Virginia Woolf and the New Common Reader

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Abstract: In 1925 and 1932 respectively, Virginia Woolf published two volumes of essays titled The Common Reader, designed to make an array of literatures comprehensible to ordinary readers. These volumes were compiled when the growth industry of literary criticism was gaining in traction and influence with elite periodicals defining highbrow against middle and lowbrow literature in what is commonly referred to as the 'Battle of the Brows'. Woolf, a highbrow, was among those who were deeply critical of sought after, mass produced popular fiction, made widely accessible through new print technologies to a rapidly growing reading public born of nineteenth-century educational reforms. A century later, new technologies in social media, alongside a renewed interest in reading cultivated during the COVID-19 pandemic, has amounted to an ever-expanding reading public whose interest in popular fiction has been subjected to the same harsh criticism. The term 'middlebrow' – not coined by Woolf, but widely associated with how she defined it in an unsent letter to The New Statesman – has re-entered discourse describing readerships that closely resemble a significant sector of online 'Bookish' communities. Considering the striking parallels between then and now, Woolf's definitions of what it means to be 'a common reader' and 'middlebrow' provide a useful starting point for

interrogating critical responses to contemporary readers and reading practices. Drawing on an overview of current social media trends on BookTok (one of the largest subcommunities on TikTok), opens avenues for exploring what it means to be middlebrow and a common reader today, and how this aligns with and differs from Woolf's definitions, showing the historical continuity of how reading communities are formed, how readerships are categorised and critiqued, and their influence on literary production and literary criticism.
Keywords: Reading, Social Media, Modernism, Middlebrow, BookTok

1. Introduction

Interwar Britain was a period of rapid change, culturally, technologically, socially and politically. The Labour college movement, building on the nineteenth-century educational reforms that had rapidly expanded the reading public, increased education for the working classes, and advancements in print technology made a wider variety of literatures accessible across class lines. The gatekeepers of culture – the highly educated critics, literary scholars, and literary elites – clashed with the common reading public fuelling the demand for mass-produced popular fiction, and whose tastes and preferences threatened to unsettle the divide between high and low culture. This tense moment of cultural debate is commonly referred to as the Battle of Brows.

A century later, new technologies in social media, coupled with a renewed interest in reading cultivated during the COVID-19 pandemic, have rapidly expanded and continue to expand the

reading public. Millions of readers, seeking connection, have transformed an ordinarily solitary activity into a foundation for community building (Attridge 2021; Wiederhold 2022; Puolakka 2022). These 'Bookish' communities can be found on Instagram (Bookstagram), YouTube (BookTube), and on more reading-focused websites and apps like Goodreads and Fable. The most expansive is concentrated in one of the largest subcommunities on TikTok: BookTok. The contemporary reading masses, like their interwar counterparts, have had a significant impact on literary sales and production. Over 52 million posts, garnering 370 billion views by January 2025, reintroduced and re-popularised older titles like Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* (2015), while rapidly elevating debut novels like Lottie Hazell's *Piglet* (2024) to bestseller status (Accio Business, 2025).

Concerns about the consequences of innovations in how the public accesses the written word can be traced as far back as 370BC, when Plato warned that the invention of writing will produce "forgetfulness", and those who read will "entertain the delusion that they have wide knowledge, while they are, in fact, for the most part incapable of real judgement" (1956, 68-69). In recent decades, scholars sounded an alarm on the impact of digital reading on critical thinking, attention and deep reading (Birkerts 1994; Carr 2010; Wolf 2018; Gordon 2023). The marked change in reading practices since 2020 has re-energised interest in exploring the drawbacks and benefits of social reading online (Pianzola 2024; Birke 2021; Puolakka 2022).

Scholarship produced against the backdrop of digital panic tends to pivot on the effects of changes in the *practice* of reading. Reading as

practice does feature in the critiques of BookTok, but these discussions extend beyond digital reading. These are cultural debates about what constitutes high and low literary culture, what should be published, what should be read, and who should be recommending it. The Battle of the Brows, relatively subdued until now, has been reinvigorated with unprecedented intensity in scholarship and the media, with the term 'middlebrow' re-entering discourse to describe readerships that closely resemble a significant sector of Bookish communities online.

The definition of 'middlebrow' is constantly in flux, and scholarship on it is broad. It is widely accepted that it was coined in the 1920s (Chowrimootoo 2018; Jaillant 2014; Driscoll 2014; Humble 2001). This claim is typically accompanied by a reference to *Punch, or the London Charivari*'s short note in their 23 December 1925 edition about "a new type, the 'middlebrow'" (673). Others cite the appearance of 'middlebrow' in "A Musical Renaissance", published in the *Freeman's Journal* on 3 May 1924 (Freeman's, 6; Macdonald 2011, 7; Driscoll 2014, 7). There are, however, earlier uses. Keble Howard writes about the middlebrow, highbrow and lowbrow in "Motley Notes" printed in *The Sketch* on 27 October 1920 (38), and the 23 March 1916 edition of *Bioscope* discusses highbrow, lowbrow and middlebrow audiences in "Pictures and the Public" (1235). *Bioscope* uses the word without explaining it, which suggests that it was already familiar to their readership.

