

*The Cambridge Introduction to
French Literature*

In this highly accessible introduction, Brian Nelson provides an overview of French literature – its themes and forms, traditions and transformations – from the Middle Ages to the present. Major writers, including francophone authors writing from areas other than France, are discussed chronologically in the context of their times, to provide a sense of the development of the French literary tradition and the strengths of some of the most influential writers within it. Nelson offers close readings of exemplary passages from key works, presented in English translation and with the original French. The exploration of the work of important writers, including Villon, Racine, Molière, Voltaire, Balzac, Flaubert, Zola, Proust, Sartre and Beckett, highlights the richness and diversity of French literature.

Brian Nelson is Professor Emeritus of French Studies and Translation Studies at Monash University, Melbourne, and a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities. His publications include *Perspectives on Literature and Translation: Creation, Circulation, Reception* (co-edited with Brigid Maher, 2013), *The Cambridge Companion to Émile Zola* (Cambridge, 2007) and translations of the novels of Émile Zola.

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*This book is dedicated to the memory of my parents,
Frederick and Ida Nelson*

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Preface

‘INTRODUCTION – Obscene word’ writes Gustave Flaubert (1821–80) in his deliciously witty *Dictionary of Received Ideas*. The present volume thus stands condemned in advance; and I should confess that its main form of shamelessness is its commitment to readability. My aim is to provide a critical introduction to French literature that is scholarly yet highly accessible to students and the general reader.

Readability is not simply a matter of nicely turned phrases but also a question of approach and method.¹ First, this book is, precisely, an introduction, not a history. It makes no attempt (how could it?) to provide comprehensive coverage. Rather than adopting a panoramic approach, I focus on a relatively limited number of writers. And to do so I have chosen the form of the essay – inherently more readable than the kinds of writing that normally make up a ‘history’ or a ‘survey’. Each essay-chapter may be read as free-standing, but the sequence of essays may also be read together for the indication they give of the development of French literature as a whole – its themes and forms, its traditions and transformations. Second, my commitment to readability implies a particular view of the function of criticism. I agree with Harold Bloom that literary criticism ‘ought to consist of acts of appreciation’;² the essays in this volume are intended as such. While I wish to inform and illuminate, and explain the ways in which the writers in question are significant, I want to do so in a manner that offers pleasure as well as understanding, that induces in the reader a desire to read (or reread) the texts in question and more generally to pursue his or her own exploration of the riches of French literature. Writers are presented succinctly in the context of their times, but in order to communicate more effectively the pleasures of the texts chosen for analysis, close attention has been paid to exemplary passages. It helps readers to enter the world of the writer, to hear more clearly the writer’s voice and to appreciate the shaping forms of his or her imagination. The commitment to readability of this volume is thus a commitment to bringing to life the texts it discusses.

The selection of writers treated is determined partly by personal preference and taste, modified by two criteria: they should all, by common consent or

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arguably, be major writers (though there is no suggestion that a particular kind of 'canon' is being promoted); and, within a balanced chronological framework, they should all provide compelling insights into their historical and cultural moment. The chapters are generally ordered by the birthdate of the author concerned, but with a few deviations in the interests of literary historical coherence (for example, the pairing of Corneille/Racine, Voltaire/Rousseau, Sartre/Camus). Obvious practical considerations (the limited scale of the volume and the privileging of essays of a certain length) mean that the choice of writers could not be extended beyond those selected.

This book assumes no knowledge of French and little or no prior knowledge of French literature. In the suggestions for further reading, I have borne in mind the needs of the student and a wide general audience: the recommendations are restricted to items in English and pay due attention to works intended for beginners and non-specialists. A separate section lists translations, with suggestions regarding the best available English versions of the main texts discussed. Quotations are given both in translation and in the original, except in the rare cases where the formulation of the original is not significant in itself. It should be noted that the French of some pre-nineteenth-century texts has not been modernized, nor have any peculiar linguistic features been annotated. The titles of texts are given first in their English translation, with the French titles in brackets. Where an item is not available in translation, the French title is given, followed by a literal translation. Footnotes have been kept to a minimum. To this end, I have incorporated into the main text references to items listed in the Further reading section at the end of the book.

So: 'INTRODUCTION – Pleasurable, useful word'? I hope so.

