disinterest in that of James Joyce (much to her boyfriend’s dismay). It’s easy to see where Highsmith might make the connection between the famous modernist and herself, and it’s tempting to speculate that Highsmith may have emulated Stein, with her constant griping that she wrote best in Europe, particularly France (she eventually retreated to full-time Swedish expatriatism). Like Stein, Highsmith lived her life as an open and seemingly unafraid lesbian and her living situation with paperback writer Marijane Meaker, detailed in Meaker’s memoir, reads like a reprise of the arrangement between Stein and Alice B. Toklas: both writers, one more famous than the other, living together in a rigid routine in secluded country house where frequent guests were fellow intellectuals and artists and much of each day was devoted to the work of thinking and writing.

Lesser-known as a point of commonality between Highsmith and canonical modernist Stein, however, was both writers’ association with crime fiction. Stein’s *Blood on the Dining Room Floor*, a book whose categorization is complicated given the supposed distinctions among literary forms, is generally received as the aberrant crime novel of a career modernist, despite Stein’s foray into middlebrowism with the bestselling *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and even though she published multiple essays in her lifetime about her respect for the genre of crime fiction. Written in 1933 but published in 1948, two years after Stein’s death, the life of the
manuscript straddles World War II. Stein’s celebrity was just taking hold at the end of the interwar period, brought about by Autobiography’s popularity in 1933; though the avant-garde expat community of writers in Europe all knew Stein and her work well by then, the US middlebrow audience hadn’t yet been formally introduced to Stein’s infamously idiosyncratic prose style by a major American publisher. The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas was Stein’s most accessible work to date, as its uncharacteristically high sales and distribution—by major 1920s-generation publisher Harcourt, Brace and Company instead of the small, independent European presses that Stein normally worked with—corroborate. Stein researched and began writing Blood on the Dining Room Floor during her lecture series and book tour for Autobiography in the US, the tour that marks her rupture into what Catherine Stimpson calls the “two Gertrude Steins”: accessible, popular Stein and experimental, obscure Stein. By Blood on the Dining Room Floor’s actual release in 1948, then, a Stein novel had a peculiar cultural cache. Middlebrow approval of Stein’s work held reasonably steady somehow without compromising her high-art reputation, but middlebrow readers didn’t automatically trust that a forthcoming Stein novel would necessarily appeal to them.

For her part, Stein, a key patron of avant-garde art and the modernist literary movement as it was unfolding, had an optimistic view of the possibility for the coexistence of what Bourdieu would call autonomous artistic production and wide circulation. In Authors Inc., Loren Glass expertly details the conditions of Stein’s American literary celebrity, and articulates the contradictions in her view of her own historicity. Stein described herself in The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas as “the admired of the precious,” but expresses with certainty that “some day they, anybody, will find out that she is of interest to them”; in other words,
Stein felt that the kind of writing which appealed to those on the cutting edge of high art would in due course find an audience with the general interest reader. In this view, she was well-aligned with Harcourt, Brace, and Company (also Dorothy Canfield’s publisher). Alfred Harcourt was a leader in the 1920s-generation innovation, along with partners Donald Brace and Ellen Knowles Earyes—indeed, Harcourt, Brace’s 1919 founding, precipitated by Alfred Harcourt’s feeling hamstrung creatively by his superiors at family-owned, civil-war era Holt, led the charge for his cohort. Harcourt coined the phrase “novel of ideas,” which he used to market Stein’s difficult prose, along with that of other modernists such as Virginia Woolf and T.S. Eliot, and was known to say that the role of a good publisher is merely to create opportunities for a truly good book to “work in its own magical way on the public” (qtd. Turner 112).

Stein and Harcourt’s faith in the sophistication of American readers proved to be well-founded when it came to Autobiography. More accessible than her previous texts, but still bearing Stein’s signature rhetorical aesthetics, Autobiography made Stein immensely famous.

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1 Though the latter’s name didn’t make it onto the masthead, Earyes was instrumental in Harcourt’s success, and in setting the tone for the house’s culture, wherein women were hired in all departments, including finance, and were compensated far more equivalently to their male counterparts than in most industries, and even in other houses within the book industry.

2 As Tebbel notes, Holt was incredibly irritated by this; an adversarial letter to the editor in Publisher’s Weekly following the announcement of Harcourt, Brace’s founding is defensive and politely acidic.

3 Some have suggested that Stein purposely wrote the book in six weeks for commercial reasons (see Souhami). Other accounts of the composition of Autobiography are a bit more nuanced (see Burns), however, and indeed Stein did refuse to comply with any publisher requests regarding the style or subject matter of her books (see letter to Van Vechten, 1933). Glass addresses Stein’s handling of writing for money extensively in Authors, Inc.
with what Glass vaguely refers to as “the American public,” but which might more specifically be termed “American general interest readers,” which we know are comprised in no small part by the middlebrow. Yet Glass maintains that middlebrow readers “continued to stubbornly resist all but [Stein’s] most accessible writing” (116)—Stein’s newfound notoriety did less than she projected to persuade the broader swath of readers to tackle her more difficult work.

Even as middlebrow audiences were trained to expect the unexpected when it came to postwar Gertrude Stein, reviewers and critics were nonetheless surprised by the modernist’s participation in the genre of crime fiction. Yet Stein was a famously unapologetic fan of crime fiction herself, and captivated by real-life crime in the news, as Matthew Levay attests in his article “Remaining a Mystery: Gertrude Stein, Crime Fiction and Popular Modernism,” which details the history of Stein’s novel as well as its context within and without modernism. For Levay, crime stories touched on all of the topics that most enthralled Stein: “the epistemological gap between an event and its meaning, the primacy of the reader or viewer in either reaffirming or bridging that gap, and the power of narrative to resist traditional modes of intelligibility or to render intelligible that which otherwise escapes us” (2). Fascinated by which murders did and did not matter to the American public—that is, which murder stories were deemed most worthy by American media for retelling in narrative form—Stein’s crime novel may have been an exercise in articulating and extracting meaning in such scenes.

Thus the pull of Blood on the Dining Room Floor isn’t only the matter of the “whodunit” in the case of the almost-certain murder of the hotel owner’s wife, which we never find out; it’s the matter of “who cares” and “why,” questions that the text explores in far greater depth. For
Stein, “knowing the answer” in fictional crime stories “spoils it, . . . unless another mystery crops up during the crime and that mystery remains” (“Narration” 40; qtd. in Levay 1). Accordingly, Blood on the Dining Room Floor’s narrator makes no attempts to solve anything, and rather revels in not-knowing:

[The] elder brother . . . said that she walked in her sleep.

Had she.

I’m sure I do not know.

Instead, we learn about how the community reacts to her death: her husband, the younger brother, the older brother, the neighbors.

Reviewers largely panned the book; even those who appreciated it, such as a reviewer for New York Herald Tribune who called it “engaging,” treated it like a novelty — “lit’ry lunacy,” in the reviewer’s phrasing. For a middlebrow reviewer, Blood on the Dining Room Floor might have been the worst version of Stein imaginable: the inaccessible Stein of circular, impenetrable prose—one cranky Time reviewer called her “the late expatriate mumbo-jumboist” —combined with a genre that had been largely degraded as lowbrow. For them, the late Stein had combined in her work, not the best of the high and lowbrows into a comfortable middle, but rather the worst into a bewildering disappointment. There were, of course, the usual gripes about Stein’s experimental style: the prose was too jumbled; the plot was too opaque. But one Time magazine reviewer also berated Stein for failing to respect the crime genre’s norms, specifically: “there’s
no detective,” he complains, rendering the novel a “leg pull.” In other words, writing a crime novel without adhering to the conventions that readers of genre fiction depend on, choosing not to deliver the plot twists they expect in the formula they have been trained to believe defines this type of novel, is an act of disrespect. Stein would have done better to remain in her own high-art corner among her admirers and leave the crime writing to the crime writers.

The receptional conundrum that Stein’s book presents exposes disruptions in the ranking system thought to govern and organize the brows. What Glass, by way of Catherine Stimpson, calls the initial “Old Good Stein”—accessible, engaging, lucrative—and “Old Bad Stein”—experimental, difficult, obscure—which later became, respectively, New Bad Stein and New Good Stein in academia, needs yet another reevaluation in light of Blood on the Dining Room Floor. Where could the crime novel by a modernist fit into these “handy” schematics, as Glass calls them (117)? Blood on the Dining Room Floor’s pattern after a genre debased even in the middlebrow world, let alone among the high-art elitists, brings it into New Bad Stein territory. Indeed, Stein didn’t even choose to publish it herself; rather, her partner Alice had it published for her posthumously as part of the management of her estate (and copyright). Yet Glass and Levay both imply that the manuscript was an act of artistic autonomy, given her concurrent refusal of a contract from Harcourt to write more biographies like Autobiography that didn’t “interest” her (Letter to Van Vechten). Its impenetrable poetics, lack of commercial success, and considered upheaval of such an entrenched genre suggest New Good Stein. And none of these speculations account for the possibility that it could be a whole new variety of bad Stein simply because its poetics are, by some elusive measure, according to someone, of lesser quality than those of Everybody’s Autobiography or Three Lives, its generic associations notwithstanding.
Though it’s impossible to say why Stein didn’t try to publish *Blood on the Dining Room Floor* while she was alive, attempts to categorize the book in hindsight only show the porousness of the boundaries separating common categories of fiction.

