

寄稿

Colonial Modernity and Print Culture Studies: Books and Readers in Australian Society

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Introduction

In Australian literary studies over the last decade as in other parts of the Anglophone world there has been something of a shift away from the practices of “textual politics” and towards forms of cultural history. If textual politics has continued as a dominant practice, underwritten by one or other version of post-structuralist or post-colonial theory, alongside such criticism there has emerged a growing interest in the history of the institutional structures that organise reading and writing: publishing networks, reading practices, distribution and bookselling, newspapers and periodicals, and “book cultures” or “print cultures” more generally. The history of the book, print culture studies and studies of reading have all become significant growth areas, bringing together “new” and “old” scholarship in bibliography, intellectual history, and media studies. In the midst of various “after theory” narratives, some gleeful, some nostalgic, this new interest in the cultural history of books, print and reading emerges both *positively* out of engagement with cultural studies and critical theory and *negatively* out of a certain weariness with the routines of contemporary criticism.

Despite its negative charge, I always insist that the shift to cultural history is less anti-theory than *post*-theory; that is, it takes off precisely from the way critical theory points us beyond the autonomous literary work, but it takes this imperative away from deconstructive critique to a new constructive or constitutive sense of the sociology of texts and “the public life of literature.”¹⁾ If I wished to be polemical I might say that these days I am more interested in books than in literature, and more interested in what ordinary readers rather than critics do with them; or at least that I am interested in how literature and literariness circulate as material forms and as values in a broader and more heterogenous world of books, print and other media.

Book history is a vast, varied interdisciplinary field, but its basic logic is to argue that the meaning of books and other printed matter is not inherent in the text but dependent on the circumstances of their production, their physical form, and the contexts of reception. Thus book history is interested in the material book and in materialist questions such as the nature of publishing technologies and shifts in the publishing industry, the interdependent histories of print and copyright, the intersections between different media (newspaper, periodicals,

¹⁾ David Carter and Kay Ferres, “The Public Life of Literature,” in *Culture in Australia: Policies, Publics and Programs*, ed. Tony Bennett and David Carter (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 140–60.

books), and shifts in reading habits and the nature of the reading public. Its ultimate horizons are those of social, cultural and intellectual history. One well-known example is Elizabeth Eisenstein's classic 1979 study *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change*, now much challenged but still a foundational work.²⁾ To put it simply, print culture studies is interested in how books come to readers and how readers come to books (or other print materials) and the social means and consequences of these processes; or as a recent anthology put it: how "books make history" and how "history makes books."³⁾

Two other strands of emerging work in Australian literary studies and cultural history can be mentioned as a context for the present argument: studies in modernity and studies of trans-national, not merely national, contexts for Australian culture.

In common with other settler colonies, the relationship between nationality and modernity in Australia has been deeply ambiguous, both historically in fact and continuously in critical commentary. Australia was always viewed and felt to be both *too modern* and *not modern enough*: lacking its own history and traditions, on the one hand, but lagging behind the modernity of the great metropolitan centres, on the other. Australia had been born modern but had never quite achieved modernity. Orthodox studies charting the up-take of artistic modernism in art and literature have often suggested a "time-lag" whereby the Australian uptake of modernism was ten or twenty or thirty years behind the times (Australia's physical distance from Europe can be rendered—and experienced—as distance in *time* as well as space).

Such analyses have a point, but in this respect Australian modernism was not peculiarly antipodean or exceptional. Rather it was contemporaneous with a whole range of regional, provincial or "vernacular" modernisms across the globe, including in Britain and America themselves outside one or two major cities. More recent studies, working with the notion of modernity rather than modern-*ism*, have begun to rewrite the Australian story and to reveal a multi-layered history of Australian modernity—in design, town-planning, architecture, psychology, fashion, popular entertainment, and in books and reading.⁴⁾ Australia, in short, was part of the international "dispersal" of modernity, a trans-national phenomenon manifested simultaneously in different parts of the globe rather than something emanating solely from the metropolitan centres. Modernity had its own dynamic in Australia because of its distinctive relation to English and American culture, say, or its combination of high levels of urbanisation and low levels of industrialisation, but the point is to relocate Australian

²⁾ See *The Book History Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery (London: Routledge, 2006).

³⁾ Introduction, *A Companion to the History of the Book*, ed. Simon Eliot and Jonathan Rose (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 1.

⁴⁾ For example; Liz Conor, *The Spectacular Modern Woman: Feminine Visibility in the 1920s* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004); Jill Julius Matthews, *Dance Hall and Picture Palace: Sydney's Romance with Modernity* (Sydney: Currency Press, 2005); Gail Reekie, *Temptations: Sex, Selling and the Department Store* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1993); Richard Waterhouse, *Private Pleasures, Public Leisure: A History of Australian Popular Culture Since 1788* (Melbourne: Longman, 1995).

culture *within* modernity rather than as left behind.

This emphasis is closely linked to a shift of focus from the national to the trans-national (for some the trans-national is the new post-colonial). One way of registering the change in my own work is as a shift of focus from “Australian literature” to “literature in Australia.” We have plenty of histories of Australian literature—a new Cambridge History is in preparation—but we have scarcely begun to think about the history of literature in Australia (or the history of books and reading). Work on colonial culture has delivered more in this respect than that focused on more recent times, because the absence of canonical nineteenth-century texts has forced critics to become historians and sociologists and to work across imperial and trans-national cultural networks. The gaps for twentieth-century studies, however, are remarkable in a settler, immigrant and post-colonial society in which the vast bulk of reading has *always* meant the reading of books written and published elsewhere. To link the two themes just outlined, in my own research imperial connections are revealed to be not merely oppressive forces for conservatism but also vectors of modernity in their own right, as Australian consumers sought the best new books from overseas.