Melbourne
October 2014

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I am indebted to many people: most of all to my family, but also to numerous friends and colleagues past and present. I would especially like to thank Rosemary Lloyd, Valerie Minogue and Tim Unwin for their valuable support, and I would also like to express my gratitude to Philippe Hamon, Henri Mitterand, Glanville Price and the late Michael Spencer and Philip Thody. I am grateful to the Brown Foundation for a Fellowship that enabled me to spend a richly rewarding month at the Dora Maar House in Ménerbes; to Esther Allen, Jan Owen and Julie Rose for their fellowship in the world of literary translation (and for their fellowship *tout court*); to Ilona Chessid for her judicious editorial comments; to Jade Patterson for her dexterous handling of the index; to Anna Bond, Jo Breeze and Jacqueline French for making the production process so smooth and efficient; and to Linda Bree, my principal editor at Cambridge University Press, for first suggesting that I undertake this volume.

I wish, too, to record my appreciation of the education I received at The Grammar School, Spalding (Lincolnshire, UK). It gave me (son of a railway worker) access to higher education and to the professional life that has flowed from it. To borrow a phrase of John Carey's with regard to his memoir *The Unexpected Professor*, 'this book is, among other things, a tribute of gratitude to a grammar school'. Needless to say, I believe strongly in public policy that treats education as a universally accessible resource, based on merit, rather than as a purchasable commodity.

All translations in this volume are mine except where indicated. My thanks are due to Justin Clemens for permission to use his translation of 'Villon's Epitaph', to Julie Rose for permission to use an extract from her translation of Racine's *Phèdre* and to Jan Owen for permission to use her translations of Baudelaire's 'To a Passer-by' and 'The Swan'. Jan Owen also translated specially for this book extracts from Apollinaire's 'Zone' and Rimbaud's 'The Drunken Boat', and (with Alex Skovron) helped me to translate a sonnet by Mallarmé. I am grateful to the Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company for permission to quote from Richard Wilbur's translation of Pierre Corneille's *Le Cid* and to Oxford University Press for permission to quote Christopher Betts's translation of La Fontaine's fable 'The Wolf and the Lamb'.

Chronology

The literary and other works listed below are restricted to those described or mentioned in the essays that compose this book.¹

486	Roman power in Gaul comes to an end.
771	Charlemagne becomes sole king of the Franks.
800	Pope Leo XIII crowns Charlemagne emperor of the west.
1066	William of Normandy becomes king of England after his victory at Hastings. By linking the English throne to extensive territories in France, this conquest leads to future disputes over sovereignty and lays the ground for four hundred years of conflict.
1337–1453	Hundred Years War.
1348	The Black Death (bubonic plague) spreads across Europe. It kills roughly a third of the French population.
1456	François Villon produces his <i>Petit Testament</i> ; the <i>Grand Testament</i> will follow in 1461.
1469	First printing press in France established at the Sorbonne.
1532	François Rabelais produces <i>Pantagruel</i> (followed by <i>Gargantua</i> in 1534, <i>Le Tiers Livre</i> in 1546 and <i>Le Quart Livre</i> in 1552).
1534	The ‘Affair of the Placards’ (anti-Catholic posters) provokes François I into adopting repressive measures against Protestantism.
1562–98	Wars of Religion. Conflict between Protestants and Catholics was more intense and long-lasting in France than in any other country in Europe.
1572	Saint Bartholomew’s Day Massacre: more than 3,000 Protestants are murdered in Paris.
1580	Michel de Montaigne publishes the first two volumes of his <i>Essais</i> .

- 1593 Henri IV converts to Catholicism.
- 1598 Edict of Nantes ends Wars of Religion, providing for equal rights and, within certain constraints, freedom of worship for Protestants.
- 1618–48 Thirty Years War against Austria and Spain.
- 1624 Cardinal Richelieu becomes chief minister to Louis XIII (1610–43).
- 1635 Richelieu founds the Académie française.
- 1637 Pierre Corneille's *Le Cid* is performed. Jansenist movement establishes its headquarters at the convent of Port-Royal.
- 1643 The five-year-old Louis XIV becomes king. Anne of Austria acts as regent and appoints Cardinal Mazarin as chief minister.
- 1648–53 The 'Fronde': a series of civil wars in which troops loyal to the monarchy confronted (and ultimately defeated) a fluctuating alliance of nobility and *parlementaires* (members of the Paris legislative court).
- 1659 Molière's *L'École des femmes* is performed (followed by *Tartuffe* in 1664).
- 1661 On the death of Mazarin, Louis XIV decides to govern France himself. Consolidation of absolute monarchy.
- 1668 The first collection of Jean de La Fontaine's *Fables* is published.
- 1677 Jean Racine's *Phèdre* is performed.
- 1678 Madame de Lafayette publishes her novel *La Princesse de Clèves*.
- 1680 The Comédie-Française is founded.
- 1715 Death of Louis XIV.
- 1726 Voltaire visits England where he will stay for two and a half years. His reflections on what he sees as a liberal Protestant country, in contrast to his own authoritarian Catholic country, becomes the basis of his *Lettres philosophiques* (1734).
- 1746 Denis Diderot publishes his *Pensées philosophiques*.
- 1751 The first of the seventeen volumes of the *Encyclopédie* is published, under the editorship of Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert. The work will be completed in 1772.
- 1755 Jean-Jacques Rousseau publishes his *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*.
- 1756–63 Seven Years War (France and Austria vs England and Prussia).