2. The Masculinity of “Good” Crime Fiction

Considering fiction in the terms of genre conventions is still crucial, however, in that the myths about various novels’ types still exert influence over their producers, consumers, and critics. Woodward’s aforementioned address in what Tebel calls the “business-oriented twenties” deems the publishing industry’s more principled motivations in their houses’ mission statements “preposterous” considering the new, expansive untapped market of casual readers. Record literacy rates and a larger-than-ever middle class brought about a new audience whose interest in leisure reading might be roused by more comfortably formulaic, less socially conscious fare than the most lauded middlebrow offerings. Despite her jeering at publisher’s pretensions as cultural gatekeepers, Woodward’s call to reach new readers and publish new kinds of books coincides with the business impetus of the 1920s generation of houses, as previous chapters have outlined. By midcentury, it was clear that the rejuvenated book industry had acted in accordance with Woodward’s advice about reaching these underserved multitudes, negotiating these money grabs with their reputations for quality and prestige all along. Book clubs, as Janice Radway has established, were a way for publishers to sell more books through mail-order to readers who didn’t frequent bookstores, yet the supposedly objective selection process of the founding board of the Book-of-the-Month Club, for example,
was also advertised as a means of verification of a book’s literary worth. Furthermore, though Harcourt and other 1920s publishers following his lead distributed books according to their belief in literature’s “magic,” they supplemented the business risks they took on the artistic offerings with the reliable sales of puzzle books, cookbooks, and self-help nonfiction.

In the case of fiction, publishers used the perception of the strong distinction between middlebrow and genre fiction to their advantage in their distribution and advertising practices, even before the advent of the paperback. Crime novels, in particular, brought out kitschy advertising gimmicks such as skywriting and contests in which publishers sealed the final few pages of a thriller and challenged readers to return the book with the seal (and suspense) unbroken, the revelatory ending unread. Such tactics, whose implementation would have necessitated a certain prescriptive cooperation from authors regarding the books’ contents, would never have been appropriate for (or tolerated by) middlebrow Pulitzer winners, but proved effective for books like Rinehart’s *The Door*. In the context of the hierarchization of brows and the spectrum of author production from autonomy to heteronomy, the gimmicks Tebbel outlines for advertising genre fiction served two related purposes: one, they reified the distinction between genre fiction and more serious novels by incentivizing a certain kind of reader participation, and two, they legitimized both—by emphasizing the middlebrow’s comparatively elevated position in the hierarchy of literary culture and creating a utilitarian

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4 As Radway discusses, this was not always a straightforward process. See *A Feeling for Books* for the complexities of the Book of the Month Club and its reputation as an arbiter of literary taste.

48 For more on puzzle-books, see Tebbel’s section on Simon and Schuster in *The Golden Age of Publishing*. 

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role for genre fiction in the respectable middle-class reading life: a non-frivolous form of relaxation and fun, necessary for a balanced life.

Certain detective and/or romance writers, however, such as Rinehart and Maltese Falcon author Dashiell Hammett, were suited for a more middlebrow interpretation. For these writers’ work, publishers might appeal to some higher authority of culture for legitimacy. Indeed, Rinehart’s aforementioned editorial grasps for cultural authority from the highest office in the state: “Practically all of our recent Presidents have turned to [crime] books, not as relaxation, but for that truest rest of the mind which comes from substituting one form of mental activity for another. . . . [T]he more active-minded the man, the more likely he is to turn to this form of reading” (563). Publisher’s Weekly dedicates a full page to this excerpt as a pullquote surrounded by ten official-looking portraits of various distinguished white men: heads of state, war heroes, men of letters (see fig. 6). Some are mentioned by name in the article, like Presidents Herbert Hoover and Theodore Roosevelt, while the inclusion of other visages in the image is a bit more puzzling, such as King George, V. The caption recommends that every bookseller “hang this illustrat[ion] . . . on your bulletin board”—to let these heads of state’s somber white male faces endorse and thus legitimize the crime novels they sell.
That all of the figureheads depicted here are men is more than a coincidence of the male-dominated offices they hold, for Rinehart not only invokes Presidents and others who happen to be men, but she invokes them as men. Their maleness is as important to her argument as their elected offices: "many more men than women read [crime stories]," Rinehart points out. She declines to explain why these demographics should reassure middlebrow readers of crime fiction’s virtues; she merely states them, as if the fact that men enjoy crime fiction is a reason unto itself. Throughout the essay, Rinehart emphasizes crime novels’ “logic” and their “appeal to the wits and intelligence of the reader,” implying that these are qualities male readers are
uniquely disposed to appreciate. Rinehart seems to be intervening in some perception she
believes to dominate that fiction popular primarily among women is less-serious fiction. Using
these gendered signals, the essay defends genre fiction by creating a hierarchy *within* the
designation itself. Rinehart’s project of recuperating the reputation of crime fiction, in this case,
necessitates distinguishing the “good,” “properly-written” examples of it, to be appreciated by
“careful” readers—like important, brilliant men—from the “hast[il]ly” written for “people
unwilling to make a mental effort” (564)—like frivolous, dim not-men.²

Rinehart’s editorial, together with *Publisher’s Weekly’s* image and caption, tightly
illustrate the range of interests exerting influence on book production, circulation, and
consumption: those of the state (see: presidential name-dropping), of booksellers creating a
market for themselves (see: presidential face-branding), of consumers who are presumed to
value certain kinds of cultural capital (see: appeal to the intelligent masculinity of crime), and
the interests of authors seeking a certain status as art-producers somewhere else along the
spectrum of heteronomous and autonomous, in Bourdieu’s terms (see: Rinehart’s claim that a
crime story is “a novel, plus”—even harder and more complex to write than a novel).

3. Two Patricia Highsmiths

Stein and Rinehart’s histories as crime writers intersect in the career of postwar novelist
Highsmith. A hardcover novelist whose new releases got full middletow treatment by Harper

² Or, in a callback to chapter 3, not-quite-not-native informants.
and Brothers and 1920s-generation publisher Coward-McCann, Highsmith was at least “good”
genre fiction by the industry and Rinehart’s terms of measurement. Her most popular and
enduring works, *Strangers on a Train* and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* along with its accompanying
sequels, lead critics to hail her either as a reincarnation of Edgar Allen Poe or a lady auxiliary of
Rinehart’s contemporary Dashiell Hammett, depending on their perspective. Harper and
Brothers, the prestigious civil-war era house who owned Highsmith’s initial contracts,
published *Strangers on a Train*, which marked her breakout success. After its bestselling run in
print, it was shortly converted into a box-office success by the redoubtable Alfred Hitchcock in
1954, which heightened *Strangers’s* notoriety still further. However, perhaps because
Highsmith’s name was dropped from the film’s promotional posters and replaced with
Hitchcock’s, and because the film’s enduring cult following has kept it closer to the front of
cultural memory than the book, the story of *Strangers on a Train* is now more strongly associated
with him than with her, in popular culture as well as academia. Where Ferber had managed to
wrangle clauses in her contracts with her publishers and the studios that produced film
adaptations of her work to continue to affix her name to her titles in the 1930s and 1940s, those
types of provisions were rare by 1950. Highsmith was incensed by Hitchcock’s appropriation of
her story, and even more incensed by her powerlessness over its evolution.

*The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1955) may have a stronger association with Highsmith than
*Strangers*, since it wasn’t turned into a film until Anthony Minnella’s version starring Matt
Damon in 1999. Unlike Hitchcock, Minnella thought of the phrase “based on the novel by
Patricia Highsmith” as a point of interest for his film. Highsmith’s most recent and most
popular biography by Joan Schenkar riffs on the title with *The Talented Ms. Highsmith*, drawing a
deliberate parallel between the woman, often thought to be strange, eccentric, “queer” in every sense of the word, and her infamously sociopathic, probably homosexual character Tom Ripley. Highsmith wrote four sequels to Ripley; publications such as The New Yorker, whose attention Highsmith coveted, continued to review the novels exceedingly well through Ripley’s Game in 1974, praising her writing’s “intelligence and aplomb.” Though Highsmith’s bibliography boasts a prolific output, much of the writing about her in crime anthologies and collections on noir focuses on Ripley and its sequels; much of the rest is about Strangers, and many of those are about Hitchcock’s film.

But the publication of The Price of Salt in 1952, between Strangers on a Train and Ripley, muddles all of the tidy characterizations of Highsmith’s craft that are based almost exclusively on her two best-known works. It led Highsmith to revise her writing persona, as well, since Harper dropped her upon receipt of the manuscript. Harper’s rejection of The Price of Salt is generally traced to the lesbian romance at the center of the story, based on the assumption that such a subject matter was too controversial for the distinguished civil-war press to lend its insignia. Harcourt and the American public had more or less tolerated Stein’s lesbian sexuality as the open secret of an eccentric artist, and Highsmith likewise traded on her eccentricity to protect her as she lived openly with her same-sex romantic partners. But the McCarthy era’s heightened fear of non-heterosexuality, sometimes called the lavender scare, with its accompanying social and legal restrictions, made Highsmith’s lesbianism a greater liability for a century-old house like Harper than Stein’s had been for the more liberal, even proto-feminist, Harcourt; thanks to midcentury applications of Comstock Laws and resolutions of other governmental bodies, it was illegal and dangerous for the post office to distribute material—
including books—thought to potentially encourage homosexual behavior. This liability, coupled with a manuscript in which Highsmith wrote so candidly about a lesbian affair, was too much for Harper to sustain.