Middlebrow book culture

Let me focus these concerns on a specific topic, the history of middlebrow book culture in Australia. By “book culture” I mean the institutions through which books and reading circulate in Australia, and the kinds of meaning and value attached to them; literature was a central part of this, of course, but the term “book culture” is meant to indicate a much broader field of publishing, reading and “book talk.”

More problematic is the term “middlebrow.” The word itself emerged in the 1920s in both the USA and Britain in a three-part hierarchy—highbrow, lowbrow and middlebrow—used to describe certain kinds of taste, certain kinds of culture and, of course, certain kinds of people. The word “brow” harks back to nineteenth-century phrenology, to the idea that lower types, such as criminal types, had lower and more prominent brows than the more civilised. Interestingly all three terms were almost always terms of abuse; that is, they were what you accused other people of being. If the positions *were* affirmed, it was usually defensively, claiming an identity in the face of an accusation: “Yes I am highbrow/middlebrow/lowbrow and proud of it!” Further, as terms of abuse, all three were also repeatedly feminised: there was the pansy highbrow, the domestic middlebrow, and the sentimental or sensational lowbrow. Thus while many claimed to be “*neither highbrow nor lowbrow*”—this was a thoroughly overworked cliché of the period—few claimed to be middlebrow.

The division between high and low cultures is a very familiar one, with a vast literature criticising and historicising the opposition; but the significance of a middle term, with its own history, has largely been forgotten in more recent work on popular culture. In order to grasp the dynamics of early-twentieth century modernity, however, it is important to restore the middlebrow’s distinctive presence to cultural history. While the mass culture critiques of F. R. and Q. D. Leavis, among many others, are well-known, it has largely been forgotten

that their anxieties were driven not just by the growth of lowbrow popular fiction but as much, if not more, by the rise of the middlebrow because of its insidious claims on quality culture.⁵⁾ Virginia Woolf, for one, saw the middlebrow as the natural enemy of highbrow and lowbrow alike: middlebrow culture, for Woolf, was “a mixture of geniality and sentiment stuck together with a sticky slime of calf’s-foot jelly ... in pursuit of no single object, neither Art itself nor life itself, but both mixed indistinguishably, and rather nastily, with money, fame, power, or prestige.”⁶⁾ In the USA, Dwight Macdonald, in a famous essay, indicted John Steinbeck and other well-known authors for professing what he called Midcult values. But he exempted Zane Grey, the prolific writer of popular Westerns, as “it seems never to have occurred to him that his books had anything to do with literature.” Midcult was the problem, for “it pretends to respect the standards of High culture while in fact it waters them down and vulgarizes them.”⁷⁾

The term “middlebrow,” of course, has no more historical or theoretical credibility than the high culture/low culture split—but also no *less*. It emerged in the early twentieth century to name what was new about divisions in the cultural field and marketplace, and indeed, as Woolf’s remarks suggest, to stake out positions in a kind of culture war. The middlebrow might thus be defined as a set of *attitudes towards* culture, and we can write their history. But these attitudes also gave rise to a set of institutions which had concrete effects in organising the field of culture. From the 1920s, books, markets, life projects, even national projects, were conceived within a field newly structured by its division into high, middle and low, even as individual texts, writers, and readers slipped around between the categories. This fact, plus the historical use of the term itself, means that the middlebrow is a useful analytical concept for understanding a range of phenomena in mid-twentieth century culture despite its conceptual vagueness.

The terms “highbrow” and “lowbrow” were in common use several decades before “middlebrow.” The idea of a cultural hierarchy scaled from high to low was common by the 1880s, but the idea of a distinct middle came later, in the twentieth century, for it depended on the simultaneous presence of high modernism on one side and urban mass culture on the other. As one American critic puts it:

Since the 1920s, the term *middlebrow* has designated the vast field of cultural production and consumption located between the most disparaged of mass entertainments and the elite ranks of avant-garde and high culture, at the intersection of consumers’ efforts to

⁵⁾ F. R. Leavis, *Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture* (Cambridge: Minority Press, 1930); Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Pimlico, 2000).

⁶⁾ Virginia Woolf, “Middlebrow,” *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (London: Hogarth Press, 1942), 182.

⁷⁾ Dwight Macdonald, “Masscult and Midcult,” *Partisan Review* (Spring 1960): 203–33 and (Fall 1960): 589–631.

access culture and the efforts of critics, educators, and entrepreneurs to make such culture more widely accessible.⁸⁾

What is important in this description is less the middle-ness of the middlebrow than the way it is located at the intersection of a new consumer imperative towards culture and a new organisation of cultural institutions and intermediaries committed to meeting that imperative and multiplying the desires it created. This dual commitment to culture and accessibility, whether through education or marketing, was critical in shaping the middlebrow; and the odd mix of agents indicated in the quotation—“critics, educators and entrepreneurs”—is exactly right in suggesting the dynamics and contradictions that drove it forward.

A very wide range of attitudes and institutions has been linked to the middlebrow, some higher up the scale, some lower, some commercial, some pedagogical, some focused on the classics, others on the contemporary and best-selling. What links them is the notion that culture—“good books” in our case—could be made more accessible, in two senses of the term: culture should not be the sole preserve of specialists or “highbrows” (it did not need to be forbiddingly difficult or intellectual, nor did one need a sophisticated critical vocabulary to appreciate it); and it should be readily available, through the media and the marketplace, for easy consumption. Hence the vogue for book selections, such as the recommended “Book of the Month” or the many “world’s greatest books” series. By democratising the appeal of culture, such institutions could assure consumers not only that “good books” could be entertaining but also that entertaining books could be worthwhile: those that were neither too highbrow nor too lowbrow.

The first recorded use of “middlebrow” in the OED in fact refers to musical broadcasts on the radio rather than to literature. The BBC, according to *Punch* in 1925, had “discovered a new type, the middlebrow ... people who are hoping that some day they will get used to the stuff they ought to like.”⁹⁾ The quote is a nice one for suggesting that the idea of the middlebrow felt new in 1925; and also for indicating the mix of aspiration and imperative, desire and discipline, often associated with it. Further, radio and new books were the two key media for the middlebrow because they offered to make prestige culture dramatically more accessible, more affordable, and more “repeatable” (or reproducible). Spreading and democratising culture according to some; cheapening and standardising according to others.