Generally speaking, 'middlebrow' signified a position between high and low culture, or "someone with high intellectual or aesthetic aspirations, but who lacked the cultural capital necessary to understand high art" (Jaillant, 2014, 5). A constant in scholarship on

the Battle of the Brows is mention of Virginia Woolf's definition in "Middlebrow" (1932), that they are of "middlebred intelligence", preoccupied with fame, money, and social esteem. They occupy a cultural middle ground, lacking the authenticity of the lowbrow and the intellectual refinement of the highbrow (1966, 198-199). Woolf's definition haunts criticism of Bookish communities, thought to privilege the aesthetics and commercialisation of reading, the accumulation or commodification of books, social capital, and middlebrow novels over classic literature and deep, critical reading. BookTok users have been accused of misreading classic literature, ruining literature (Marsden, 2024), ruining reading (O'Regan-Reidy 2024, Sinha 2024, De Melo 2024), and affecting readers' intelligence by exposing them to "a combination of unimaginative novels, unnuanced marketing tactics and a readership that is continually growing more intolerant to complex thought processes" (Madruga, 2024).

Whether explicitly stated or implied, the pattern that emerges in these critiques is that they correlate intellectual capacity and reading practices, posit that there is a right and a wrong way to read, and assign value to the ability to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' literature. These are all ideas that Woolf wrote about over the course of her career. In "How Should One Read a Book" (1935) she proposes that "reading is a complex art". To read, "you must be capable not only of great fineness of perception, but of great boldness of imagination if you are going to make use of all that the novelist – the great artist – gives you" (1959, 260-261). In an earlier version of the essay, published in the *Yale Review*, she writes, "We have to remember that it is one of the qualities of greatness that it brings heaven and earth and human nature into conformity with its own vision. It is by reason of

this masterliness of theirs, this uncompromising idiosyncrasy, that great writers often require us to make heroic efforts in order to read them rightly. They bend us and break us" (1926). The revised version of "How to Read a Book" was included in the second of two essay collections titled *The Common Reader*.

Both collections comprise discussion of and judgements applied by Woolf to a range of literatures. Her essays were, according to Melba Cuddy-Keane, designed to "scrutinize the process of reading, to locate reading in a context of historically and ideologically variable standards, and to outline a model for active, self-reflexive reading practices" (2003, 1). As Cuddy-Keane and others understand it, *The Common Reader* is "empowering and pedagogical: Woolf's penetrating readings make a vast range of literature accessible…they also offer the tools for readers to gain that access for themselves" (2003, 1). But, although Woolf encouraged readers to "follow your own instincts, to use your own reason, to come to your own conclusions," she also made clear that the common reader was only empowered insofar as they learned to read without impunity, and to distinguish between what was and was not worthy of attention and preservation (1959, 258). In "The Leaning Tower," read to the Worker's Educational Association in May 1940, she makes clear that "We have got to teach ourselves to understand literature…we must teach ourselves to distinguish – which is the book that is going to pay dividends of pleasure forever; which is the book that will pay not a penny in two years' time?" (1966, 180-181). The literature that Woolf promoted, and sought to make accessible, was limited to what she and other highbrows, approved of.

The Common Reader encouraged the development of a certain *kind* of reader, different from the reader common when Woolf published the first series in 1925, and the second in 1932 – incidentally, the same year that she wrote "Middlebrow". The *First Series* begins with a reference to Samuel Johnson's "Life of Gray" in which he describes the reader as governed by "common sense" and "uncorrupted with literary prejudices" (*Lives of the English Poets* 1925, 392). Woolf, like Johnson, "[rejoiced] to concur with the common reader" because he "differs from the critic and the scholar" and "reads for his own pleasure rather than to impart knowledge or correct the opinions of others" (1925, 1). Woolf explains that if Johnson's claims are true, she and other autodidacts without a formal education are justified in recording their responses to the books that they are reading and have read. Elizabeth Madison argues that "emphasis here is on the reader's creative involvement in the world and his subsequent derivation from that involvement kind of whole – an insight into the author's personality, apprehension of the historical elements reflected in the literature, or an awareness of the characteristics of the genre. And in practice, each of the essays concentrates on one of these aspects" (Madison, 1981, 62-63). Ultimately, the common reader whom Woolf was most interested in was herself, noting in her first reference to a "Reading Book" in her diaries, "the more I read of other people's criticism the more I trifle; can't decide; nor need I just yet. But how I enjoy the exercise of my wits upon literature – reading it as literature. And I think I can do this the better for having read through such a lot of lives, criticisms, every sort of thing" (1978, 120). In her initial description of a common reader, they are only capable of piecing together a "rickety and ramshackle fabric" out of the odds and ends that they collect in an attempt to construct a whole (1925, 1). What follows is a collection of essays that do the opposite, and despite