Had Harper chosen to publish The Price of Salt, it would also have had to address the problem of the dearth of ready marketing buzzwords or advertising strategies appropriate for selling it. Though, like Strangers on a Train, The Price of Salt follows two ordinary characters who, after their chance meeting, become social and legal transgressors, Therese and Carol’s cross-country road trip is part-romance, part-Bildungsroman; the detective on their trail is deemphasized here, pushing the book’s noir elements to the background. The only book of Highsmith’s explicitly about a lesbian romance, published square in the middle of Creadick’s American “sex panic,” The Price of Salt is the least titillating, the events in the story less shocking, and the ending less tragic. Woven throughout is an element of what Terry Castle aptly describes as “roadside Americana,” lending it a middle-class realist feel. As a follow-up to Strangers on a Train, The Price of Salt wouldn’t have given Highsmith’s career a clear trajectory or solidified a brand of any kind for her. As a middlebrow novel, however, the taboo affair at its center rendered it a nonstarter. The reader market for pure lesbian romances, meanwhile, was primarily the domain of paperback and mass-market presses.¹ How could Harper convince

¹ Yvonne Keller’s work is instructive here: she locates the flourishing of lesbian and gay print culture directly in the midcentury, between 1950 and 1965, and notes that it coincides with the height of McCarthy-era antigay paranoia (179). During these years, communism and homosexuality were interchangeable in many post-WWII surveillance initiatives and much legislation (180). Some perceived communism and homosexuality as one and the same, despite the fact that the Communist party was itself vehemently antihomosexual. Lesbian pulp fiction, Keller’s specific subject matter, is a booming business at midcentury.
booksellers to buy such a book, when they couldn’t offer a poster of presidents’ headshots, or Pulitzer credentials, or a sealed ending as an angle to get it off their sellers’ shelves? Where they had a ready vocabulary to promote middlebrow hardcover novels that had some of the hallmarks of genre fiction, as in *Strangers on a Train*, there was no such precedent for selling *The Price of Salt* as a middlebrow novel with echoes of pulp fiction.

Though Harper’s break with Highsmith was a devastating blow to her ego, considering the high value she placed on her associations in the literary sphere, she committed to publishing the manuscript elsewhere, and didn’t have to go all the way to a mass-market paperback company like Gold Medal to do so. Where her prestigious civil-war-era press failed her, 1920s generation house Coward-McCann agreed to distribute the title without even the benefit of her increasingly famous name to sell it: for this solitary work, Highsmith wrote under the pseudonym of Claire Morgan. Coward-McCann gave *The Price of Salt* the full middlebrow treatment in its ad campaign, and the book was even reviewed by the *New York Times*, which praised Claire Morgan’s “good taste” in her handling of the allegedly “explosive subject matter,” but ultimately complained about its lack of titillation, calling it too “low voltage” (Rolo). The hardcover run was respectable, but per the latest trends in book publishing technology, Coward-McCann was able to follow up with a paperback release—and this was when sales exploded to a half a million.

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2 Highsmith was besties with Truman Capote—her in mind, anyway. Others suggest that she exaggerated the friendship in a grab for status. As a 2009 *New Yorker* blog post details, she also had high hopes for publishing in *The New Yorker*, or even writing for other, less literary magazines like *Vogue*. 
The success of the paperback release makes sense when we consider that the new paperback publishing technology enabled yet another publishing boom in the late-1940s and 1950s which doesn’t typically get termed a *renaissance*, though Yvonne Keller mirrors Tebbel’s language regarding the 1920s middlebrow publishers by calling it a “golden age” in her work: mass-market paperbacks, distributed by specialized presses such as Gold Medal, a new sector of the publishing industry distinct from the 1920s cohort. Evidence suggests that the readers that comprised the market for this niche loved Highsmith’s story. Gene Damon, the also-pseudonymous reviewer for a national underground lesbian magazine called *The Ladder*, praised Claire Morgan’s *The Price of Salt* as “a novel that probes deeply into [the] special problems of [being] a Lesbian. Being remarkably free of the old ‘candlelight and death’ symbolism, and having a ‘different’ kind of an ending, this may well exemplify a new outlook long awaited by the homosexual world.” The scare-quoted “different” ending Damon referred to was the first in midcentury lesbian fiction that did not leave either of the lesbian protagonists dead, slated for heterosexual marriage, or trapped in lifelong in despair. And since Highsmith’s identity as Claire Morgan was more or less an open secret among the tight-knit lesbian communities in and around New York, Highsmith received letters of appreciation from deeply moved, deeply closeted women across the US for the rest of her life.

Highsmith was connected to the lesbian paperback industry personally as well, through Marijane Meaker, one of the most popular lesbian paperback novelists of Keller’s golden age.³ Meaker’s recollection of the publishing process with Gold Medal, however, highlights how

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³ Meaker used Ann Aldrich for her nonfiction work, and M.E. Kerr for her young adult books.
wholly disconnected from the mass-market paperback sect Highsmith actually was, despite her large following among its readers. For example, before Meaker had even a word of a manuscript her contact person at Gold Medal informed her of the book’s title (Spring Fire was very close to Michener’s well-received The Fires of Spring out of 1920s-generation Random House; the hope was that some people might pick it up by mistake), its basic plot (to ensure a sufficiently titillating cover), and its ending (tragic, what Gene Damon’s aforementioned review called “candlelight and death,” to appease potential censors or litigious interest groups).

Meaker’s book under the name of Vin Packer, a story of star-crossed sorority sisters with a mildly salacious paperback cover depicting an image of two young women in negligees, sold a million and a half copies in 1952, but was reviewed only by The Ladder—an important magazine in the midcentury lesbian community and among the first of its kind, but one without the mainstream prestige of something like the New York Times.

By contrast, Highsmith’s paperback lesbian romance was the direct result of her refusal to comply with a publisher’s requests. Had she been willing to churn out an annual revival of Strangers on a Train, continuing to produce “good” genre fiction in the manner of Mary Roberts Rinehart, Highsmith could likely have carried on with Harper and Brothers. Indeed, it was because she balked at such constraints that Price of Salt was written and published at all. Like Stein with Blood on the Dining Room Floor, Highsmith chose to revisit a degraded genre marked by its relationship to mass consumerism in a paradoxical act of artistic autonomy; also like Stein, her resulting text challenges the conventions not only of its alleged genre but also the very style she had helped establish—and the middlebrow, besides.
Where Stein had buried the manuscript for *Blood on the Dining Room Floor* in her personal papers, however, Highsmith used “Claire Morgan” to distance herself from *The Price of Salt* for nearly forty years, refusing to publicly acknowledge that she had written the book until a 1989 re-release under her own name. In the author’s afterword included in that edition, Highsmith articulates the generic balancing act she was doing in her explanation of her choice to publish the book as Claire Morgan. She hints that she had decided to publish under a different name before Harper ever rejected her manuscript (an implication belied by Meaker’s memoir), claiming that she adopted the pen name in order to avoid being given yet another label; chafing at being called a “suspense writer” and balking at Harper’s order to produce another novel similar to *Strangers on a Train*, she hoped to avoid becoming a “lesbian-book writer” as well (290). In the same paragraph, she counts it an act of artistic integrity that she wrote the book at all, in lieu of spending “ten months” writing something “for commercial reasons” (291), though her previously stated desire to manage the literary connotations of her name conflicts with this assertion of principled artistic autonomy.

Some, like Highsmith’s biographer Wilson, have speculated that Highsmith didn’t want a professional association with a community she preferred to maintain only social ties with, that she wasn’t necessarily “comfortable” with her lesbianism coloring her public persona. Michael Trask suggests that this view is overly simplistic, and instead hypothesizes that Highsmith found the inevitable questions about the autobiographical nature of the text distasteful. “Prurience masquerading as human interest” would doubtless annoy the famously contrarian Highsmith and compromise the “mystique of anonymity” she preferred to cultivate besides. If Trask’s theory is right, perhaps Highsmith was following Stein’s call for women to write the
literature of the twentieth century—which meant not writing about herself. Highsmith conceded that Carol and Therese’s meeting at Frankenberg’s which formed the basis of the plot for *Price of Salt* was semiautobiographical, based on an encounter Highsmith had while working a similar job to Therese at Bloomingdale’s. In the real-life case, Highsmith saw the address of the woman who had captivated her attention on the receipt and secretly went to the house uninvited, watching it from behind the bushes for an entire day. She didn’t interact with the woman directly, and nothing particularly happened while she was observing her, but the voyeurism reportedly gave Highsmith a thrill: she wrote in her diary that she “felt like a murder stalking her prey” (qtd. in Wilson). Since connection, let alone confession, were the last things Highsmith wanted readers to take away from her work, Trask speculates that Highsmith’s desire to offset the story’s intimacy drove her creation of Claire Morgan as an alterego.

Regardless of the accuracy of Trask’s account of Highsmith’s inner feelings about her authorial persona or about Claire Morgan, which is impossible to assess, the pseudonym’s ultimate function was only to communicate that Highsmith didn’t want to be professionally associated with the book. It didn’t distance her from it in any real way, since everybody pretty much knew that Claire Morgan was Patricia Highsmith. Among midcentury participants in lesbian print culture, this sort of non-secretive pen name was common practice: even the *Ladder* reviewer wrote under a pseudonym, as did Meaker. Highsmith was different, however, because she was a famous novelist outside the tight-knit communities of lesbian writers and artists in Greenwich Village where she socialized. Beyond the usual wish to avoid having ones name associated with media about homosexuality *in writing* for fear of the various possible forms of
retaliation (legal, social, economic), Highsmith’s use of a pen name also signaled her participation in a literary tradition separate from the one she had long tried to break into. It, in short, represented her purposeful split into two Patricia Highsmiths.

Yet, as Blood on the Dining Room Floor emphasized in the case of Gertrude Stein, the Price of Salt’s breadth of categorical allegiances troubles what appears on the surface to be a distinct split between that text and Highsmith’s others. Though Harper considered The Price of Salt to be too much of a deviation from Strangers on a Train, and indeed it has been read as completely separate from her crime fiction, closer analysis reveals that much of the Edgar Allen Poe-like phantasmagoria which marks Highsmith’s other work remains in her so-called romance. As a crime writer, Highsmith is credited with bringing noir to crime fiction by Charles Rzepka. Originally used by French filmmakers to describe “dark” and “shadowy” aesthetics of what Rzepka calls “American underworld films,” noir came to be used in fiction to describe stories that follow criminal antiheroes, especially those who appear to outsiders as ordinary Americans living conventional lives (230). The suspense in such books comes not from the mystery of the whodunit, because we already know it’s the protagonist, but rather the pressure on the perpetrator to evade discovery.149 In the cases of Strangers on a Train and the Ripley series, Guy and Tom are both murderers—and in Strangers, Guy avoids his unstable co-conspirator as well as the police. Surveillance and the fear of discovery pervade The Price of Salt, as well, and Highsmith makes full use of her skills in this vein, but Therese and Carol haven’t committed

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149 Poe’s Telltale Heart, is a proto-example; Javert’s pursuit of Jean Valjean in Les Miserables is also often referenced.
any actual crimes, since antigay laws only explicitly addressed male homosexuality.\textsuperscript{50} Where *Blood on the Dining Room Floor’s* “leg pull” was having a murder, but no detective, *Price of Salt* has a private detective, but no crime according to the value system of the novel.