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1759	Voltaire publishes <i>Candide</i> .
1761	Rousseau publishes <i>Julie ou la Nouvelle Héloïse</i> (followed in 1762 by <i>Du contrat social</i> and <i>Émile</i>). In 1764 he begins his autobiographical <i>Confessions</i> .
1773	Diderot writes <i>Jacques le Fataliste</i> ; it will be published in 1796.
1782	Choderlos de Laclos publishes <i>Les Liaisons dangereuses</i> .
1787–88	A disastrous financial situation, caused by cumulative war expenditures and profligate court spending, provokes a political crisis. Louis XVI calls a meeting of the Estates General (a consultative body made up of representatives of the nobility, the clergy and the commons) for the first time since 1614.
1789	17 June: The commons (the middle-class Third Estate) proclaims itself the National Assembly, highlighting the fact that it represents the majority of the nation. 9 July: The National Assembly becomes the Constituent National Assembly and establishes a constitutional monarchy. 14 July: The Bastille prison is stormed by an armed crowd. 4 August: The Assembly votes to abolish all feudal privileges. 26 August: <i>Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen</i> : the founding document of the French Revolution.
1791	21 June: Louis XVI and his family are arrested while trying to escape to Austria.
1792	The ‘September massacres’: more than 1,200 prisoners are executed in Paris. The monarchy is abolished and the First Republic declared.
1793–94	Louis XVI executed (21 January 1793). The Terror begins: a wave of summary executions of perceived enemies of the Revolution. It ends with the arrest and execution of Maximilien Robespierre, leading member of the Jacobin Club and the Committee of Public Safety.
1795	Installation of the Directory, an executive body of five members including the young general Napoleon Bonaparte.
1799	Napoleon seizes power on 18 Brumaire (9 November), marking the beginning of the Consulate (1799–1804).
1804	2 December: Napoleon crowned emperor by Pope Pius VII at Notre-Dame Cathedral.
1814	Napoleon deposed and sent into exile on the island of Elba. Louis XVIII, brother of Louis XVI, becomes king: Bourbon dynasty restored.

1815	The ‘Hundred Days’: Napoleon escapes from Elba, gathers support and marches to Paris, where he seizes power. Defeated at Waterloo (18 June), he abdicates again and is exiled to the island of St Helena, where he dies in 1821.
1822	Victor Hugo’s <i>Odes et poésies diverses</i> are published.
1824	Louis XVIII dies and is succeeded by his brother, Charles X, whose reign is marked by reactionary policies.
1827	Hugo’s preface to his unperformed play <i>Cromwell</i> (<i>La Préface de Cromwell</i>) appears.
1830	Hugo’s play <i>Hernani</i> is performed at the Comédie-Française. Stendhal publishes <i>Le Rouge et le noir</i> . The French send an expeditionary force to Algeria and take Algiers. In July, three days of revolution force Charles X to abdicate. Louis-Philippe, duc d’Orléans, becomes the ‘Citizen King’, beginning the so-called July Monarchy (1830–48).
1831	Hugo’s historical novel <i>Notre-Dame de Paris</i> is published.
1835	Honoré de Balzac’s <i>Le Père Goriot</i> is published.
1841	Balzac decides to use the collective title <i>La Comédie humaine</i> for his novels.
1846	Charles Baudelaire publishes his influential art and cultural criticism, <i>Le Salon de 1846</i> .
1848	24 February: Revolution of 1848. Demonstrations and rioting lead to the fall of Louis-Philippe. 25 February: Second Republic declared. Liberal measures are voted, including universal male suffrage. 22–26 June: ‘June Days’. An uprising of workers and students against the bourgeois Republic is violently suppressed (thousands killed, 11,000 imprisoned or deported). 10 December: Louis-Napoleon, nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte, is elected president.
1849	A swing to the right: freedom of the press curtailed, strikes forbidden, right of assembly suspended, universal suffrage abolished.
1851	2 December: Louis-Napoleon seizes power in a <i>coup d’état</i> .
1852	Louis-Napoleon proclaims himself Emperor Napoleon III: beginning of Second Empire (1852–70). Foundation of major banking institutions, Crédit Mobilier and Crédit Foncier. Georges-Eugène Haussmann, Prefect of the Seine, starts vast redevelopment of Paris.
1856	Hugo’s collection of lyric poetry, <i>Les Contemplations</i> , is published.