Woolf's concurrence with the common reader, she encourages them to follow her example. Although it may differ in some respects from formal literary criticism (even Woolf notes the underlying formality in her style), there is nothing rickety or ramshackle in Woolf's critical method. The essays develop the common reader into an *uncommon* reader who can, despite their lack of education, move past their deficiencies to positively and productively contribute to literary culture.

The true common readers of Woolf's time, "uncorrupted with literary prejudices", "snatching now this poem, now that scrap of old furniture, without caring where he finds it or of what nature it may be", and reading for pleasure alone, were the middlebrows that she despised. Woolf, in her interpretation of Johnson's idea, moves from "the *common sense* of *readers*" to an "*instinct* to create for *himself*" (emphasis mine, 1). The difference is slight, but important. Instinct is an inherent aptitude or impulse in an individual. Woolf's common reader is solitary, introspective and consumed by literature, or as she put it in a letter to Ethyl Smyth, "the state of reading consists in the complete elimination of the *ego*" (Woolf 1982, 319). In contrast, common sense is socially (communally) constructed and learned.

The common reader today – the new common reader – can be found on social media. They are driven to read by common sense, with the broad reading habits of the middlebrow (a category taken here as positive). They develop a subjectivity in relation to the common and the individual experience of the common. The common in this sense is a community of 'common reading subjects' who, like Woolf, are autodidacts but develop a sense of themselves and others as 'readers' premised on, in Rancierian terms, an equality of intelligence. An

overview of current social media trends on BookTok, paired with Beth Driscoll's useful "Eight Defining Features of the Middlebrow" in *The New Literary Middlebrow* (2014) provides insight into what it means to be middlebrow and a common reader over a century after Woolf published her essay collections. How this aligns with and differs from her definitions, and how the language of the Brows influenced and continues to influence how we think and talk about literature, is central to uncovering how reading communities are and were formed, how readerships are categorised and critiqued, and their influence on literary production and literary criticism.

2. Female and Feminised

In the interwar period, elite periodicals like *The New Statesman* defined highbrow against middle and lowbrow literature, erecting barriers around what should and should not be considered high art. Self-proclaimed defender of the intellectual, T.S. Eliot, "despised the development of a thriving market in escapist and entertaining reading matter" (Humble 2001, 28). Woolf was deeply critical of sought after, mass produced popular fiction, or as she called it "the middlebrow version of what they have the impudence to call real humanity…this mixture of geniality and sentiment stuck together with a sticky slime of calf's foot jelly" (1966, 200). In *The Common Reader,* she permits a degree of "rubbish-reading" in "How Should One Read a Book" (*The Common Reader: Second Series*). By "rubbish reading" she does not mean contemporary popular fiction. She refers to the pleasure of reading "half-truth" in non-fiction like Tate Wilkinson's four-volume *Memoirs of My Own Life* (1739-1803), concluding that "we tire of rubbish-reading in the long run" (1959, 263-264). Woolf's arguments about reading "books written to escape

from the present moment, and its meanness and sordidity," were primarily illustrated by texts written before the twentieth-century (1959, 263). In "The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia" (*The Common Reader: Second Series*) she moves from an account of the sensory joy that she experiences when first taking up Sir Philip Sydney's prose pastoral romance, *Arcadia* (late 16th Century), to her loss of interest which she justifies with a more technical account of the deficits in the writing, plot and characterisation. Typical of her instructional method, Woolf does not tell the reader what to think, instead modelling her reading practice. She *shows* how best to sift through the rubbish pile and draw the correct conclusions.

In her critique of early twentieth-century fiction, "Modern Fiction" (*The Common Reader: First Series*), she does not overtly state her aversion to middlebrow novels, rather using the examples of H.G. Wells, John Galsworthy, and Arnold Bennett to signal her distaste for middlebrow narrative form. The writer, she says, is "constrained, not by his own free will but by some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant who has him in thrall, to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability...The tyrant is obeyed; the novel is done to a turn" (61). In "Middlebrow" she is more direct. She tries to read a middlebrow book, finds it "not well written; nor is it badly written...it is betwixt and between," before tossing it out of a window. She explains to her "friends the lowbrows" that she, or rather "we, the highbrows, never buy a middlebrow book, or go to a middlebrow lecture, or read, unless we are paid for doing so, a middlebrow review" (200). The 'tyrant' in Woolf's formulation is the limitations placed on the author by novelistic conventions, but it is also the reader whose tastes and preferences sustain these conventions.