If Highsmith, and the variety of crime fiction she pioneered, can “embrace[] the world of criminal duplicity and deceit . . . assumed to lie just beneath the innocent surface of everyday American life,” as Rzepka says, or “portray[] the disturbing criminal impulses which can erupt in ordinary life—or perhaps even provide its foundation,” in Nicol’s words, in her murder stories, she certainly does so in her story of a lesbian affair. Descriptions of Therese’s unremarkable surroundings reverberate ominously: she works in the toy department of Frankenberg’s, likened to “the din of a single huge machine” (11), characterized by bare walls and turnstiles, and long tables full of empty-eyed worker-drones meandering through wooden barricades to consume sad lunches off of trays. The imagery suggests a mad scientist’s dungeon or perhaps a prison. Seated at one of the long tables with her gray mystery meat and peas is Therese; seated opposite of her, positioned as the visage of a distorted future self as if in a mirror, is Mrs. Robicheck, whose fifty-something years of life and half-dozen years at Frankenberg’s in New York have left her a grotesque walking corpse, “stricken with everlasting exhaustion and terror, the eyes distorted behind glasses that enlarged or made smaller, the cheeks splotched with rouge that did not brighten the grayness underneath” (14). Here, the sense of impending doom comes not from the restlessness of some male protagonists’ guilty conscience, but from Therese’s suspicion that she is being funneled toward a banal future as a

\footnotesize\textsuperscript{50} See Canaday on “sodomy.”
permanent low-wage worker in a female-dominated part of the retail industry: she “[can]not look” as Mrs. Robichek, perhaps afraid of becoming like her (14).

Her chance meeting with the poised, wealthy, middle-aged Carol, and subsequent obsession with her, contains echoes of Bruno’s pursuit of Guy in *Strangers on a Train*, and Tom’s simultaneous emulation and resentment of Dickie Greenleaf in *The Talented Mr. Ripley*; consistent with Highsmith’s notes on *Price of Salt*’s real-life inspiration, one might think at first that the end game here is for Therese to stalk and murder Carol, rather than become her lover. Indeed, when Highsmith described the real-life events that inspired *Price of Salt* in her notes, she remarks that she “felt like a murderer.” And when the two women embark on a road trip together, they are pursued by a private detective hired by Carol’s estranged husband, who takes furtive pictures and tails them from town to town through Delaware, Iowa, and the Dakotas—a constant, subtle presence that contradicts the sense of freedom Therese feels while traveling with Carol.

Yet the women make surprisingly little of him, and the threat he poses ultimately fizzles out anticlimactically; Carol loses custody of her young daughter, which devastates her but leaves Therese fairly unmoved—if anything, Therese is offended that “Carol loved her child more than her,” heartbroken that Carol “had chosen her child,” or at least attempted to do so, because it made their affair “a tremendous lie” (255). The detective surveillance that was the chief source of suspense in *Strangers on a Train* and *The Talented Mr. Ripley* is here pushed to the background as a “problem[] of being a lesbian.” What haunts Therese, instead, is the thought of Frankenberg’s monster, Mrs. Robichek:
The clock on the dashboard said quarter to ten, and she thought suddenly of the people working in Frankenberg’s, penned in there at a quarter to ten in the morning, this morning, and tomorrow morning, and the next, the hands of clocks controlling every move they made. But the hands of the clock on the dashboard meant nothing now to her and Carol. They would sleep or not sleep, drive or not drive, whenever it pleased them. She thought of Mrs. Robichek, selling sweaters this minute on the third floor, commencing another year there, her fifth year. (174)

This scene, and indeed the entire exposition, reads like a hate letter to mass culture, a way of life specifically correlated with the legal trap of heterosexual marriage and the drudgery of wage-earning. Mrs. Robichek would never escape Frankenberg’s “control,” and is forever “penned in”; with Carol, Therese feels she can break free, even as the law follows her and records her every move.

The parallels Highsmith creates between her murderer protagonists and lesbian protagonists could be a case of Highsmith embracing, rather than working to counteract, the perception of lesbianism as a criminal pathology. But by prioritizing the danger of being subsumed by heteronormative mass culture over the danger of being found out by a detective, Highsmith rejects the notion of any alleged pathology as distinct from the types of interactions condoned by polite society. In *The Price of Salt*, Carol and Therese’s “roadside Americana” and “transgressive sex” (Castle) is a pathology preferable to the sort of life in which one goes from rows and rows of lunching workers to rows and rows of punchcards to rows and rows of boxes stocked with hundreds of dolls, organized by size, features and dress color, ready to be pulled
off the shelf at request for the price of nineteen ninety-five (expensive for 1952, and mass-produced for the masses at Christmastime) by lonely housewives for the daughters that keep them tethered to their odious husbands. To “[p]eople like Harge’s family,” Carol reminds Therese—that is, to respectable suburbanites of means and good breeding—they are “an abomination” (198). But, as Therese responds to Carol, and discovers for herself in a her post-Carol life as a set designer, “[t]hey’re not the whole world” (199).

Therese and Carol’s affair features greater intimacy between the two characters than in most of Highsmith’s other work, which is typically preoccupied with what Trask describes as “eroticizing impersonality” (609). While drawing on the strategies of her particular iteration of the crime genre to critique mass culture, as I have been arguing Highsmith does in *Price of Salt*, she simultaneously revised the conventions of the lesbian romance to criticize high culture. For, as much as Therese and Carol’s chance encounter resembles those of Bruno and Guy on the one hand, so too does their relationship’s development resemble a lesbian pulp novel on the other: Therese, a young woman who forms strong, immediate attachments to women in her life and dislikes sex with her boyfriend, is plagued by feelings of un fulfillment and ultimately finds herself through her first sexual relationship with a woman.

Unlike the rural-to-urban (or home-to-college) migration that so often characterizes lesbian protagonists’ story arcs, however, Therese has already moved to the Big City at the novel’s beginning: Manhattan is the site of her discontentment in the expository, disillusioned before-portrait. Therese has already moved to Manhattan to become a theatre set designer; she already found her circle of urban young artist and philosopher friends; she’s already booked
her trip to Europe. The usual triumphant ending is, for Therese, the expository scene of discontent: glittering New York is where dreams go to die because all of the would-be small business owners and artists work as holiday help at big-box stores. And as far as lesbian pulps were concerned, *The Price of Salt* wasn’t salacious for a male audience (Keller; aforementioned NYT review) nor melodramatic yet fluffy, like many other similar books written specifically for a lesbian audience (Bannon)—and, importantly, the ambiguously happy ending is unlike anything that came before it. The result is surprisingly feminist, for a woman so disdainful of civil rights movements, and surprisingly antimodernist, for a writer so invested in her high-art associations, and surprisingly pro-middle America, for a hardcover author who spent most of her life abroad and thought herself a fragmented remainder of the modernist expatriate coterie. The novel’s position as neither the tedium of mass culture nor the pretentiousness of high culture, together with its championing of sexual and gendered rebellion and a satisfying ending for a relationship meant to stand in for a broader community, render it a unique balance of edification and delight: a *middlebrow* balance.

Nowhere is the feminist and class critique of high culture more pronounced than in the character of Therese’s jilted boyfriend Richard. An aspiring auteur of some form or another, Richard has embraced all that the Big City is supposed to stand for according to a young talented person with dreams. He takes Therese to art museums and parties with his stylish, well-connected friends and lives off of his unlimited trust fund. He is baffled that Therese has read Gertrude Stein but not James Joyce; he’s injured that she “ma[kes] him feel like a brute” when they try to have sex (58). But when Therese must finally return to Richard in New York from Carol in South Dakota, she feels chic and wise (“the clothes she remembered in her closet
in New York, seemed juvenile, like clothes that had belonged to her years ago” (271)), and all her former acquaintances marvel at her newfound sophistication, acquired in the big expanse between New York and California. Carol reflects to Therese, “in New York I was exactly the wrong person for you to know—because I indulge you and keep you from growing up” (199).

This “growing up” happens in hotel rooms in Nebraska, Indiana, and South Dakota in The Price of Salt, under the surveillance of a mercenary camera. The newly worldly Therese pities the despondent Richard, confiding to a mutual friend that she “hope[s] he finds somebody to listen to him. He needs an audience” (269). Richard embodies everything the urbane litterateur is supposed to represent, yet, according to Therese, his books, concerts, his jaunts to Europe, were all enabled by his “faith that there would always be a place, a home, a job, someone else for him” (153). Like that of Dickie Greenleaf in Ripley, the bohemianism that marks Richard’s life and his high-culture associations are perceived by the protagonist to be nothing more than a performance sponsored by privilege. The payoff of the plot hinges on Therese dumping Richard and quitting Frankberg’s, leaving behind both Richard’s high-art posturing and the department store’s milling masses. Freed from her equal and oppositional burdens, Therese forges her own connections with an assortment of figures prominent in the New York scene, becomes a set designer after all, and even meets another woman as well as a man. The novel’s crucial final scene, often noted for its rare optimism, finds Therese leaving her new prospects behind—though, it’s suggested, not entirely or permanently—to meet Carol, who had likewise given up her marriage and her child, on the train.
If, as Trask argues, *The Talented Mr. Ripley* "elaborate[s] the fantasy of a world without determinate identities or their consequences," then *The Price of Salt* reveals that the determinate identities and consequences of this world are themselves a fantasy of an American middle class that lives with constant surveillance and fear. In this it both affirms and departs from Rinehart’s essay referenced at the beginning of this chapter. Rinehart concludes by assuring her readers that crime fiction “is not for the sub-normal,” for “mental defectives or drug addicts”; its “high morality” does not satisfy the depravity of the “criminal” seeking a how-to manual, nor the voyeur looking for the cheap thrill of a “sex book,” she insists (566). Highsmith’s books have readers rooting for protagonists who are technically “criminals” in *Strangers* and *Ripley* and a “sub-normal” “abomination” of a relationship in *Price of Salt*, but in the process direct readers to reconsider the viability of received narratives of high morality. Part of what makes Highsmith’s fiction is difficult to categorize universally as “crime,” “romance,” “modernist,” or “genre” is its insistence on destabilization.