In 1949, American *Life* magazine published a feature article on the differences between highbrow, middlebrow and lowbrow covering everything from artistic taste, including reading matter, to tastes in food and drink, to clothing and home furnishings.¹⁰⁾ Indeed they

⁸⁾ Jennifer Parchesky, “‘You Make Us Articulate’: Reading, Education, and Community in Dorothy Canfield’s Middlebrow America,” in *Reading Acts: US Readers’ Interactions with Literature, 1800-1950*, ed. Barbara Ryan and Amy M. Thomas (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002), 229.

⁹⁾ As recorded in *The Oxford English Dictionary*.

¹⁰⁾ “Everyday Tastes from High-Brow to Low-Brow,” *Life* 26, no. 11 (April 1949): 100–101, reprinted in *Perspectives on American Book History: Artifacts and Commentary*, ed. Scott E Casper, Joanne Chaison and Jeffrey D. Groves (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 348–49.

THE HARVARD CLASSICS
AN APPEAL TO INTELLECTUALS

Do you desire to increase your intellectual stature? Would you take pleasure in doubling or trebling your earning capacity? Assuredly!

Well, invest £33 in the Harvard Classics!...

The Harvard Classics contain 418 of the World's Greatest Masterpieces. They are by 302 supreme writers of all time. They are complete and unabridged.

This great array of the imperishable writings by the world's outstanding authors is contained in 50 volumes having a total of 22,407 pages.

Under the guidance of the inimitable Dr Charles W. Eliot, President of Harvard University for forty years, you read for fifteen minutes every day of the year the pages he has selected for you.

No intelligent person can do this, with devotion, for 365 days and fail to be transformed...

The beautiful books sell themselves! Their appeal to the intellect is irresistible!¹²⁾

Thus accredited by a well-known expert and packaged in consumable parcels, both as material objects to buy and as texts to be read, the classics become a new kind of commodity, accessible to every "intelligent person." They were to be read in the home rather than the library, and in the living room, I suspect, rather than the study. Above all, they promised to increase the consumer's intellectual stature and his or her "earning capacity." If such a claim now sounds vulgar or naïve, this might only reveal how far our own investment in high culture persists. In fact one of the challenges of the historical middlebrow is to learn to take such claims seriously. After all, they are not too far from what we promise our own students via a university degree: to increase their intellectual stature *and* their earning capacity.

In the kind of rhetoric represented by this advertisement, culture was its own reward, but it was also repurposed as new social and economic capital. The middlebrow appeal to self-improvement—being "tremendously transformed"—was rather different from earlier forms of working-class self-education, for it was less about being educated than being *modern*: well-informed, comfortable in the presence of "interesting talk" and up-to-date, even in relation to the classics. Its consumers, we might say, were already more or less educated and middle class, but they sought new forms of cultural insidership and social distinction.

Middlebrow culture can be defined by this mix of attributes and aspirations. Typically, the value of culture was affirmed and traditional voices of authority were evoked, but at the same time that value was transformed: culture was to be made much more widely accessible or, more precisely, more "consumable," whether in the form of cheap sets of classics, membership of an institution like the Book of the Month Club which offered the best of the new books sifted and selected by a panel of experts, or in the new commercial

¹²⁾ Advertisement in *View* (Melbourne), April 1946.

book magazines and radio book shows which equally performed the role of selecting and recommending (and offering familiarity with “book talk”). In the process, traditional high culture or “restricted” values were put into much wider circulation through the use of new media and new forms of marketing directed at an expanded reading and book-buying public. Thus it was that critics, educators and entrepreneurs could indeed find common cause. Joan Shelley Rubin links the development of the famous Great Books program at Columbia to the emergence of middlebrow culture, for it too depended upon the assumption that serious culture was accessible, relevant, and socially “useful” to an emerging class of professionals, and so should not be restricted to the scholars or specialists.¹³⁾

As the critics met the entrepreneurs, there was almost nothing that couldn’t be repackaged to appeal to a middlebrow market. Even *Ulysses*. In 1934, Random House advertised its new edition of Joyce’s novel in the middlebrow *Saturday Review of Literature*.

Ulysses is no harder to “understand” than any other great classic. It is essentially a story and can be enjoyed as such. Do not let the critics confuse you. *Ulysses* is not difficult to read, and it richly rewards each reader in wisdom and pleasure. So thrilling an adventure into the soul and mind and heart of man has never before been charted. This is your opportunity to begin the exploration of one of the greatest novels of our time...

... With a plot furnished by Homer, against a setting by Dante, and with characters motivated by Shakespeare, *Ulysses* is really not as difficult to comprehend as critics like to pretend. [There then follows a quite sophisticated how-to-read guide, after which the advertisement continues...]

But these things need not concern the general reader whose enjoyment of *Ulysses* depends on its humour, its wisdom, and its essential humanity. Beyond the esoteric significance of parts of the book... there lies as the solid basis of it one of the most exciting stories offered by modern fiction: the complete, unexpurgated record of a man’s uninhibited adventures, mental and physical, during the course of one full day.¹⁴⁾

Despite its own warnings about critics, the advertisement nonetheless includes a section devoted to “What the Critics Say.” Thus, as with the Harvard Classics, high cultural authority and expertise is invoked as a form of certification but simultaneously disavowed for the sake of the “general reader” (“Don’t let the critics confuse you”). The point to be insisted upon was that ultimately *Ulysses* was a *good read*. Readers were promised that greatness and pleasure, modernity and “essential humanity” could still be found together—although as far as I know nobody tried the same thing for *Finnegan’s Wake*.

¹³⁾ Joan Shelley Rubin, *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 27–29 and 148ff.