In affronts on the middlebrow, the tyrant, both the reader and literary convention, is "female and feminized" (Driscoll 2014, 29). Middlebrow literature "is often produced and disseminated and overwhelmingly consumed by women" (2014, 29). Historically, women have participated in large numbers in writing, reading and popularising the novel as a literary form. From its development in the eighteenth-century, through to the twentieth-century, those concerned with the state of the arts marked it as not only inferior to the higher art of poetry, but dangerous in that it "was apt to corrupt the mind with romantic ideas and with flights of imagination that diverted attention from the demands of real life" (Korsmeyer, 2004, 69). BookTok's demographics are dominated by young women, reading and popularising middlebrow novels written by and for women (Dera 2024). The bestselling BookTok titles in 2024 were written by women, including Emily Henry's genre romance *Funny Story* (2024), Sarah J. Maas' romantasy *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (2015), and Liz Moore's mystery-thriller *The God of the Woods* (2024). The romance has retained a privileged place in middlebrow genre fiction for well over a century, because, as Pamela Regis explains, "the Romance is the most female of popular genres. Nearly all of the writers and readers are women" (2003, xii).

Content creators on BookTok have noticed the gender bias in critiques of the community. Kehinde (@kehindeslibrary) asks, "What exactly does it mean to be well-read?":

> I have seen a lot of debates [on BookTok and in the media] but the everlasting debate that keeps on showing up is anti-intellectualism and how BookTok has ruined the publishing industry and ruined books. And, whenever people talk about this, they often associate it

> to the romance genre, which really, really does annoy me because I feel like the unnecessary hatred of the romance genre is rooted in internalised misogyny (2024).

One of her followers, 'Belinda', comments, "Spot on! It really is rooted in misogyny because more women are into reading now and their genre of choice happens to be romance" (2024). @books&Stuff added that the "establishment/culture-makers use terms like [well-read and anti-intellectual] to exclude people from being considered smart/educated" (2024). Andrew Moore, a professor of literature who posts as @greatbooksprof notes that "the perceived 'threat' to literature or the 'commodification' of literature seems to take the form of women reading. The implicit formula seems to be if too many women are interested in reading, it will somehow 'ruin' literature" (pers. comm., June 19, 2025). He compares BookTok to 'Oprah's Book Club' in the 1990s, which cultural gatekeepers found similarly unsettling.

One of the primary differences between BookTok and Oprah's Book Club, Book of the Month Clubs and other middlebrow literary networks, is that the subcommunity is one of the largest on a platform with over 2 billion registered users. The sheer volume of BookTok content is distributed across for-you-pages, which not only makes *what* women are reading visible to the wider public, it shows, through recordings of reader response and reviews, *how* they are reading, and the emphasis that they place on "emotional connections with literary works" in keeping with the sentimental tone of the middlebrow reading practices (Driscoll 2014, 32). The emphasis on subjective reading and authentic, emotional reading experiences has

been effective in sustaining engagement, and increasing the impact of Bookish communities on literary production.

3. The Sentimental Tyrant

Emotional connections with literary works are central to the "constant tension between art and commerce" that Driscoll attributes to middlebrow literary culture. BookTok is "implicated in commercial distribution networks," and makes explicit the connection between writers, readers and the intermediaries who present literary works to the public" (Driscoll 2014, 23-25). With some exceptions, the majority of content creators are new common readers who do not have degrees in literary studies, or training as literary critics, and yet they wield remarkable influence on the publishing industry.

The content on BookTok is designed to elicit an emotional response from the viewer, urging them to read and buy the book – a method that has contributed to the growth in sales of trending genres, most recently hybrid-genres like Romantasy (Accio Business 2025; Martens et al. 2022; De Melo 2024; Reddan et al. 2024; Dera 2024). Publishing houses, sensing the commercial benefits of this approach to promoting new and older titles, have capitalised on what Lyndsay Thomas identifies as "long-standing associations between consumer culture and femininity" and, citing Sarah Brouillette, "the feminization of work in the publishing industry," where unpaid labour by readers and writers drive profits (2023). Penguin Random House has partnered with TikTok to introduce a Book Tagging Feature that invites content creators to link their videos to the book under discussion. The link takes viewers to a page populated with more tagged videos and information. According to Penguin marketing, the

Tagging Feature is designed to cultivate "a natural forum where users can engage with others interested in the same books." They play on readers' emotional engagement by emphasising that it can be used to "connect on a deeper level" (Castaneda, 2022). Penguin, HarperCollins, and Pan Macmillan have curated 'BookTok Books' pages on their websites. On a smaller scale, BookTok provides authors with the opportunity to directly interact with their readers. They can promote their work, including self-published work, on a free, far-reaching platform, thereby bypassing publishing houses and the need for endorsement from an authoritative reviewer-critic.