Rinehart’s phrasing anticipates a major keyword for postwar America: *normal*. The effort to replace wartime fear and uncertainty with equilibrium included bureaucratic interventions on multiple fronts: regulation of the economy (rationing and widespread widowhood gives way to the championing of home ownership and the breadwinner/domestic worker model of nuclear families); intense scrutiny of and redefinition of whiteness (fuzzy lines around what Julian Carter calls “provisional whiteness” sharpen around Jim Crow); the nuclear family (the mass manufacture of single-family homes); and gender performance (Rosie the Riveter is subsumed by the male breadwinner). Thanks to the efforts of policies like the GI Bill and other government actions designed to “settle men down after wartime” in jobs and modest homes (Canaday 138),
the middle-class was more visible and more aspirational than ever. Rinehart’s disgust with the “sex book” is equally appropriate for the midcentury: as Margot Canaday found in her study, *The Straight State*, the middle class was also more heterosexual than ever, and more tethered to the notion of a nuclear family, as most of the government programs that provided veterans with monetary assistance for finding housing, jobs, or life skills training were explicitly denied to soldiers suspected to be homosexual, and also denied to the many unfettered non-veteran women who could also have used such services. These limitations were imposed purposefully to encourage as many heterosexual marriages as possible, as well as the infamous postwar “baby boom.”

Popular culture often remembers the 1950s as an exceedingly conservative time but as scholars like Anna Creadick have shown, skepticism is, paradoxically, a key feature of midcentury normality culture. Despite, or perhaps in reaction to, postwar US handwringing over non-heterosexualities, many scholars have also found that these same decades marked a rise in gay and lesbian publishing—from the periodicals of activist groups such as the Mattachine Society (*Mattachine Review*) and the Daughters of Bilitis (*The Ladder*, as aforementioned) to the explosion in lesbian paperback novels like Vin Packer’s. The midcentury-US “sex panic” (93), as Creadick puts it, prompted the prescribed doomed endings of Vin Packer novels and created the environment in which Highsmith’s comparatively humanizing *Price of Salt* could be revolutionary, but as many scholars have shown, these texts represent significant progress toward a flourishing LGBT press (Streitmatter, Keller, D’Emilio). As the next chapter details, though, the “sex panic” of the print historical conditions of the genres pioneered and then hybridized by Highsmith put pressure on other, less liminally
middlebrow postwar women writers as well. In it, I show how the antisociality that marks Highsmith’s noir crops up in other contexts.
Coda: Postwar’s “Sub-normal” Revision of Middlebrow Feminism

Reviewers in 1947 mostly hated *A Country Place*, Ann Petry’s follow-up to her critically acclaimed and bestselling *The Street* one year before. They coded their disappointment in terms of weaknesses in her “technique”—the abrupt changes in point of view, they argued, were confusing, and didn’t hold up logically—a rookie mistake of a dilettante lady novelist. The effort didn’t sell nearly as well, and indeed, though black feminist recovery efforts have brought *The Street* to the fore as a major tentpole of midcentury black literature, *A Country Place* remains neglected (Bernard 97). Upon Petry’s death in (1997), the *New York Times* eulogized her as “the first writer of Harlem”—a false categorization on a number of levels, since not only was Petry’s was far from the first novel ever written about Harlem, Petry herself was not even from Harlem; the manuscript for *The Street* was born of the culture shock she had experienced commuting to Harlem for nonprofit work after growing up in a relatively affluent New England suburb. Though Petry was black, she wasn’t Harlem, so her novel’s “avowed aim,” as James Baldwin once said of “the American protest novel,” “is to bring greater freedom to the oppressed”—to give voice to a people she did not exactly belong to, true to the anthropological interests of interwar women writers discussed in chapters 2 and 3. *The Street* was precisely the kind of novel about black life that middle-class readers were trained to appreciate, the sort that, again in Baldwin’s words, affords readers “a thrill of virtue from the fact that [they] are reading such a book at all” (19). By contrast, *A Country Place* tells a story of white characters in a town much more like the one Petry called home; yet while Langston Hughes may have been delighted by “Negroes writing works in the general American field, rather than dwelling on Negro themes
solely” (qtd. in Dubek 56), others were either unimpressed by her “literary passing” or predisposed to bewilderment at her “technique.”

Yet what reviewers considered a lapse in logic regarding *A Country Place’s* narrative style serves as a direct critique of the notion of the white male point of view as neutral at the formalist level, to reinforce the contempt for so many of *A Country Place’s* white characters on a content level. For the difficulties with the shifting points of view reviewers pointed out—the impossible omniscience of a narrator that is supposed to be a peripheral bystander, town druggist—are indeed so very obvious that it seems highly unlikely that a writer with Petry’s training and experience couldn’t have spotted them herself. Perhaps, then, the disruptions in the narrative in *A Country Place* are purposeful, drawing attention to the extent to which all books that rely on a narrator perpetuate a fantasy of white male objectivity. The druggist describes himself as “a medium kind of man”: “medium tall, medium fat, medium old . . . and medium bald,” “neither a pessimist nor an optimist,” with “a medium temperament” (1). According to the druggist, he is, above all, *average*—he is normal, or at least he is not “subnormal,” in Rinehart’s words from chapter 4.

Because gender performance played such a major role in Americans’ comfort (or lack thereof) with their own and others’ normality, postwar women novelists whose work had any investment in social critique slightly revised the interwar formula of risk management described in chapters 2 and 3. With explicitly antihomosexual and anticommunist policies actually written in law and government policy and intertwined in public imagination, any kind of nonnormativity carried even more concrete, prosecutable risks than it had before; by contrast, having a heterosexual nuclear family in which the woman labored exclusively within the
confines of the home telegraphed one’s averageness, and therefore one’s right to citizenship.\textsuperscript{51} Meanwhile, the dualism of normality discourse—wherein obsession with and aspiration to normality was coupled with criticism, doubt, and extensive self-conscious reflection on what normality means and how it is defined—fits neatly with what had long been the middlebrow’s defining thrust: its hybrid approach to criticism and conformity. Normality discourse promoted the opposite of what Jessie Redmon Fauset called for in the 1930s, as chapter 3 described: more authentic middle-class values, less hand-wringing about imaginary concepts like good breeding and “bad blood.” Yet certain marginalized groups, as Carter argues, “could, in theory, be ‘normal,’ so long as they willingly subjected themselves and their children to the bourgeois erotic and relational disciplines that certified their allegiance to the social and civic order on which white American civilization rested.” As Carter found in his study, the seeds for this negotiation were planted before World War II: women writers, in particular, had long existed outside the heterosexual contract—and, in the inevitable normality negotiation process, white women were the ones who most often got away with other varieties of deviance.

Writers like Ferber, Hurst, and Cather sidestepped patriarchal heternormativity in divergent ways, while others, such as Gertrude Stein and Gale Wilhelm, had been publishing as open lesbians for decades. Curiously (or maybe predictably), the increased discourse on the normal—motivated by the fear of deviant sexuality noted by Creadick—and the formalization of the postwar and Cold War pressures to perform heterosexuality—via McCarthy-era witch-hunts catalogued by Canaday—coincided not with a tapering off of sexual and gender

\textsuperscript{51} I make a similar argument in “Normalizing the Variant,” about how the Daughters of Bilitis leveraged their middle-class entitlements, and cis privilege to launch a print campaign for lesbian community and assimilation.
misbehavior in women writers and their protagonists, but rather with a strengthening of its tradition. Besides Highsmith’s optimistic lesbian romance *The Price of Salt* and the rise of Vin Packer’s devoted following as a lesbian pulp novelist, Creadick’s “sex panic” meant that activist-minded writers whose careers started after 1945 dealt less in the subtlety and plausible deniability of plot devices such as the dead patriarch trope. Where Fannie Hurst’s *Imitation of Life*’s soothe-critique-soothe approach to white patriarchy could be couched in the sacrifice of Delilah’s agency in the service of Bea’s, Lillian Smith couldn’t revise the social contract through engendering sympathy for individual characters: *Strange Fruit* depicted characters in defiance not only of norms, but of federal law—and Smith’s Boston court battle over obscenity charges levied at *Strange Fruit* is well-documented.

During and post-war, the task of the middlebrow woman writer had thus shifted from the aforementioned affirmation-sandwich approach of the interwar era to a more explicit questioning of the very foundations of middle-class life, only to, as Baldwin predicted, “ramify[] that framework we believe is so necessary,” for, as this chapter argues, such protest in bestselling books ultimately reinforced the American bourgeoisie’s perception of itself as a class that always has its shoulder to the wheel of progress. This is how normality and critiquing normality both became the domain of the white woman.