¹⁴⁾ Published in *Saturday Review of Literature* 10, no. 10 (February 1934): 474–75, reprinted in Casper, Chaison and Groves, *American Book History*, 342–43.

Middlebrow modernity

As this example suggests, the middlebrow was in part a means of absorbing the challenges of modernism, and as such it usefully puts modernist fiction back into its contemporary context: out of the *canon*, as it were, and back into the crowded marketplace of new books—high, middle and low—within which it first appeared (or in the case of *Ulysses* re-appeared). The rise of middlebrow institutions was itself a response to the rapid expansion of publishing and reading around the turn of the century. From the 1890s to the 1930s in Britain the annual number of new titles more than doubled despite a dip during the war, an increase largely driven by new fiction and condensed popular knowledge titles, such as H. G. Wells's best-selling *Short History of the World*. There were more books and more *new* books, as the book trade was reorganised around the category of the bestseller, the book of the week or month. Reading too was reorganised as part of modern leisure; there were new kinds of readers and reading occasions. As one commentator remarked, noting the new phenomena of pocket editions, "Civilisation comes to us today in exquisite fragments suitable for shelf, suitcase or car, purposely designed to meet the fleeting needs of the modern race of nomads."¹⁵⁾

Although none of these developments was unprecedented in the 1920s, their effects were accelerating (after a moment of pause during the Great War). But while the boom in new books and new readers could be celebrated as a sign of a healthy culture and book trade, it could also be unsettling for critics, entrepreneurs and consumers alike. Again and again in the twenties, amateur and professional readers express an anxious sense of "drowning" in a sea of new books. The sense was that the sheer number of new publications made it increasingly difficult to discern the best and harder to inform oneself authoritatively; but as books and reading and new kinds of readers proliferated, it became increasingly important that one *should* be so informed, and so distinguished from the ignorant or indiscriminating consumer. As the famous publicity for the US Book of the Month Club put it: "How often have outstanding books appeared, widely discussed and widely recommended, books you were really anxious to read and fully intended to read when you 'got around to it,' but which nevertheless you *missed*? Why is it you disappoint yourself so frequently in this way?"¹⁶⁾

Such appeals manifested a form of social anxiety, a cultural imperative, and a market opportunity, all at once. Critics and entrepreneurs both could feel that the burgeoning consumer-oriented book culture needed to be sorted and regularised. Thus institutions built around the key tasks of keeping up with the best of the new books and getting to know the classics proliferated almost as fast as the new books themselves: subscriber book clubs; book magazines and radio book shows; books on how to read books; digests and "outlines"; and book selections, lists, series and compilations of all kinds.

¹⁵⁾ Arthur Thrush, "Pocket Editions of Today," *All About Books* 14 (December 1928): 42.

¹⁶⁾ From the Club's first advertisement, quoted in Rubin, *Making of Middlebrow Culture*, 99.

The Australian magazine, *All About Books*, launched in 1928, defined good books as those “which you not only SHOULD read, but will enjoy reading.”¹⁷⁾ The magazine’s opening editorial is one of the best local examples of the middlebrow moment:

We launch this Journal on a sea already overcrowded with journals, magazines and daily and weekly papers of all kinds, to say nothing of a superabundance of books published each month—this is just the trouble. As very ordinary members of the great public, we have found much difficulty in sifting the grains of wheat out of so much chaff, and many in our circle of social and business friends are in the same predicament. We like reading, and welcome with open arms anyone who can tell us of a good book.

If we could only find some means of getting recommendations of the best new books without having to read long, critical reviews... We read mainly for recreation, and want some means of learning of the best new books—some summary that will enable us to decide quickly if a book is the kind that will give us the pleasure and recreation or the information we desire...

We intend to give information rather than criticism. We lay no claim to literary distinction. We do not even desire to be original. But we do aim to keep you advised of the best new books and what leading reviewers think of them, to give you interesting information about books and authors, to let you know of the books that are attracting worldwide attention and, perhaps, bring to your notice older good books you may have overlooked.¹⁸⁾

The magazine’s founder, D. W. Thorpe, was a book trade entrepreneur rather than a critic or man of letters. Like many other middlebrow institutions, the magazine’s aim was to make book selection efficient, timely and reliable, and it linked reading to pleasure, recreation and information rather than culture. And yet the whole point was to sort out the *best* new books, and this task did carry a cultural loading.

The duality in the magazine’s aims became explicit in its sixth anniversary editorial in 1934: “We have endeavoured to serve a dual purpose. Qualified critics such as Mrs Palmer and Professor Cowling give critical reviews regularly, whilst other reviewers, engaged for their ability to ‘sort’ books into different classes, give summaries of different types of novels.”¹⁹⁾ The magazine thus made a feature of its authoritative critics: Nettie Palmer, then the best-known critic of Australian books, and George Cowling, Professor of English at Melbourne University, both of whom contributed monthly columns. But most

¹⁷⁾ Phil Grim, “Russia, England, British Guiana [sic], Mexico,” *All About Books* 12 (May 1934): 94.

¹⁸⁾ Introduction, *All About Books* 14 (December 1928): 1. See David Carter, “‘Some Means of Learning of the Best New Books’: *All About Books* and the Modern Reader,” *Australian Literary Studies* 22, no. 3 (2006): 329–41.

¹⁹⁾ “We Turn Six,” *All About Books* 15 (January 1934): 3.

of the magazine's pages were filled with reviews that indeed did little more than sort and summarise, and that claimed little more authority than that of a fellow reader. Even Palmer's column was called "A Reader's Notebook," while Cowling, very much like Henry Seidel Canby, the Yale professor central to the US Book of the Month Club and *Saturday Review*, proved an ideal figure of middlebrow guidance. He brought his authoritative status as a Professor of English to bear in advising readers as to the "books everyone should read," but largely dissolved that authority in a familiar readerly manner, as a reader writing for readers rather than a critic writing for critics. By the late thirties, his column bears the impeccably middlebrow title "All Sorts of Reading for Everybody."