The notion that reading has become commercialised goes hand-in-hand with the accusation that reading on BookTok is a solely aesthetic activity (O'Regan-Reidy, 2024; Sinha, 2024). Claims that Bookish communities are more concerned with the aesthetics of being a reader than actually reading, are supported with examples of videos in which content creators act out reader response (crying, contemplating, horrified, bemused), browse bookstores, share book hauls, show off new editions with pleasing covers, set up reading nooks, or give tours of well-stocked personal libraries. Personal libraries range from haphazard displays spanning genres, to more orderly collections dedicated solely to a specific genre, or organised by genre or trope.

Part of Woolf's vexation with the middlebrow is that he or she "ambles and saunters now on this side of the hedge, now on that, 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" (1966, 199). Aesthetic trend-based content on BookTok, and the accompanying hashtags designed for Search Engine

Optimisation, stand a higher chance of registering with TikTok's algorithm, increasing visibility, engagement (connecting with like-minded readers), and attracting followers (fame and prestige), which in turn increases the potential for content creators to benefit financially through paid partnerships (money). Jasmine Rusady, identifying an increase in books built around tropes like 'enemies-to-lovers', attributes an increase in novels "written and marketed as if they are made for BookTok, manufactured to fit the app's specific audience and trends" to the aestheticisation of reading – how it is depicted, but also in the fixation on certain aesthetic trends in writing (2024).

The idea that the commodification of books and the aestheticisation of reading is a recent social-media-driven phenomenon is, as with many of the critiques of BookTok, a nostalgic longing for an imagined golden age of reading, and a failure to historicise. Richard de Bury's *Philobiblon* (1345), a collection of essays published in the 14th Century, is largely dedicated to the mere love of books, to acquiring them, justifying the time and money spent on them, and gifting them. Reading was aestheticised in paintings by Édouard Manet, Alfred Stevens, Robert Delaunay, Sir John Lavery, and others long before it was aestheticised on social media. Portraits of nobles like Sir Joshua Reynolds' painting of Dorothy Vaughan, Countess of Lisburne, often featured books to signify intellect, wealth, and social status, as did the well-stocked personal libraries of the upper classes, even if many of the books they contained were never read. In her study of marginalia in books owned and written by modernists, Amanda Golden finds that many had display copies of works to be seen and not read, such as Evelyn Waugh's edition of James Joyce's *Ulysses,* bound in leather, with marbled boards, and gold lettering on the spine (2020, 8). E.M Forster

shares the pleasure that he derives from owning books, lending and borrowing them, and how he ordered (or rather, did not properly order) his library in "In My Library" (1949). In the shift towards consumer culture in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, books were among the first items purchased using consumer credit (Striphas 2009, 8). Cultivating and showing off personal libraries signalled affluence.

The mass production of books built around specific tropes is similarly not a recent phenomenon. Edith Maud Hull's 'enemies to lovers' desert romance *The Sheik* (1919), reissued in 108 editions in Britain alone, was one of the most widely read romance novels of the 1920s. Publisher Mills & Boon, hoping to capitalise on Hull's success, produced their own line of 'desert romances' beginning with Louise Gerard's *A Sultan's Slave* in 1921. Travel writer, Rosita Forbes, "couldn't resist the temptation to cash in on the popular desert romance genre" with *Quest: The Story of Anne, Three Men and Some Arabs* (1922), *If the Gods Laugh* (1925), and *Sirocco* (1927) (Teo, 2012, 82). Kathlyn Rhodes wrote an astonishing number of desert romances, including *Under Desert Stars* (1921), *Desert Lovers* (1922), *A Desert Cain and Other Stories* (1922), *Desert Justice* (1923), and *Allah's Gift* (1933). These works were marketed as 'desert romances' so that readers who enjoyed these tropes knew what to expect between the covers.

What is often overlooked is that, outside of their commercial affordances, trends form part of community-building. The appeal of producing content that shows familiarity with Bookish culture and aesthetics aligns with Andrew Piper's view that although "we largely read in isolation today…we still wish for commonality when it comes to reading" (83). He identifies three intersecting ideas that illustrate

what brings BookTok communities together: Commonality ("We want other people to read the same thing we are reading"); Transferability ("we want to be able to send other people what we are reading"), and Sociability ("we want to be able to talk to other people about what we are reading") (2012, 83). As I argue elsewhere, these communities are informal and unstructured: "Interaction can be generative (making content), passive (viewing content) or interactive (reposting content, commenting on content and talking to others, including the content creator, in comments threads)", all of which are activities centred on communal participation (Timlin, 2025, 8:22). Piper notes that "Reading is never purely an act of isolation. When we read, we enter into a world of commonality, whether of language, story, or material object. Reading socializes" because we "form social bonds through our reading material" (2012, 84).

