Introduction

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Just over a century ago, in 1917, George Saintsbury published the first instalment of his two-volume *History of the French Novel*. The first tome stretched ‘From the beginning to 1800’ and its second, published in 1919, spanned from 1800 ‘to the close of the nineteenth century’. In the Preface to his second volume, Saintsbury explains why he chose not to bring his *History* up to the present day. ‘I have had a great many other things to do’, he writes with intriguing candour, ‘and I have found greater recreation in re-reading old books than in experimenting on new ones.’ For all its avowed selectiveness, Saintsbury’s ‘recreational’ reading nevertheless spawned a work of some thousand pages of text. The tone and approach feel dated now, but the spread of material covered and the continuity of the two volumes mean that Saintsbury’s *History* remains a valuable document for the literary historian. The present volume is shorter in extent but seeks to offer contemporary readers an up-to-date resource to support, stimulate and illuminate the reading (recreational and otherwise) of novels and their precursors written in French from the fourteenth century to the present. Although the means and methods may have changed from those most common a century ago, twenty-first-century citizens still enjoy reading and re-reading old books, though of course ‘old’ for Saintsbury and for a reader of 2020 may mean quite different things.

We live in a world, it has been argued, that is fundamentally at odds with the world in which the discipline we know as literary history emerged in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Literary histories born of that tradition tend, the argument goes, to do two things: either they try ‘to

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shape the history of national literature as a trajectory towards the self-revelation of national identity’ or they can ‘be characterized as “historical anthropology”: “[using] different types and forms of literature from different moments of a national past in order to constitute a complex image of the nation in question, without having a central thesis about the nation’s identity or an idea of its systematic unfolding’. This Cambridge History seeks neither goal. We do not attempt, in what follows, to plot, teleologically, the emergence of some sort of monolithic ‘French national identity’ (whatever that might be) via a reading of the novels writers have produced in French through the centuries. Nor do we seek, from an accumulation of snapshots of novel writing at different points in history, to constitute a composite picture of the French nation. A reading of our History’s chapters individually or in combination will doubtless provide a good deal of food for thought as regards how cultural production – the writing of novels – is shaped by and can in turn shape political events, how it colours the way individuals and groups, minorities or ‘outsiders’, perceive themselves and each other, how they express themselves, and how, amid all of this, ideas of ‘nation’ are formed. But this latter point is not our explicit purpose since, as one of our contributors has put it elsewhere, ‘[though] the nation-state persists as an important ideological construct […] it is increasingly inadequate as a frame of study. The assumption that one nation = one language = one culture is no longer tenable, and indeed – as work by Medievalists such as Simon Gaunt has stressed – has never been tenable. For these reasons, then, ours is a History of the Novel in French, rather than a history of the French novel. Colonialism and its aftermath, forced and voluntary migration, and the displacement of people around the globe mean that novels have been produced in the French language far beyond the borders of the Hexagon and, at the same time, have emerged within those borders from the pens of individuals hailing from cultures and societies neither French nor francophone. Throughout its history the novel – as many of the contributions demonstrate – has been something

3 Gumbrecht, ‘Shall We Continue to Write Histories of Literature?’, pp. 522–3.
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of a hybrid, an art form that absorbs, adapts and repurposes material from other generic traditions but also from other languages.

What the present volume aims to do is to provide readers with routes into particular moments in the history of the novel in French and to encourage inquisitive, comparative connection-making between writers, works and historical periods. We do so by offering accessible accounts of how novelists writing in French have responded to the diverse economic, socio-political, cultural-artistic and environmental factors that shaped the world in which they found themselves by doing something innate to humankind: by fashioning, telling and circulating stories.⁶ As Julian Barnes has it, ‘Fiction, more than any other written form, explains and expands life.’ He continues:

Novels tell us the most truth about life: what it is, how we live it, what it might be for, how we enjoy and value it, how it goes wrong, and how we lose it. Novels speak to and from the mind, the heart, the eye, the genitals, the skin; the conscious and the subconscious. What it is to be an individual, what it means to be part of a society. What it means to be alone. Alone, and yet in company: that is the paradoxical position of the reader. Alone in the company of a writer who speaks in the silence of your mind.⁷

The chapters that make up this History might be read, then, as voices complementary to those that speak to us in the moments of accompanied solitude we call reading. It is hoped that they will not only shed light on the novels and novelists they analyse and discuss but also aid readers in getting closer to what Gumbrecht calls the ‘feeling of being part of and inscribed into the material world that surrounds us’ when we read a particular novel,⁸ whether it be Les Trois Mousquetaires or Le ravissement de Lol V. Stein. Novels explore, enrich and help us understand our intellectual existence, our embodied lives, our impulses, our fears, what bonds us to our fellow woman and man and what separates us from them. The chapters that follow recognise this and seek to allow readers better to appreciate the dynamics of the production and consumption of what Marthe Robert, in an influential,

⁸ Gumbrecht, ‘Shall We Continue to Write Histories of Literature?’, p. 530.
psychoanalytically informed study of why we write novels, calls, because of its free, polymorphous form, ‘the undefined genre’.  

Our coverage begins a little later than that of Saintsbury, who devotes significant space to medieval saints’ lives and the chansons de geste (material that is now abundantly analysed elsewhere) but we stretch well beyond his end-point of 1900: the forty substantive chapters that follow this introduction range from late medieval antecedents to the novel, to the riches of the twentieth-century writing that lay beyond Saintsbury’s remit, up to recent trends and tendencies in novel writing since 2000 and the intersections of the novel and internet culture.