Cowling's reputation is as an Anglophile literary conservative, and so he was, but the very conventionality of his vocabulary—his insistence that good fiction required sincere emotion, unity of purpose, sympathetic characters and a good story—enabled him to find in the monthly bestsellers plenty of examples of the good and almost great. He thereby reassured ordinary readers that highbrow-ism was irrelevant to worthwhile reading and literary enjoyment. Dismissing a modernist novel under review he writes: "It is very provocative, and 'crowded with culture' of the highbrow sort that is now talked ... in the Café Francais, London."²⁰ Not surprisingly, his hero was Arnold Bennett, and like Bennett he was happy for authors to achieve social distinction: "I should like to see Australian literary men sailing their own yachts, managing repertory theatres, travelling *de luxe*, filling the stalls at the theatres in immaculate evening dress, and collecting books, pictures and bric-à-brac."²¹

In *All About Books* new habits of reading were also linked to new habits of book-buying or rather book *owning*. "Own the books you most wish to read. Have them in your library, carry them in your pocket."²² Whether by purchasing the Harvard Classics, or perhaps the ten-volume *Masterpiece Library of Short Stories* as my grandfather did, or through discriminating individual choices, the building of a personal library, no doubt within reach of many for the first time, carried important social meanings. Building a library meant taking responsibility for one's own recreation and "transformation"; but it was also pre-eminently a social act, defining a place within what we might call cultured sociability. Thus the home becomes the crucial site of middlebrow book culture, and the frequent recommendation that books and bookshelves made attractive living room furniture was not simply trivial; even these should be good books in good bookshelves. And here, too, the entrepreneur and the critic, even the *nationalist* critic, found common cause. As Nettie Palmer wrote, advising readers on gifts for Christmas 1930: "What are the books that we cannot afford to miss this year? [Those] I have noted are such as we shall want to have at hand in years to come ... either in our homes or in our libraries."²³ Building a library and building a market were both

²⁰ G. H. Cowling, "What is Good Literature?" *All About Books* 15 (May 1931): 107.

²¹ G. H. Cowling, "Arnold Bennett, Ellen Terry and Others," *All About Books* 12 (September 1933): 139–40.

²² *All About Books* (May 1929): 178.

²³ Nettie Palmer, "Australian Books of 1930," *All About Books* 5 (December 1930): 307–10.

part of building a reading nation.

The line between high ideals of cultural diffusion and commercial imperatives towards the commodification of cultural products was never clear. Middlebrow institutions were committed to broadening access to culture, even to its democratisation, but also to its role as a form of social distinction. They were committed to quality but also to expanding its markets. They evoked critical authority but largely in order to reassure ordinary readers that the best was within their reach (and in their interests). They repeated the lesson that culture could be acquired not just through inherited cultural capital, and not even necessarily through extensive disciplined study, but through discerning consumption (a book a month, fifteen minutes a day). Good books were promoted as the repository of timeless values while modern marketing promised to deliver them in a timely and efficient manner. Enduring classics were announced month after month.

The middlebrow notion of “good reading” was thus fairly generous both up and down the scale, multiplying the possible kinds of good books way beyond the limits of the literary canon. But at the same time it carefully policed the boundaries between good books and trash, at one end, good reading and highbrow affectation, at the other. Readers were assured that their own tastes mattered and that with *some guidance* they could appreciate quality themselves, whether in a challenging modern novel, a “virile” western, or the many good books in between. Two scales of value operated together, the vertical scale of universal quality and a horizontal scale where books were divided and sub-divided into so many types and tastes. On the latter plane, taking its bearings from the consumer, different tastes were just “a matter of taste.” On the former, by contrast, taking its bearings from the critic, taste was something rare and to be cultivated. Middlebrow culture emerges in the intersection between the two scales, mediating different *kinds* and different *values*, primarily through the flimsy but eminently flexible notion of “good books.” Of course, the very indeterminacy of the term left all the work of discrimination still to be done.

The (trans-)national middlebrow

Over the last decade there have been substantial studies of the middlebrow in the United States, especially Joan Shelly Rubin’s *The Making of Middlebrow Culture* and Janice Radway’s study of the Book of the Month Club, *A Feeling for Books*. The middlebrow has also emerged as an important category for new studies of mid-century modernity in British literature, for example in Nicola Humble’s *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel* or Chris Baldick’s recent volume in the Oxford English Literary History series, *The Modern Movement*.²⁴⁾ To date there has been no equivalent Australian study.

²⁴⁾ Joan Shelly Rubin, *Making of Middlebrow Culture*; Janice Radway, *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997); Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Chris Baldick, *The Modern Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

The US and British studies are largely pursued within national boundaries where, in each case, there was a substantial domestic publishing industry servicing a large national reading public. Imported books and magazines disappear, as it were, into the national market. But what of the Australian case, where books and reading for the most part meant books and reading from overseas? Were the institutions of middlebrow culture reproduced in Australia, and if so when and where? How does the middlebrow, as an analytical concept, change our understanding of Australian literature or the national culture?

As my earlier discussion of *All About Books* suggests, I would argue that middlebrow attitudes and institutions did emerge in Australia—in the 1920s—and began to dissipate in the 1960s (as they did elsewhere). The effect of the division of cultures was weaker, perhaps, because the institutions of high culture were less well established; there was nothing on the scale of the Book of the Month Club; and it is more difficult to separate mainstream from popular publishing. Nonetheless, we can trace the splitting of nineteenth century forms of literary journalism into separate cultural spheres as new forms of book talk begin to emerge and debates about high versus low culture break out everywhere. Further, we can observe an intense interest in the new books arriving from England and the USA, in a way that can be linked rather than opposed to the desire for a modern *Australian* culture. Australian cultural politics has sometimes been portrayed as a struggle between radical nationalists, on one side, and anti-nationalist conservatives or cosmopolitan modernists on the other. But there is another history to be written, a history of what we might call “middlebrow nationalism.”