While there might be commercial and community-building incentives to produce certain types of content and read certain BookTok books, the community would not be sustainable if there was no pleasure in reading and interacting outside of financial or social gain. Assumptions that readers on BookTok are only concerned with the aesthetics of being a reader, or that they conform blindly to trends, homogenises the community. They become the reading masses, not individuals with agency who form part of a larger, diverse network of readers with different preferences and opinions. Those who seek out particular tropes do so because, despite the repetition and predictability, they find them entertaining. The majority of content on BookTok is not created by authors, publishers, distributors, or influencers (Thomas 2023). It is posted by readers who want to talk to other readers about what they are reading and, contrary to the prevailing narrative, this includes canonical literature and critically

acclaimed contemporary works. Those like speech pathology student, Trish Parkinson, review books like Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* (1929) with the same care and consideration as Evie Dunmore's historical romance, *A Rogue of One's Own* (2020). As she explains it, "I read classic fiction because I believe it's foundational to the books we have today. Many of the tropes I love in modern fiction can be traced back to classic works…I also love reading popular fiction because it's a great way to unwind…For me, reading is the perfect hobby because it can both educate and entertain" (pers. comm., February 5, 2025). Readers, like Trish, are reverential, because "a veneration for elite culture underpins all the activities of the literary Middlebrow", but that veneration does not determine the limits of their reading habits, or their common sense opinions on literature (Driscoll, 2014, 21).

Continuing a now centuries-old tradition, being a reader who "ambles and saunters now on this side of the hedge, now on that" (Woolf 1966, 199) makes Booktok users targets for literary elites seeking to maintain the distinction between high and low art. Seth Rogoff was devastated by Franz Kafka's sudden rise to fame on BookTok in 2024 because, in his estimation, "Kafka cannot possibly withstand the flattening and emptying forces of social media" (2024). Eva Marsden complains that "even the conversations created around books on TikTok are arguably lacking critical analysis and valuable insight" (2024). In a statement reminiscent of *The Scotsman*'s comment in 1935 that "if the supplying of good modern fiction would prove the alternative to over-indulgence in the 'Woman of My Heart' and 'The Bloodstained Thumb', the cost would not be too high" (9), Marsden elaborates that "classic literature or critically celebrated contemporary work provides exactly what BookTok is missing" (2024) These statements imply that feminised reading practices, the

"feminisation of taste," or "the sentimental and romantic indulgence in imagination and enjoyment of formless emotive writing," preclude the reader from engaging in any depth with more complex literary works (Korsmeyer 2004, 69). In "The Love of Reading", Woolf posits that reading "does not merely consist in sympathizing and understanding. It consists, too, in criticizing and in judging" (nd.). Although the young women on BookTok are able to do both, they are treated as if their capabilities are limited to emotive responses to literature.

4. A Canon of their Own

The shift in how new common readers engage with and drive reading and publishing, coupled with the instability of an increasingly corporatised academy, has forced literary critics to consider the urgent question that Derek Attridge asks in his introduction to *The Work of Reading Literary Criticism in the 21st Century* (2021): "What is the role of the academic literary critic in the fostering and diffusion of literature?" (2). His concern is that the profession has become "too inward-looking and self-perpetuating to be a strong force for good in the wider world" (2021, 3). In *Professing Criticism*, John Guillory proposes that this question, which he calls an "overstatement of aim," results from an "uncertainty about the social effects of literary study," and ignores a critical barrier to access for the average reader – "the difficulty of critical language, the prevalence of a rebarbative dialect that sometimes has a more performative than communicative function." Language that has become "the defence mechanism of an inward-turning profession, a response to the disappointment of its great expectations" (2022, 79). The "insular preoccupations of the profession," as Attridge phrases it, have consequences beyond the

broader relevance of the literary critic: “under the pressure of the neoliberal privileging of monetary reward and utilitarian training over a broader understanding of education, the numbers enrolling in literature courses are in decline” (2021, 3).

The concerns that Attridge and Guillory raise are useful for contextualising cultural debates and developing a more nuanced understanding of the new common reader’s influence on literary production, dissemination and consumption. In simple terms, BookTok poses a threat to the intellectual because the community is treading where it is not welcome. Its content creators, are usurping the (traditional) academic literary critic, literary scholar, and the well-educated reviewer. To add insult to injury, their literary practices are those of the middlebrow - “amateur…recreational, not academic… “defined outside, and often against, the academy” (Driscoll 2014, 36). They differ “from the critic and the scholar” and from Woolf’s common reader who refines their reading practices to preserve high culture (Woolf, 1959, 1). Instead, Bookish communities place popular and canonical literature on the same shelf.