1. Positive Thinking and the Sub-Normal

The textual response to this shift in the scale and source of resistance to middlebrow social criticism was to look inward—culture, postwar conventional wisdom dictated, was nothing more than the sum of individuals and their attitudes. One of the bestselling books
between 1940 and 1960 was a nonfiction work from Prentice-Hall by minister Norman Vincent Peale. Its title has since become a regular turn of phrase in American vernacular: *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952). The *New York Times* enlisted a fellow clergyman to summarize Peale’s thesis thusly: “There is no problem, difficulty, or defeat . . . that cannot be overcome by faith, positive thinking, and prayer to God” (Stephenson). Millions of Americans made Peale a significant public figure for this claim, buying his books, tuning in to his radio broadcast, and attending his talks. Like FDR’s insistence that the “American people” would “win” something unspecified through “righteous might” in his post-Pearl Harbor address, and like Fredrick Melcher’s complementary post-Pearl Harbor vow to “steadfast[ness]” in his own industry, Peale preached that Americans could and would control their fate and their culture simply by resolving to think well of themselves and their own individual lives. This, Peale argued, was true “power.” The popularity of Peale’s position, the appeal of his particular blend of the language of psychology and science with religious platitudes, exemplifies the dominant dogmas of public discourse in mid-century America. Meanwhile, the vicious backlash against his work, which his critics saw as symptomatic of a larger cultural problem—what some called the “cult of reassurance” (“Apostle”)—is likewise representative of the larger battle that was played out in American print culture over the concepts of happy, moral, normal American living.

Anna Creadick seems to be describing much the same type of emotional discipline and maintenance as Peale in her phrase “mental hygiene” (145) in *Perfectly Average*—at the heart of the broader “post-World War II focus on normality” as an aspirational goal. Creadick draws on Julien Carter’s *Heart of Whiteness*, whose timeline is a bit earlier and for whom “normal” is a prominent but less central keyword—anticipated by chapter 4’s Mary Roberts Rinehart, who is
quick to assure her readers that crime fiction is not for the “sub-normal.” *Heart of Whiteness* identifies many of the same concepts covered in *Perfectly Average* as they were in their nascent development pre- and post-World War I, and spotlights their lasting effect specifically on race relations in the US. Carter argues that the “sex panic” Creadick discusses was negotiated partially through the management of other signifiers of normality, especially whiteness and middle-class economic status. Both scholars use the Natural History anthropological/sociological project of Normman (Norm-man) and Norma, two models of the thoroughly normal American developed by researchers and circulated in *Natural History* in 1945, as a case study. The statues of Norma and Normman, originally revealed at the 1939 New York World’s Fair, “embodied the triumphant progress of the years between 1890 and 1940,” according to Julien Carter: they supposedly represented the statistical average of all Americans, in stature as well as their hypothetical likes and dislikes. The two figures’ youth, athletic builds, and whiteness makes their universality seem suspect, however, and their presentation as male and female complements to one another implies a heteronormative sexuality. Far from a benign summary of the actual demography of American society, Norma and Normman stood as representations of one vision of *ideal* average Americans—as Carter puts it, Norma and Normman “construct[ed] and [taught] white racial meanings” and “normal sexuality” simultaneously and “without appearing to do so” (2).

The paradox inherent in the postwar curation of the *normal*—a word which is supposed to be merely descriptive of what is usual—as aspirational. In the case of Norma and Norman, normal was extraordinary; a later search for an actual human female that resembled Norma returned zero results. But its standard governed much of American pop culture in midcentury
America. Taken together, Creadick’s and Carter’s studies suggest that the obsession with normality mounted in the early twentieth century, culminated with World War II and its aftermath, and leveled off with the assassination of JFK in 1963. By the 1940s, there was nothing more desirable to Americans than being normal. Yet the fact of normality’s ubiquity as an individual and cultural goal reveals the postwar revision of normal’s definition: it wasn’t a matter of objective averageness but a state of being only achieved through great effort—including regulation of one’s emotional health (via “positive thinking” among other methods), and the hard work which was thought to be the key for upward class mobility.

The paradox inherent in what normality meant in midcentury America prompted further contradictions in how it, as a concept, was received. For, as Creadick points out, disillusionment with the concept of the normal was as typical as the concept itself: Creadick’s ad. Pop- and print-cultural conversations seemed to be continuously prescribing the standards of normality on the one hand while continuously calling them into question on the other. Indeed, along with the rise of institutional and cultural sanctioning of normality came the rise of specific types of resistance, particularly on normality’s most volatile front: gender and sexuality. As chapter 4 discussed, the antigay McCarthy era saw a rise in lesbian publishing; as Canaday notes in The Straight State, antihomosexual legislation did little to prevent homosexual relationships (and, in a nice parallel, she further observes that the written confessions of military women pleading guilty to the crime of lesbianism tended to read like pulp novels).

But middlebrow writing, and middlebrow feminism in particular, with its trademark blend of affirmation and critique, was uniquely suited to carry out the cycle of definition and destabilization that Creadick and Carter attribute to the midcentury notion of normal. What
presented as “antisociality” in Highsmith’s work emerged in Smith, Petry, McCarthy, and Wolff’s as a more cynical iteration of the “ruthless humanitarianism” of Ferber, Hurst, Cather, and Fauset, wherein the grisly murder, freak-accidental death, or other destruction of a patriarch is the culmination rather than the impetus of the story.

2. Ann Petry, Mary McCarthy, and the Unreliable Average Narrator

Besides Petry’s druggist’s conviction of his own normalcy in *A Country Place*, he is incidentally also “in a better position to write the record of what took place here than almost anyone else” because of his point of view as the country place’s medium white male pharmacist; indeed, he is confident that he “can tell you with a fair degree of accuracy what [Glory Roane] thinks about when she wakes up in the morning” (4, 6). As reviewers repeatedly pointed out, however, his explanation for the preeminence of his perspective on the story of Johnnie and Glory Roane in Lennox is weak and unsatisfying. The moments in which the narrator asserts himself are jarring: one description of Mrs. Gramby and Mrs. Roane’s catching Glory cheating on Johnnie, in which the narrator discloses Mrs. Gramby’s personal secret thoughts for upwards of two pages, hums along smoothly if one imagines an omniscient narrator; but, by the druggist’s own account of his conversation with The Weasel, who supposedly informed him about the event, he had no reason to suppose that Mrs. Gramby was ruminating silently about Johnnie’s “harlot for a wife,” her late husband, her son, or the depression of aging (89). One common interpretation of Petry’s choice of the druggist as her narrator is that she meant to use him as a stand-in for some sort of universality. Reader and critical resistance to her book then stems from white indignance at a black woman writing about
As Emily Bernard argued in her essay “Raceless’ Narratives,” authority was a point of anxiety for Petry: Simon and Schuster, of the 1920s generation of publishing houses, took great pains to include several blurbs from various sources which detailed Petry’s qualifications to write a novel about white people in a white New England town, giving brief accounts of her similar birth and upbringing. And almost every review of A Country Place, as well as her headnote in the anthology of essays she contributed to that same year, includes a seeming non-sequitur about Petry’s novel taking shape while her husband was overseas fighting in the war.

Though Country’s plot hinges on Johnnie’s deployment and return from fighting in World War II, Petry doesn’t claim any autobiographical connection to his cheating wife on the homefront. Petry reflects on her authorial authority in an essay for an anthology edited by Helen Hunt, itself put out by the Literary Guild as a self-reflexive guide to midcentury American literature by some of its most prominent contributors. Petry’s status as the best-selling author of The Street meant that her opinion of what constitutes quality fiction was valued, despite the disappointing numbers for A Country Place and The Narrows; the former was still a British Book-of-the-Month Club selection, and both were still reviewed in all the major outlets.

Yet Petry’s essay, “The Novel as Social Criticism” isn’t so much a prescription for midcentury fiction as an articulation of the virtues and pitfalls of protest through fiction. Petry was uncomfortable with the extent to which people assumed she was an expert on the Harlem neighborhoods she wrote about in The Street, that they seemed to treat her novel as sociological research instead of a work of art. After writing it, Petry was surprised that she would be presumed to be an expert on the novel’s topic, beyond the characters she created in her story.
In the case of *A Country Place*, however, Petry’s qualifications as a worthy observant of small-town New England life required continual affirmation; as Bernard puts it, by preemptively “addressing readers’ possible anxieties . . . Petry’s publishers effectively construct those anxieties and legitimize them” (98). Houghton Mifflin’s efforts to cultivate an audience for the book through its advertising copy and paratextual cues, such as its dust jacket littered with praise and instructions for appreciating *A Country Place*, failed to do justice to the book’s context, and to its argument: as Bernard figures it, they tried to present the book as “raceless” — a designation for white literature written by black authors which Bernard persuasively demonstrates is impossible. Thus, no audience was found for *A Country Place*.

Yet I don’t think anxiety over Petry’s authority tells the whole story about *A Country Place*: Dubek, for example, asserts that the black and other nonwhite characters in *A Country Place* are “completely devoid of black cultural politics and practical lived experience” (57), yet Neola, Mrs. Gramby’s black maid and an eventual principal beneficiary of her will, has a robust inner life, and the novel’s conclusion rests on a recognition of the systemic inequalities that have kept her in domestic servitude. Mrs. Gramby leaves her house not to her son and scheming daughter-in-law, but to Neola, Portulacca, and Cook, to whom it rightfully belongs as the people who maintained and cared for it. Rather, I think the struggle for readers was a combination of Houghton’s failure to competently market the book to black audiences the Bernard outlined and Petry’s unwillingness to reassure bourgeois readers of their competence in consuming and telling stories.