The role of imported cultural products has often been interpreted as a form of cultural imperialism. But while this has a point, certainly in industrial terms, if we shift the frame slightly, away from the national towards a trans-national history of modernity, we can interpret the desire for the latest thing from England rather differently: not as the failure of nationalism but as a means of accessing the modern. Middlebrow culture, in other words, might be seen not just as the absence of an authentic Australian culture but as a sign of Australian culture’s participation in international modernity. The new modern books were the books modern Australians wanted to know about. Editors and reviewers so took for granted their contemporaneity with London and New York that the idea of imperial domination seems to miss the point. This is heightened perhaps in a local culture dominated by the ephemeral forms of newspaper and magazine, where it was the new and newsworthy books that mattered more than tradition (except where that tradition could be made new).

Let me give some examples, mostly drawn from those magazines that mediated the new books for their Australian readers. I can begin with the Sydney *Triad*, a commercial books and theatre paper from the 1920s. Relaunching the magazine in 1925, its new editor explained: “The Old *Triad*, rightly or wrongly, was dubbed High-brow. The New *Triad* is neither High-brow nor Low-brow. It is Broad-brow.” The public doesn’t want “tripe,” he continued, despite what the experts say, but “neither do they care for caviar, except in very small portions. The *Triad* menu henceforth is neither tripe nor caviar, but a properly

balanced diet from soup to sweets.”²⁵⁾ But finding the balance between high and low, art and entertainment, criticism and news, was a recipe the new *Triad* never quite managed and the magazine soon disappeared. Part of the problem was that the middle ground it sought was precisely that of the high quality magazines imported into Australia in large numbers from the USA and Britain.

By the 1930s the habit of dividing culture according to brows was thoroughly familiar in Australia, and widely dispersed across magazines that were by no means literary magazines — in the general, independent commercial magazines, offering reading for leisure and recreation (including cultural recreation), which dominated the market until the Second World War. For example *Man* magazine (Australia’s first “men’s magazine”) reversed the usual disclaimer about being neither highbrow nor lowbrow when it was launched in 1934, proudly announcing itself as “both highbrow and lowbrow.”²⁶⁾ On the other side of the gender divide, the *Australian Women’s Weekly* (Australia’s biggest-selling and longest-running women’s magazine), launched in 1933, featured a great deal of talk about good books and reading, and it followed the highbrow-lowbrow debate. Good books were opposed to “light fiction,” but they were also defined as the books that should be owned and kept in the home. In 1940 a worried stenographer wrote to the *Weekly* with exemplary middlebrow taste and typical middlebrow anxieties: “I like biographies, best-sellers, history and travel books and most of the classics, but the girls I have come in contact with cannot be bothered with any of these, and, if they read at all, just read light fiction.”²⁷⁾

These magazines can be contrasted to the manifesto-driven “little magazines” that emerged in the early 1940s with titles such as *Comment*, *Angry Penguins*, *Venture* and *Meanjin*.²⁸⁾ These were all expressly distanced from the market, as a sign of which they privileged poetry above fiction. In best avant-garde style, *Comment* announced proudly “Our public is practically non-existent.” *Angry Penguins* boasted that it was “not intended to be entertaining” and published three poems called “Poem” in its first number. *Meanjin* and *Venture* announced nationalist intellectual movements. The modern and the intellectually serious were thus dramatically divorced from the bestsellers and books of the month in the commercial papers. National culture was divorced from the marketplace.

The emergence of modernist and nationalist movements has been thoroughly written-in to Australian cultural history. What remains hidden is the substantial growth of a whole other

²⁵⁾ *Triad*, May 1925.

²⁶⁾ *Man*, June 1937, 7, quoted in Richard White, “The Importance of Being *Man*,” in *Australian Popular Culture*, ed. Peter Spearritt and David Walker (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1979), 149.

²⁷⁾ *Australian Women’s Weekly* 20 (July 1940), and see Patrick Buckridge, “‘Good Reading’ in the *Australian Women’s Weekly*, 1933–1970,” *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature* 1 (2002): 36.

²⁸⁾ See David Carter and Roger Osborne, ‘Periodicals’, in *Paper Empires: A History of the Book in Australia 1946–2001*, ed. Craig Munro and Robyn Sheahan-Bright (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2006): 239–57.

layer of institutions and agents—the booksellers, radio presenters, reviewers, schoolmasters and book lovers—committed to good books, good modern books and good Australian books but not in the way that we would normally associate with cultural nationalism or high modernism. The later 1940s represent something of a highpoint for this middlebrow nationalism as the social aspirations associated with good books and good reading were linked to aspirations for a new post-war Australian culture.

The “lifestyle” magazine *Australia: National Journal*, for example, shared the values of one of its book reviewers who expressed the hope that he would soon be able to read a novel about Sydney or Melbourne that would be “as neat and sophisticated as a recent novel about Montreal ... a city of strong charm, inhabited by civilised and cultured people.”²⁹⁾ From 1939, the magazine of the national broadcaster, the *ABC Weekly*, offered “guidance in reading” as well as music appreciation, and featured ongoing discussions, not least in its correspondence pages, of what a visiting American professor called the pointless “civil war between highbrow and lowbrow.”³⁰⁾ In 1946, the ABC launched a new monthly paper entitled *Talk*, for “really worthwhile material [presented] in an attractive, popular and easily-assimilated form.” Here university experts regularly turned their expertise into general culture. Professor Eric Ashby, for one, argued the case for a distinctively Australian and suspiciously middlebrow version of the highbrow:

The lowbrow in Australia already gets a pretty fair deal; and quite rightly, for he is the backbone of the country ... But the highbrow, who is the nerves of the country, does not get such a fair deal by any means. Of course, there are highbrows and highbrows. I do not mean the pansy sort who have none of the Australian vigour ... about them, and who live in a cloud of European ideas, mostly out of date. I mean men who put into words, music, and colour our way of life.³¹⁾