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- 1857 Gustave Flaubert publishes *Madame Bovary*; Charles Baudelaire publishes *Les Fleurs du mal*.
- 1859 Colonial expansion: occupation of Saigon; much of Indochina progressively brought under French control.
- 1862 Hugo's *Les Misérables* is published (though begun in 1840s).
- 1864 Foundation of the International Workingmen's Association, in which Karl Marx is a leading figure.
- 1869 Baudelaire's prose poems *Le Spleen de Paris*, sometimes referred to as *Petits poèmes en prose*, are published posthumously; Flaubert's *L'Éducation sentimentale* is published.
- 1870 19 July: France declares war on Prussia. 2 September: Louis-Napoleon defeated at Sedan. 4 September: Third Republic proclaimed (1870–1940). Prussians besiege Paris.
- 1871 28 January: Surrender of Paris. Formation, in Paris, of the Commune, a revolutionary government opposed to capitulation. It enacts the first socialist programme in Europe. 22–28 May ('semaine sanglante'): suppression of Commune by French government troops (25,000 killed).
- 1873 Arthur Rimbaud's first collection of poems, *Une saison en enfer*, is published; his *Illuminations* will follow in 1886.
- 1874 A painting by Claude Monet, *Impression, soleil levant*, gives the Impressionist movement its name.
- 1877 Zola's *L'Assommoir*, the seventh of his twenty-volume Rougon-Macquart series (1871–93), is published; *Germinal* will follow in 1885.
- 1882 Under the prime minister, Jules Ferry, elementary education is secularized and made free and compulsory.
- 1884 Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À rebours* is published.
- 1885 Stéphane Mallarmé publishes his hermetic poem 'Prose pour des Esseintes'.
- 1889 Second International created. Eiffel Tower inaugurated at the Paris World's Fair. Idea of building Paris Métro conceived (first line opened 1900).
- 1892–93 Panama Canal scandal triggers a campaign by journalist Édouard Drumont against Jewish financing.
- 1894 Jewish army officer Alfred Dreyfus condemned for espionage and deported to Devil's Island. Discovery of new evidence leads eventually to his acquittal in 1906, but the affair (in which Zola's pro-Dreyfus newspaper article *J'accuse . . . !* is a

	key moment) generates heated debate, focusing the ideological divisions within the country: Dreyfusards (anti-clericals, anti-militarists) are set in opposition to anti-Dreyfusards (Catholics, anti-Semites, monarchists).
1899	Foundation of the right-wing Action Française.
1905	Law of Separation of Church and State.
1907	Pablo Picasso's painting <i>Les Femmes d'Alger</i> marks the birth of Cubism.
1909	Louis Blériot crosses the English Channel by plane.
1910	Constitution of federation known as French Equatorial Africa.
1913	Guillaume Apollinaire's collection of lyric poetry, <i>Alcools</i> , published (followed by <i>Calligrammes</i> in 1918). Marcel Proust publishes <i>Du côté de chez Swann</i> , first volume of <i>À la recherche du temps perdu</i> (completed 1922).
1914–18	First World War (1.3 million French soldiers dead, 1.1 million wounded).
1919	Treaty of Versailles. Alsace and Lorraine reincorporated into France.
1920	French left, formed into a single socialist party in 1905, splits in two. The majority become the new French Communist Party.
1924	André Breton's first Surrealist Manifesto appears; his novel <i>Nadja</i> will be published in 1928.
1932	Louis-Ferdinand Céline publishes <i>Voyage au bout de la nuit</i> .
1933	Adolf Hitler becomes chancellor of Germany.
1934	6 February: Right-wing demonstrations in the Place de la Concorde. 9 February: Left-wing counter-demonstrations.
1936	The Popular Front, a left-wing coalition led by Léon Blum, wins a majority in the national elections. (Blum's government will fall in 1938 amidst financial chaos.) Creation of the International Brigades, composed of foreign volunteers who join the Republican forces during the Spanish Civil War (1936–40).
1938	Jean-Paul Sartre publishes <i>La Nausée</i> .
1939	1 September: Germany invades Poland. Second World War begins.
1940	14 June: Germans enter Paris. 18 June: From London, General Charles de Gaulle broadcasts a call to resistance. 22 June: Marshal Philippe Pétain signs an armistice. France divided into an occupied zone (north and west) and an unoccupied