Five years before *A Country Place’s* release, Mary McCarthy had published the much-praised *The Company She Keeps* — a novel also about an adulterous wife, and also with constantly
shifting points of view. But the key difference between the shifts in point of view in *The Company She Keeps* versus *A Country Place* is that, no matter how many times McCarthy changes the narrator’s point of view, readers are continually guided through, let into the story by her humor, which Carol Batker thoroughly examines in *Playing Smart*. Chapter titles like “A Portrait of the Intellectual as a Yale Man,” which follows the coming of age of a pretentious, quasi-celebrity culture critic, serve as a clear signal to the well-read among McCarthy’s audience who might be familiar with James Joyce’s autobiographical work. According to Batker, such antimodernist asides and the “wit” with which she deployed them folded her into midcentury middlebrow culture (146). In *The Company She Keeps*, McCarthy skewers the pretensions of the American intelligentsia through her characters’ droll, semi-ironic conversations about communism, poetry, and war, and the reader is always in on the joke. Sarcastic capitalization in passages such as “She and the Young Man began to tell each other in breathless and literary style that The Situation Was Impossible, and Things Couldn’t Go On This Way Any Longer” (7) lets readers in, inviting them to laugh at the expense of the characters.

Petry’s novel, by contrast, keeps readers out. The obvious unreliability of the semi-omniscient first-person narrator creates distance rather than closeness; it puts readers in the uneasy position of not knowing who the fool is. What reviewers interpreted as “illogic” in Petry’s novel may actually have been a direct challenge to readers’ perceptions of the neutrality of whiteness and maleness. Despite his confidence in himself as a dispassionate observer, readers see that he doesn’t have the insight—or authority—that he claims his “average”-ness gives him, where “average” is further broken down into white, male, and “having a prejudice
against women” (1). By contrast, the antiracism in McCarthy’s novel affirms racially privileged perceptions of how race and racism work; scenes depict white elitists casually tossing out racial slurs, and the jaded white protagonist is herself prone to uncharitable ruminations on nonwhite people as monolithic groups, but their bigotry is presented as yet another iteration of their foolish arrogance by a winking omniscient narrator sharing an eyeroll with readers, as if the nonsense of systemic racism has been well-mastered by the intelligent general interest reader who bought McCarthy’s books. Petry forecloses the possibility for white—for any—readers to align themselves with her through her anti-narrator. But prompting skepticism of an obviously weak narrator who cites only his constituent identity markers as his qualifications in A Country Place has implications for the proliferation of other, similar narrators—say, a narrator like Nick Carraway and his opening treatise on his credentials as an objective observer of the intrigue that plagued the supposedly less-average people around him. Though A Country Place could be considered a failure of middlebrowism, the conditions and process of its failure reveal much about what postwar middlebrow audiences found important—for what Petry got wrong was that ever-important balance between criticism and affirmation of the American middle class.

3. Lillian Smith’s Middle-Class Human Being

Where Petry faced bias against her for being a black woman writing about white people, the white Gallup-poll “Most Admired Woman” Lillian Smith was valorized for writing about black people. White women weren’t automatically valorized so: for example, Orville Prescott, compares Petry’s The Street to the contemporaneous release of Fannie Cook’s Mrs. Palmer’s Honey—a comparison he deems “very much in Mrs. Petry’s favor” as he proceeds to
eviscerate Cook’s prose. But the review, uncharacteristically passionate for the generally even-keeled Prescott, is a mess of indignation; it’s not always clear whether Prescott takes issue with Cook’s technique, the sloppy execution of her antiracist activist purposes, or her politics themselves. A reviewer like Prescott, basically liberal in the style of midcentury culture commentators such as Hicks, Macdonald, and Canby, would have been unlikely to explicitly state a preference to protect white supremacy, but it’s not clear whether his complaint that the white people of Cook’s novel are “caricatures” and “puppets” stems from frustration with Cook for failing to do justice to the issues she was writing about, or if some stung personal feelings at the lack of “honorable” white characters in Cook’s book played a role. Petry’s novel of social criticism, a “tragic story of Harlem” by “a Negro” who “writes from the inside about a life she knows” (though, as has been thoroughly established, this is untrue) is acceptable, even “powerful” to Prescott; but Cook’s “outsider” perspective which dwells on the “viciousness” of white people “fails as fiction and is not very impressive as a social document.” He takes exception to the notion that white people of all classes and political persuasions are “all united in a sort of informal conspiracy to persecute Negroes.” Though he doesn’t actually use the phrase reverse racism, his objections to the novel seem to invoke its meaning.

Lillian Smith was as passionate of an activist as Fannie Cook, and her novels not only speak to white “viciousness” but also the very formal systems of segregation and other laws that comprise a “conspiracy to persecute Negroes.” Smith fits within a long line of white women writers whose chief subject matter was social justice and civil rights, dating back to the iconic Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose Uncle Tom’s Cabin serves as Baldwin’s ur-text in “Everybody’s Protest Novel.” Best known for Strange Fruit, a novel that chronicles the interracial affair of two
young characters that results in the lynching of a peripheral young black man, Smith’s writing was even more didactic than that of Ferber or Hurst, and her humanist agenda even more specific than Pearl Buck’s. Critics have understood *Strange Fruit* as primarily an antisegregation sermon. Many contemporary scholars who write about Smith actually end up pulling most of their material from her memoir *Killers of the Dream* (praised heavily by Buck herself [“Full Confession”]), which details the guiding principles of her fiction in a nonfiction format, finding it more efficient to dispense with the pretense of a story and just deal with Smith’s social criticism directly, undiluted by invention or logistics of plot.

It’s possible, however, that Smith would have objected to this kind of engagement with her work. Like Highsmith, Smith was a “hardcover” novelist with a reputation for a certain amount of litterateur performance in her personal life. Smith kept obsessive records on herself for use by future biographers, saving all of her correspondence in an organized system for easy procurement by whatever university archive was sure to want them. (Sadly, a fire destroyed most of those documents.) Thomas Haddox points out somewhat cringingly that Smith even expected to receive a Nobel prize (63). But with one foot in the realm of genre fiction, Highsmith’s middlebrowism was defined by its antisociality in chapter 4; by contrast, Smith’s was hyper-social—”ruthlessly humanitarian,” to once again use Harker’s quoted phrase—and Smith’s goals for her authorial persona were far more characteristically middlebrow. For Smith, as for Petry, the only novels worth writing were novels of social criticism, but, also, the only social criticism worth reading told a compelling story. “The idea that a story should point a moral, convey a message, did not originate in the twentieth century; it goes far back in the history of man,” says Petry referencing both *Native Son* and *Strange Fruit*; she cannot accept that
“art exists for art’s sake,” reiterating Du Bois’s infamous assertion that “all art is propaganda,” (33), and yet “the craftsmanship” of protest novels “is of a high order” (35). Similarly, Smith asserts that writing a book is a process of taking the real people one knows and “us[ing] them as a sculptor uses dabs of clay, pressing them, on, one by one, until finally an image is made of what a human being looks like to me” (Preface). The text of The Journey’s preface tells us that Smith uses invented characters and events to do what she can’t with a simple essay, which was most important to her: deliver her message through the human. Its existence as paratext, meanwhile, reveals her impulse to deliver instructions to her readers.

Much-praised as she was, Smith was subject to the familiar criticism levied at middlebrow feminists with a cause: praise for her novels’ “power” offset by condescension on some other vague grounds related to her lack of “clear vision.” While publishers and critics alike seemed to consider Smith a “serious” novelist (NYT), few reviews of Smith’s work praise her without a qualification, usually some gendered criticism for her tendency to overwrite. The same publication that praised her for her “sound mind and balanced judgment” and “found her cool in action” (Breit), possessed of “rare understanding” (Sykes), also frequently dismisses her on charges of feminine hysteria: she’s “angry,” “shrill” (Prescott); and “carried away by fervor” (Moon). Even current scholarship occasionally characterizes Smith this way: for Haddox, for example, her prose drips with “soporific earnestness” (52). As with Highsmith, appreciating Lillian Smith’s work compels justification for overlooking infelicities in her actual prose: we are directed to read Smith in spite of her command of the literary form, rather than because of it. A “sound sociological basis” may have the only thing the reading public wanted from black writers, but white writers released such works to mixed feedback.
Yet, true to what I have been arguing in this project is a salient characteristic of middlebrow literature’s communication circuit, Smith’s “fervor” was key to her success, even as it held her back. The four-page spread advertising *Strange Fruit* in the issue directly after Melcher’s New Year editorial echoes his language. Reynal and Hitchcock, a small outlier of a 1930s publisher which would shortly be absorbed by Harcourt of the 1920s cohort, predicted that Smith’s novel would “move good men to action.” Smith’s “understanding” of “her people and her country” would “serve . . . the society of all the world.” Juxtaposed as it is with Melcher’s call to purge books of “marginal value” (a call that wasn’t as original as Melcher pretended, considering Little’s 1930 “Too Many Books!” essay) in order to get around serious paper shortages, Reynal and Hitchcock argue that the value in Smith’s books was that they would sell, inform, and instruct—indeed, the ad also highlights its price of $2.75, which was near the higher end for a newly released hardcover at the time.

Though none would ever bring her the acclaim of *Strange Fruit*, Smith’s books succeeded where Petry’s *A Country Place* and *The Narrows* failed because Smith got the balance right, even in her lesser-known novels. Haddox invokes MacDonald’s “masscult” in his descriptions of Smith’s less-known *One Hour* and *The Journey*; indeed, *One Hour* in particular has a whodunit thrust reminiscent of crime fiction, and *The Journey* a hovering paranoia reminiscent of one of Highsmith’s thrillers. He describes her as “two different Lillian Smiths” (51), in language echoing that of Stimpson’s for Gertrude Stein which I showed could be similarly applied to Patricia Highsmith in chapter 4. As Haddox eventually concludes, however, Smith is closer to MacDonald’s “midcult”—her humanist values, her commitment to aesthetics and high-art signposting, her view of culture as a collection of individual lifestyles are more in line with the
middlebrow than the mass market. Haddox then proceeds to poke fun at *One Hour’s* “stuff white people like,” derisively cataloguing various high-cultural references Smith drops in the novel and characterizing them as so much posturing (61). But posturing though it may be, such moments also importantly reveal Smith’s deeply held beliefs about the intellectual superiority of the upper-middle class, further illustrated in the parable of two men that anchors *Killers of a Dream*.