Also in 1946, an Australian Book Society was launched with a magazine, *Australian Books* (1946-48). This was to be a “rallying place for all book lovers who wish to see Australian writing of all kinds ... given its full place and prominence as our OWN expression of literature.”³²⁾ It was a magazine of book news and book talk rather than literary criticism, with a monthly Australian book selection in each issue. So had the more professional but otherwise very similar magazine from the same year, the *Australasian Book News and Library Journal* (1946-48). And to continue the links between radio and good books, the commercial radio magazine *The Listener-In* recommended a Book of the Week, had its own “great book” offers, and featured regular discussion of the highbrow-lowbrow debate. It

²⁹⁾ *Australia: National Journal*, August 1946.

³⁰⁾ Professor Dixon Wecter, *ABC Weekly*, 1946.

³¹⁾ Eric Ashby, “Give the Highbrow a Fair Deal,” *Talk* 1, no. 1 (April 1946): 37.

³²⁾ Mary Mansfield, Editorial, *Australian Books* 1, no. 1 (September 1946): 1.

carried a books feature usually on the Women's Page, edited by a Miss J. G. Shain who also presented a weekly radio books show in Melbourne called *Living Authors*. As Radway suggests, book talk in such places was intensely reader-oriented, feminised and managed through the trope of direct communication with "living authors" (even those long dead).³³⁾

The rise of middlebrow modernity was also reflected in an increased presence of American cultural models in the Australian book world (I think it was "increased" but we know so little of American-Australian connections in the book world that this point might need revision). There appears, in any case, to have been a much stronger presence of contemporary American book culture in Australia than has generally been acknowledged. There were the Harvard *Masterpieces* of course, and in 1940 Angus & Robertson, Australia's largest publisher, issued Mortimer Adler's middlebrow classic *How To Read a Book*, their edition "Australianised" for local readers with a foreword by Walter Murdoch, another candidate as Australia's Henry Seidel Canby. Unlike Canby, Murdoch remained a Professor of English to the end of his career, but he built his reputation as a man of letters writing genial newspaper columns about books and reading and other matters of broad or idiosyncratic interest. (Richard Wright's *Native Son*, a controversial Book of the Month Club selection in the USA, was also reprinted by Angus & Robertson in 1940.)

Henry Canby himself toured Australia in 1945 as a guest of the University of Melbourne, and Melbourne University Press subsequently published his lectures as a short book on "the importance of a national literature." Canby's message, however, stressed the importance of increased book-buying rather than anything specifically nationalist: "What every writer needs most of all in such new nations as Australia is a public eager to read and able to write intelligently. For its instruction, the best books should flow in from everywhere. As a slogan, 'buy Australian books' is of little use to the native writer, until his public has listened to the sounder appeal of 'buy books'."³⁴⁾

Another candidate for the title of Australian Canby is George Mackaness, Vice-President, with Murdoch, of the Australian Book Society, lecturer in English at the Sydney Teachers College, bibliophile, anthologist and historian. Writing in *Australian Books* in 1946, Mackaness defined literature as first and foremost a matter of "public interest, public opinion and public education."³⁵⁾ As such, literature depended upon the support of the writer, the publisher and the reader, but not of the *critic*, who was nothing but "an excrescence, almost a parasite upon the body literary." Nonetheless, Mackaness felt the lack of a "real critical journal" in Australia. There were "half a dozen small cultural magazines," he wrote, and there were newspaper reviews, but it was precisely the middle range that was lacking. His

³³⁾ Radway, *Feeling for Books*, 261ff.

³⁴⁾ Henry Seidel Canby, *A New Land Speaking: An Essay on the Importance of a National Literature* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1946), 27.

³⁵⁾ George Mackaness, "Are We Australians Book-Conscious?," *Australian Books* 2, no. 1 (December 1946): 1.

approved models were largely American (and largely middlebrow): “we need an authoritative monthly journal, a *Fortnightly*, a *Munsey*, an *Atlantic*, a *Harpers*, to which we could look for guidance in our reading.” This interest in contemporary American culture was not the opposite of a commitment to the local; quite the reverse.

Aspirations for a renewed Australian culture were present in government planning for post-war reconstruction and in the cultural optimism of nationalist intellectuals. But my examples suggest that they were also more widely dispersed, through a relatively dense middlebrow culture, crossing the universities, commercial media and public institutions, and defined explicitly between highbrow and lowbrow. Middlebrow nationalism projected a public culture of writers, publishers and readers that depended on discerning consumers rather than pioneering folk (as in other models of the national culture); a culture that was at home in the marketplace and the suburbs; and that was premised not on the opposition of Australian and imported cultures but on their contemporaneity. In distinguishing “good books” from the excesses of the mass-commercial and ultra-modernist, middlebrow nationalism offered to reunite, around the modern, precisely what modernity had seemed to drive apart—individuality and communal aspiration, cultural value and popular consumption, good taste and accessibility. This is a fascinating moment in which an Australian culture was projected as modern, middle-class, and even modestly cosmopolitan.