Books spanning the literary spectrum are brought together in an informal community-constructed literary canon that “diverges from the traditional literary canon emphasized in education” (Dera, 2024). In the words of @RomanticallyLit: “well read to us means the ability to make *connections* across genres and subjects” (2025). To stay current, newcomers must familiarise themselves with novels trending on the platform so that they can orient themselves within the community and build the knowledge needed to engage in discussions and participate in trends. Woolf’s *Orlando* (1928), Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar* (1963), Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s

White Nights (1848), James Baldwin's *Another Country* (1962), Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989), Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991), and other 'greats' are firmly situated in the BookTok canon beside Ana Huang's *Twisted Love* (2021), Holly Jackson's *A Good Girl's Guide to Murder* (2019) and Colleen Hoover's *It Ends With Us* (2016).

There are internal debates on BookTok about what constitutes good and bad literature, but these take place on common ground, free from rebarbative dialect. And, while affective, subjective reviews and aesthetic content are pervasive on the app, BookTok is steadily developing its own academy to complement its canon with an expanding body of educational content by creators, academic and amateur, like @Booksofthedead, @coolmelleniumbooks, and @taylatalkingtime. Moore, an academic taking an outward-turning approach to the fostering and diffusion of literature, uses BookTok (and Youtube) to create supplementary teaching materials for his students, and to "advocate for the humanities and demonstrate the value of humanistic inquiry to a general audience" (pers. comm., June 19, 2025). Responding to the conflict between the intellectual and the new common reader, Moore argues that "energizing readers is good for the humanities. How could it not be? English Literature departments probably do more to 'ruin literature' than BookTok does" (pers. comm., June 19, 2025). The divide between the academic literary critic and the amateur reader grows wider when BookTok content creators are accused of simplicity and vacuousness in their efforts to teach their followers about literature, reminiscent of highbrow concerns that interwar middlebrow educational efforts "forged in opposition to the perceived elitism or unintelligibility of modernism," which "involved representing and interpreting difficult works so that they became more accessible to the general public"

would simplify these works, depriving them of depth and meaning (Hammil, 2023, 99). At its core, the interwar highbrow's distaste for the "middlebrow lecture" or "middlebrow review" (Woolf 1966, 200), and the contemporary critics distaste for how literature is spoken about on social media, is steeped in what Erica Brown and Mary Grover identify as the "powerful anxieties about cultural authority and processes of cultural transmission" that informed the invention of 'middlebrow' as a cultural category (2018, 1).

5. The New Common Reader

Woolf's "Hours in a Library" (1916) celebrates a reader closer to the common reader that Johnson concurs with, and the new common reader, than any of the essays that she included in *The Common Reader.* She emphasises that "to become a specialist or an authority, is very apt to kill what it suits us to consider the more humane passion for pure and disinterested reading." Reflective of the age demographics on BookTok, "the true reader is essentially young…the great season for reading is the season between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four" (2018). Community with authors and other readers, according to Woolf, grows out of reading at an age when "all restrictions have been removed, we can read what we like; libraries are at our command, and, best of all [we have] friends who find themselves in the same position… Indeed, one of the signs of passing youth is the birth of a sense of fellowship with other human beings as we take our place among them" (2018). Like the middlebrow, readers on BookTok are reverent, and read classic literature to "show… familiarity with the greatest human beings who have ever lived in the world" (2018). The new common reader collates lists, quotes and rankings on Goodreads pages, and BookTok accounts, and like

Woolf's reader, keeps notebooks containing what they plan to read, authors and books ranked by merit, meaningful quotes, and "most interesting of all, lists of books that have actually been read…at the age of twenty, most of them probably for the first time" (2018).

Woolf acknowledges the joy and familiarity that comes from reading contemporary fiction by living authors: "We can treat them as we treat our equals; they are guessing our riddles, and, what is perhaps more important, we understand their jokes." Through this, she writes, "we soon develop another taste, unsatisfied by the great—not a valuable taste, perhaps, but certainly a very pleasant possession—the taste for bad books" (2018). Reading new books, good and bad, is done without the "vanity" behind efforts to be 'well-read' because "the kind of admiration which [new books and authors] inspire is extremely warm and genuine…in order to give way to our belief in them we have often to sacrifice some very respectable prejudice which does us credit" (2018). Woolf maintains that reading great literature is a necessary foundation for judging the value of contemporary fiction, but there is also value in reading bad books, through which the reader develops "a far keener eye for the old." This reader, approaching 'great books' with a more critical eye, could find, "probably, that some of the great are less vulnerable than we thought them. Indeed they are not so accomplished or so profound as some of our own time" (2018).