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- (southern) zone. Third Republic replaced by the 'French State' (1940–46), with Vichy as the seat of government. The conservative, collaborationist Vichy regime promotes a Catholic France that has no place for Jews or foreigners. People are faced increasingly with a choice between resistance and collaboration.
- 1942 Albert Camus's first novel, *L'Étranger*, and his philosophical essay *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* are published.
- 1943 Sartre publishes his major philosophical work *L'Être et le néant*.
- 1944 6 June (D-Day): The Allies land in Normandy. 25 August: Liberation of Paris. 9 September: De Gaulle forms a government of national unity. Women are given the right to vote. With the liberation of France, the period known as the *épuration* (purification) begins. There are many summary executions and unofficial settling of scores; trials of those thought to have been guilty of collaboration are held throughout the country. The question of justice in relation to Nazi collaborationism becomes (and remains) hotly debated.
- 1945 8 May: Germany surrenders.
- 1946 De Gaulle resigns. Fourth Republic (1946–58) established.
- 1947 Raymond Queneau publishes *Exercices de style*.
- 1948 Sartre publishes his influential essay on 'committed literature', *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*
- 1949 Simone de Beauvoir publishes her seminal text for the development of modern French feminism, *Le Deuxième Sexe*.
- 1951 Samuel Beckett publishes *Molloy*, his first novel in French; it is followed in 1953 by his play *En attendant Godot*.
- 1953 Roland Barthes's influential essay *Le Degré zero de l'écriture* is published.
- 1954 7 May: French army routed by Vietnam Liberation Front at Dien Bien Phu. This marks the end of French military involvement in Indochina. In Algeria, terrorist attacks organized by the National Liberation Front mark the beginning of the Algerian War (which will last until 1962).
- 1956 France recognizes the independence of Morocco and Tunisia. A series of articles entitled *Pour un nouveau roman* by Alain Robbe-Grillet is published and becomes a form of manifesto; the articles will appear in volume form in 1963. Other

- important works of criticism include Nathalie Sarraute's *L'Ère du soupçon*.
- 1958 15 May: Deepening crisis in Algeria brings de Gaulle back to power. He establishes Fifth Republic and, in December, is elected president (re-elected 1965).
- 1960 France proclaims independence of its (sub-Saharan) African colonies. Oulipo is founded.
- 1962 Algeria's independence recognized.
- 1964 Sartre's *Les Mots* and Marguerite Duras's *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein* are published.
- 1966 Michel Foucault's essay *Les Mots et les choses* and Jacques Lacan's *Écrits* are published.
- 1967 Michel Tournier's first novel, *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique*, is published. It is followed by *Le Roi des Aulnes* (which wins the Prix Goncourt) in 1970.
- 1968 'May Events': Massive anti-government protests by students and workers, leading to a protracted general strike, convulse the Fifth Republic.
- 1969 De Gaulle resigns and is succeeded as president by Georges Pompidou, who liberalizes some Gaullist social policies.
- 1971 Sartre publishes his study of Flaubert, *L'Idiot de la famille*.
- 1973 Barthes publishes *Le Plaisir du texte*.
- 1977 Luce Irigaray publishes *Ce Sexe qui n'en est pas un*.
- 1978 Georges Perec publishes *La Vie mode d'emploi*.
- 1980 Marguerite Yourcenar becomes first woman elected to the Académie française.
- 1981 François Mitterrand elected president (re-elected 1988).
- 1984 Duras publishes *L'Amant*, which is awarded the Prix Goncourt.
- 1987 Opening of the Institute of the Arab World in Paris.
- 1989 November: Affair of the 'Islamic scarf' highlights racial tensions. The far-right National Front gains in support. Moroccan novelist Tahar Ben Jelloun wins the Prix Goncourt with *La Nuit sacrée*.
- 1994 Michel Houellebecq publishes *Extension du domaine de la lutte* (followed by *Les Particules élémentaires* in 1998 and *La Carte et le territoire*, which wins the Prix Goncourt, in 2010).
- 1999 Jean Echenoz wins Prix Goncourt with *Je m'en vais*.

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2002	France stunned by success of Jean-Marie Le Pen, leader of National Front, in first round of presidential elections. He forces a run-off with the incumbent Jacques Chirac.
2005	Violent social unrest in the Paris suburbs.
2009	Marie NDiaye wins Prix Goncourt with <i>Trois femmes puissantes</i> .
2015	7 January: Attack by Islamist gunmen on the offices of the satirical magazine <i>Charlie Hebdo</i> , killing twelve people. 11 January: a crowd of about 1.5 million people (the biggest public rally in France since the end of the Second World War) take part in a ‘unity march’ through the streets of Paris.