Critical reflections

Let me step back for a moment and summarise why I find working with the middlebrow a useful and productive process. First, as suggested, it brings a material “print cultures” perspective to the study of Australian culture. It focuses on books and print in Australian society, not just Australian literary texts, and on the institutions of ordinary reading not just on literary criticism. In doing so, it recasts the study of Australian literature, placing the national frame within a larger trans-national network, and revealing the history of what I’ve called middlebrow nationalism. It demands a “positive” history of literature’s circulation in the public sphere and the marketplace. Second, as part of that trans-national framework, it participates in some of the very interesting new work around the concept of modernity, and in particular the idea of colonial, popular or vernacular modernities (all these terms have been used). As Radway has shown, the Book of the Month Club must be understood not as conservative or residual but as a “characteristically *modern* cultural institution,” and the point can be generalised to the institutions of middlebrow book culture more broadly.³⁶⁾

Thirdly, the middlebrow is theoretically interesting in the way it recasts the high culture/popular culture binary. Of course, no-one believes in this opposition any more, at least not as an eternal hierarchy of values, but for good and bad reasons it still structures much of our work on culture. The good reason is that cultural institutions are still often structured themselves according to its binary logic. The bad reason has to do with disciplinary histories

³⁶⁾ Radway, *A Feeling for Books*, 15.

and institutional divides. The problem is that the high/low structure tends to produce an excluded middle, that vast slice of the cultural market where high culture values are folded back into the consumer forms of “quality entertainment.” This describes parts of television, much commercial theatre, much classical music broadcasting, and much of the literature that still today, and possibly more than ever, goes under the heading of “good books.”

In other words, the broad category of “popular culture” is just too broad (or in some uses too narrow) to adequately describe the range of cultural forms and tastes that have existed and continue to exist between pulp and the avant-garde. The middlebrow as a term won’t solve this problem but it gives it a name and a history.

But perhaps, after all, what really attracts me to the middlebrow is that it has *nothing going for it*. It’s neither high enough nor low enough to be interesting to literary/cultural studies. It’s neither transgressively avant-garde nor subversively vulgar; indeed, it’s about as far from subversive as it’s possible to get and never ever vulgar. In short, it combines the *worst* of both high and low: pretensions to good taste on one side and crass commercialism on the other. How could this not be attractive to a cultural historian!

Middlebrow or High-Pop?

Finally, the “historical middlebrow” of the mid-twentieth century can be read against the changes in contemporary book culture in Australia and more broadly across the English-language world—especially the emergence of a new culture of “good books,” perhaps even the resurgence of a middlebrow book culture after its collapse in the 1960s. Think of how much more than “airport novels” we now find in airport bookshops! Think of the new book stores in our cities and suburbs, the ones in fact that we call “good book stores,” those that sell good music and good coffee as well as good books. (A materialist definition of “good books” might be those that are sold in “good book stores.”) Think, too, of the classy literary novels that now become bestsellers; the boom in literary prizes, festivals, reading groups and book clubs; and a new obsession with book of the week recommendations, lists of the year’s best, and so on. These phenomena seem common across much of the English-speaking world at least.

Such developments reflect fundamental changes in the production, distribution, and quite possibly consumption of books and literature over the last two decades or so. Thus I can frame my enquiry at its beginning by the modernist reorganisation of the cultural field that occurred in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, and at the other end by the equally significant, perhaps post-modernist, reorganisation of the cultural field that occurred at the end of the twentieth century and is still unfolding.

One manifestation of the latter is what American cultural studies critic Jim Collins has termed “high pop”: the post-1980s phenomenon whereby high cultural values and artefacts are subject to exactly the same forms of dissemination and celebrity as popular forms. Whereas Pop Art in the 1960s was about bringing pop culture into the realm of Art, “high pop” reverses the equation, diffusing high culture through the means pop culture has

perfected, melding “institutions and tastes formerly thought to be mutually exclusive” and thereby “transforming *Culture* into mass entertainment.”³⁷⁾

Collins’s expressly distinguishes high-pop from the middlebrow. While the middlebrow is still present in forms such as the “popular classics,” high pop refers to the widespread diffusion of avant-garde style. Thus he argues that it’s “a serious mistake to conceive of the current popularisation of elite cultural pleasures as simply the most recent incarnation of middlebrow aesthetics.”³⁸⁾ Ultimately I think Collins is right, nonetheless it’s a mistake worth making for what it reveals about the new book cultures. Consider the following features they share with the historical middlebrow:

- a range of new institutions for increasing the circulation of good books and for increasing public access to them (e.g., direct internet ordering from newspaper books pages, books distributed digitally);
- new reader-oriented forums for book culture: reading groups, festivals and book clubs;
- a new culture of good reading outside the academy, indeed in some sense against the academy (the academy plays the antagonist role of the highbrow);
- a repackaging of good books as newly fashionable commodities, especially literary fiction and new genres of travel, essays, niche history and life stories, which are reconnected to lifestyle choices. Newspaper books pages now belong to what are lifestyle as much as cultural supplements; and in Australia we have the successful *Good Reading* magazine, which looks more like a lifestyle magazine than a literary magazine (because it *is* a lifestyle magazine).

These new book cultures do not simply reproduce old cultural capital; rather they suggest just how it might look when redistributed in an era of expanded tertiary education, new media and globalised cultural markets. Market analysts, for example, have identified a new class of “neo-consumers,” the new professional-managerial class, who apparently constitute 24 per cent of first world populations but possess more than the half the discretionary spending and “have a huge appetite for books.”³⁹⁾

Books today will have a range of social functions connected to lifestyle and social distinction. Perhaps what is distinctive about the new good books, though, is their promise of access to forms of cosmopolitanism, again as a kind of social distinction and self-transformation that is accessible, so the promise goes, through discerning consumption rather

³⁷⁾ Jim Collins, “High-Pop: An Introduction,” in *High-Pop: Making Culture into Entertainment*, ed. Jim Collins (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 1, 6.

³⁸⁾ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁹⁾ R. Honeywill, “Neo-Consumers Set the Agenda for Booksellers,” *Australian Bookseller and Publisher* (October 2002): 16–17.

than disciplined study or traditional forms of cultural capital (although no doubt these help). From *Memoirs of a Geisha* to *The Joy Luck Club* to *The Life of Pi* or *Eucalyptus*, all reading group favourites, the internationalism of the quality contemporary literary best-sellers—new world, cross-cultural, hybrid texts—is one of their most distinctive features. Australian books, too, now find their place within this cosmopolitan order much more forcefully for most readers than in any national ordering. That task is left to the dull academics.