The real risk to literature is not social media, the new common reader, nor the continued popularity of the middlebrow novel. It is repeating the mistakes of critics past. When Attridge talks about "literature," he makes clear that he means "the kind of literature that offers challenges and surprises, that inspires admiration for its craft and subtlety, and that takes the reader into unaccustomed realms of

thought and feeling." He dismisses the rest as "formulaic literary works" (2021, 1). There are two potentially damaging consequences of categorically avoiding literature that appears, superficially, to be out of keeping with 'the greats', and of passing judgement on those who read it.

First, a decline in reading. The idea that a reader is defined by the quality of their reading material reinforces the conflict between the highbrow and the middlebrow, encouraging readers to pick a side. Those who develop reading habits via the enjoyment of popular fiction are more likely to find their way to the 'greats' by encountering these works mixed in with the mass-market books promoted by content creators who read across the literary spectrum. Discouraging this kind of reading only serves to decrease diversity in reading practices.

Second, it is now apparent that the way that literature was coded in the interwar period has left gaps in scholarship on literary production. Although work is underway to address this with new categories like 'Intermodernism' (Bluemel 2009) it seems unlikely that all of the lost great works will be uncovered, and especially those by women and the working-classes. If this is to be avoided in our present moment, it cannot be left to future researchers to do the work of recovering fiction. The most important way that the new common reader differs from the critic and the scholar is that they do not limit themselves to what the critic and scholar define as great literature, and are therefore more likely to stumble upon books that have been tossed out the window because of genre, a basic understanding of the plot, or even acclaim on BookTok.

New common readers are achieving what Woolf advised young readers to do in "Hours in a Library". It is their "delight to watch this turmoil, to do battle with the ideas and visions of [their] own time, to seize what [they] can use, to kill what [they] consider worthless." Most importantly, they realise that they "must be generous to the people who are giving shape as best they can to the idea within them" (2018).

BookTok readers have shown an ability to critically engage with popular fiction. Trish (@trishslibrary) gives Hannah Grace's *Ice Breaker* (2022) a negative review for its poor plot, one-dimensional characters, and failure to "meet the core tenets of the genre" (2023). @inlaraland, who reads, reviews and recommends philosophy, poetry, non-fiction and fiction, classic and contemporary, canonical and popular, singles out Dunmore's 'enemies-to-lovers' romance, *A Rogue of One's Own,* for its interesting plot, characters and implicit feminism (a suffragette buys a publishing house, then falls in love with a rogue), while also pointing out the flaws in how Dunmore writes people (characters) of colour. And, @kehindeslibrary recommends Sally Rooney's *Normal People* (2018) for its underlying critique of capitalist dehumanisation and exploitation (2024).

Janice Radway provides a useful example of why a more generous approach to different types of literature is important. In *A Feeling for Books* (1997) she reflects on her biases towards middlebrow literature, middlebrow efforts to distribute literature, and how her position changed the more she engaged with the genre and its readerships (1). One of the conclusions that she draws from her interviews with readers was that "romances were not only subtle and varied but immediately relevant to the conditions of their daily lives. They showed me that romance fiction constituted a complex living

literature in the context of their day-to-day concerns, and this only increased my doubts about the intrinsic status of textual complexity and the purported universality of the sacred literary canon" (1997, 5-6). These readers found something in their preferred genre that those who dismissed it failed to notice.

The new common reader is a hybrid of the middlebrow and Woolf's common reader. Woolf could not have predicted the shape and form that this reader would assume, but she did predict the important role that they would play in the preservation and identification of great literature. In "Byron and Mr. Briggs", she writes that "the Common Reader is a person of great importance" because "literature both past and present must rest in the hands of the people who continue to read it...The truth is that reading is kept up because people like reading. The common reader is formidable and respectable and even has power over great critics and great masterpieces in the long run because he likes reading and will not let even Coleridge do his reading for him" (2025). Woolf's literature is among the works that BookTok is preserving in its canon. As of June 2025, there were 7.1 million posts tagged #VirginiaWoolf, discussing her novels, short stories and non-fiction (TikTok 2025).

Sustaining the Battle of the Brows with debates, the tone and content of which have hardly changed for over a century, has done little to alleviate anxieties about processes of cultural transmission. Considering the continued popularity of middlebrow genre fiction, attempts to reinforce the boundaries between high and low art in the interwar period were unsuccessful, and will, hopefully, be equally unsuccessful in curtailing the reading habits of new common readers or, rather, the twenty-first century reading masses – feminised,

marginalised, and placed in opposition to the highbrow minority. Moving past these debates is only possible if a truce is called, an outward-turning approach to literary studies and criticism is adopted, and how readers and their reading preferences are categorised and critiqued is revised – a revision that includes a more nuanced and considerate engagement with reading communities, and how the new common reader contributes to literary culture, not from a liminal space, betwixt and between, but as an equal and valuable participant in its production.

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