In the *Killers* parable, Smith tells the story of two men, Mr. Rich White and Mr. Poor White, the former of whom manipulates the latter to race-based hatred, in order to sow discord among the lower classes and maintain his dominance over both poor whites and all nonwhites. A third actor, Something, takes the form of a voice that whispers realities of segregation and labor relations to Mr. Rich White, in order that he may use them against Mr. Poor White and the silent, absent nonwhite. Something identifies itself as “the seed of hate and fear and guilt” and Mr. Rich White as the seed’s “strange fruit which I feed on” (190)—an early invocation of the title of the famous novel Smith would publish five years later. While the image of a seed “feeding” might be considered a mixed metaphor, it’s telling that, Smith’s figuration, the “strange fruit” isn’t lynched black bodies, as in Billie Holiday’s 1939 song of the same name; instead, it’s the abundance awarded the prosperous white man who successfully agitates the less-prosperous white man into the *act* of lynching itself, thus distracting him from the injustices he, too, suffers at the hands of his economic betters but racial peers. For Smith, as we will see, segregation, and all forms of aversion to difference, are at least partially about economic and social class, and her tale of Mr. Rich White and Mr. Poor White expresses her disgust with class inequality.
Yet while the problem may rest with the educated, affluent white, the solution is solely theirs as well. For in Smith’s worlds, the poor are completely powerless and often ignorant. Poor whites, in particular, rarely recognize their true lack of power; their hatred, though driven by nothing but ignorance and gullibility, is “real,” while the rich man’s hatred is really just pretend—a means to an end, but not rooted in any true evil inside him. “We must remember that demagogues fatten on the poor man’s vote and his loneliness,” she stresses in a newspaper editorial. “It is our caution, our lack of energy, our moral impotence, and our awful if unconscious snobbery, that make demagoguery unafraid of liberalism” (“Southern”). The bourgeois is thus convicted, but also assured of its authority to shape society.

More than 50 years before Carter, Smith asserted that children (especially in the South) learn about sex and race at the same time, specifically that “masturbation was wrong and segregation was right” (Killers 78). God, the superiority of whiteness, and what Smith calls “sex feelings” are inextricably intertwined in an “intricate system” (18) like the one that Carter and Canaday identified—except, where Carter and Canaday explore them in terms of war, the G.I. bill, McCarthyism, and iconic cultural artifacts, Smith explores them in terms of parents, aunts, uncles, and neighborhoods. She connects her rejection of their attempted coercion of her to heteronormativity to her ability to reject their well-intended lessons about the hierarchies that, according to them, rightfully divide races.

It is thus questions of sexuality that form the foundation of Smith’s antiracist project, including but also beyond Strange Fruit; for Smith, race hatred is a twisted byproduct of sex panic. Cheryl Johnson hinted at this point when she outlined the ways in which race in Strange Fruit is inextricably wrapped in gender and sexuality, arguing that it’s possible that the novel is
even more successful in the latter aspects. She turns to the character of Nonnie to introduce the topic. Though Nonnie’s character is at the center of the controversy both within the novel and without, given that the reason that the book was banned in several states has to do with the depiction of an interracial relationship between Nonnie and Tracy, she is strangely one of the least developed and least interesting characters in the novel. This “voicelessness” of Nonnie’s, says Johnson, “denies the reader any access to her complexity as a black woman,” even as it “empowers . . . her” to “resist . . . stereotypes” (16). Johnson decides that Smith “sacrifice[d] . . . Nonnie’s voice in order to achieve” the novel’s antiracist, antisexist “goal” (17). Though *Strange Fruit* explicitly flouts taboos regarding miscegenation, it hits a wall when it comes to black female interiority.

The reason that Smith’s story has so little for Nonnie, according to Johnson, is that *Strange Fruit* is as much or more about deviant sexuality than it is about race—it is “a narrative on difference,” not “a narrative on race,” in her words. Unlike Petry’s “race” novel, *The Street*, Smith’s work is a study of the oppressors, rather than the oppressed: *Strange Fruit* centers on the race hatred of white people throughout, on Nonnie’s rapist Tracy, his parents, and the murderous townsmen, rather than Nonnie’s suffering, or Henry’s death. For Smith, the central puzzle of racism isn’t solved with an exploration of black female interiority; rather, it’s through understand white people’s process of becoming racist, which Smith suspects has deep ties to their process of reckoning with their sexuality—which *Strange Fruit* briefly addresses through brief hints at Tracy’s sister’s lesbianism, and the relationship which seems to uplift her but also generate anxiety around keeping it hidden.

Smith’s beliefs about postwar American culture weren’t entirely dissimilar to Norman
Peale’s, in that, for her as for Peale, “culture” was just folks, and the sum of their own individual attitudes and behaviors. As in Flannery O’Connor’s *Wise Blood*, when Mr. Motes’s landlady complains that he’s “not normal” because he’s doing something “like one of them gory stories, it’s something that people have quit doing, and he replies, “They ain’t quit doing it as long as I’m doing it” (224). But Smith’s commitment to untangling the evolution of racism at the individual level rests on an assumption that *authentic* normality, especially amongst the educated bourgeois, would reveal a better, more progressive human race. This message is particularly explicit when we consider *The Journey* and *One Hour* along with her more famous text; these works are essential for understand Smith as what Thomas Haddox calls “a Cold War intellectual.”

*One Hour* delves deeply into what Smith sees as the connecting threads between sexuality, religion, and race, with a reverend amputee protagonist who is in love with a queer woman who is married to a man accused of rape by a little girl. Four years after praising *The Price of Salt*, “Gene Damon” stood out as one of the few critics who “‘highly recommended’ *One Hour* for its “moving and sympathetic love affair between a woman camp counselor and the heroine of the novel” (13)—an otherwise disappointing flop for Smith. The reverend’s “missing leg” is referenced constantly in increasingly Freudian terms and his affection for his accused friend described with similarly increasing eroticism: “Mark: I had loved him, too; my feeling for him had been deeper, or I had always thought so, than what I felt for her; my relationship with him had sunk a shaft a long way down in me and in a curious sense it had been a protection from the other, the feeling for her” (372), finally deciding that “love for him love for her slashed at me canceling each other out” (373).
The reverend claims that his desire is for everything to go back to “normal,” his status as a minister charged with keeping equilibrium in his parish: “There is a normal way to do everything!” exclaims one of his parishioners during a counseling session about her sex life with her husband (31). Yet in his attempts to clear the name of his friend, he expresses skepticism of normality at every turn; once he admits to himself that the alibi he provided for Mark couldn’t possibly be accurate, that what he had assumed was a white lie had snowballed into perjury, the narrative degenerates into a chronicle of his paranoia at being pursued, lying to the cops, almost as if he had committed the crime himself. The figuratively castrated reverend thus becomes a noir-like antihero, hearing his heartbeat in his ears, evading the authorities, and growing increasingly erratic in his behavior during social interactions.

*The Journey* also prominently features an amputee with a complex internal sexuality as one of a full cast of characters each with their own difference. The nameless protagonist considers the normality of difference, where “difference” is defined as “different from her,” as she recalls a cast of marginalized characters in her childhood: her friends Martin, the amputee, and Midge, who was hearing impaired; the “Negro” women she followed to church on Sundays; Carl, whose disabilities were both physical and cognitive. Still, she admits that there’s a hierarchy of difference: physical disability she hardly registers, but Carl’s intellectual disability she can’t handle (22-23). To the narrator, Martin and Midge were explainable, but Carl’s “difference” was attributed to the sin of his mother, so comparisons with the Devil make sense to her. “Normal” is such a key word for *The Journey* that Smith comes close to contradicting Stein’s assertion that one can’t know what their contemporariness is—her
takedown of normality culture suggests a remarkably astute view of the discourse circulating in American pop culture.

In an explicit instance of the implicit hand-holding discussed in Ferber’s novels in chapter 2, Smith begins *The Journey* with an 11-page prologue that explains to readers how to understand her book’s forthcoming moral. Whether the “I” in the prologue is Smith herself or *The Journey*’s first-person narrator is difficult to determine, as their writerly voices are indistinguishable from one another. For her, Smith says, *The Journey* is a portrait of “what a human being looks like to me” (11)—a real human being, at its most authentic; unbound by some arbitrary standard of what she calls “spurious normality” (6). “Normal,” in her own scare-quotes, “conforming,” and “absolute” are words that have no place in human values, according to the prologue (6).

For Smith, the problem of normality isn’t merely the contradiction of aspirationality; according to her, a true average is no better: “[h]ere is the real enemy of the people: our own selves dehumanized into ‘the masses,’” she asserts (6). Rather, “[t]his generation’s historic mission is to find and set up in a high place the human being revealed in his manifold differences and infinite possibilities, for all to see, to be exalted by, and to identify with” (7). Difference, Smith argues, is the only thing that’s normal, and the only thing that has value. Averageness is dehumanizing; “spurious normality” breeds the strange fruits that support systems of inequality. If we can only dispense with our pursuit of the white, heterosexual, postwar version of an aspirational “normal,” Smith’s novels argue, we can embrace a more *natural* state of democratic racial and social harmony.
Though never explicitly categorized as genre fiction, Petry’s “violence of the everyday” in *A Country Place* and Smith’s marked interest in “difference” together with her noir-like antihero in *One Hour* echo the elements of Patricia Highsmith’s work that keep her tethered to bookstores’ “mystery” sections. Their juxtaposition further underscores both the fluidity of genre and style distinctions among midcentury women’s literature as well as how the conventions associated with them afford opportunities to unpacks the paradoxes of a US conventionality that insists on subversion as one of its defining principles.
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