There have of course been many histories – wide-ranging and period-specific – of French literature, of francophone literature, of literature(s) in French in the years since 1919 (many of them mentioned in the chapters that follow), as well as countless monographs and edited collections on individual novels and novelists, on groups, generations and schools of writers. Our History aims to stand between these broad, multi-genre surveys and the geographically or author-determined studies, offering readers bridges between cultural-historical context and textual specifics, between the broader literary-historical questions of who is writing and reading what, where and why at a particular moment, and the finer details involved in the study or analysis of individual works and their textual idiosyncrasies. A curiosity of the field is how few works in English or French with anything like the ambitions of coverage of Saintsbury have in fact been devoted to the novel per se in French (rather than literature in French, or the novel as form, more broadly conceived).  


A handful of very selective studies assessed the novel in French from a literary-historical standpoint between the interwar years and the 1970s. A much more even-handed contribution, though focusing only on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, came in the form of The Cambridge Companion to the French Novel: From 1800 to the Present in 1997, which features fifteen essays ranging widely over the period. Our History brings readers up to date on material published since Unwin’s volume appeared and in this and in our handling of topics and authors from earlier periods discussed by Green, Turnell and others, we take into account the most recent developments in theoretical and literary historical scholarship. The overarching structure of the present work is a largely linear chronological one, and for ease of navigation within the volume the chapters are gathered under five headings. The resulting sections are purposefully overlapping, their imbrications serving as reminders of the artificiality of the cut-and-dried periodising bent of much literary history. Cross references between chapters have been included throughout to encourage transversal movements of connection-making that highlight commonalities, contrasts and intersections that might go unnoticed in a conventional, linear reading.


Beginnings: From the Late Medieval to Madame de Lafayette

Our first section examines aspects of the literary-novelistic production in French between the late medieval period and the publication of what is often heralded as ‘the first modern novel’, Madame de Lafayette’s *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678). What emerges from the chapters in this section, which amongst other things explore questions of taxonomy and how critics and readers have determined what ‘counts’ as a novel, is a strong sense of the diversity and hybridity of prose writing between the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries. Helen Swift draws attention to the ‘methodological challenges to adopting a fruitful retrospective gaze on medieval textuality’ and considers pitfalls of previous approaches, including that of Saintsbury and others mentioned above. Subsequent chapters in this section highlight the generic diversity (and the diverse origins) of the texts that were borrowed or plundered from, or more subtly reshaped into what, in the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries started to resemble what we now know as novels. Virginia Krause plots (amongst others) the handling of French adaptations of Montalvo’s *Amadís de Gaula* material, originating in fourteenth-century Spain, and Linda Louie and Timothy Hampton similarly explore early novels as vehicles of cultural transmission. Faith Beasley highlights the centrality of collaborative modes of writing, editing and publishing in seventeenth-century France, showing that far from being antecedents to the ‘madwoman in the attic’ or being disparaged as blue-stockings, as a result of their social position women writers had ‘an outsized influence on the development of the French novel’. Contributors explore and question the enduring, though problematic notion of the ‘rise’ of the novel, popularised via Ian Watt’s historical study of the English novel published in the late 1950s. Watt’s study is cited in a number of contributions across the volume (not least because he is rather dismissive of the novel in French), but

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as Nicholas Paige’s quantitative research shows, the novel does not rise in the
seventeenth century in France: it is already there, and a whole range of
variants ebb and flow in popularity throughout the century. As Paige
demonstrates (from a sample of some 609 novels published between
1601 and 1730), what in fact we see is the evolution of a novel system
characterised by continuous change. Amidst the ferment emerges La
Princesse de Clèves, a novel whose invented heroine and scrupulously
rendered historical setting challenged conventions and expectations at the
time of its publication, and whose reception and standing in the wider history
of the novel are surveyed by John D. Lyons.16

The Eighteenth Century: Learning, Letters, Libertinage

Our second section covers the growth and development of the novel in the
siècle des lumières – the age of Enlightenment. The contributions in this section
provide a wide-ranging and stimulating set of reminders that the French
eighteenth century, though most commonly thought of in literary-historical
terms as the century of the philosophs and the Encyclopédie, was also the source
of an extraordinarily rich seam of novels. A keynote of these chapters is the
notion of novel writing as a means of crossing boundaries – between individ-
uals, between nations, between coloniser and colonised, between fiction and
philosophy, decorum and indulgence, decency and debauchery. Pamela Cheek
gives an overview of the French circum-Atlantic novel, demonstrating how
chattel slavery became transformed ‘into an aesthetic atmosphere for depicting
human enslavement to passion rather than human enslavement to humans’.
The tensions and inter-relations between the novels and novelists of
eighteenth-century France and England are explored by Gillian Dow, whose
chapter encourages a look away from the usual all-male literary headliners of
the eighteenth century on both sides of the Channel, towards a ‘feminised
cosmopolitanism’ at work in novels by writers such as Isabelle de Montolieu
and Stéphanie-Félicité de Genlis entre autres. Caroline Warman considers the
fictions of Denis Diderot and Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the spirit of their age, as

16 The enduring appeal of ‘classic’ or ‘canonical’ novels often means they attract the attention
of successive schools of literary theory and criticism. For a recent example, see Terence’s
Cave’s suggestive analysis of Lafayette’s novel in the context of a discussion of cognitive
models of mimesis in Thinking with Literature: Towards a Cognitive Criticism (Oxford: Oxford
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works that seek ‘to get their readers to see the world as a construct, to begin to see that it might be different, and thereby to introduce the thought of change’. And such thought, an openness to difference and the opportunities of alterity, is part and parcel of the Enlightenment project: something to which epistolary fiction, as Elizabeth Goldsmith shows, was particularly congenial. Letter novels that gave first-person voice (albeit imagined voice) to the views of outsiders, those external to France and to French culture as it was known ‘at home’, were a means of drawing attention to the constructed nature of society.

While our contributors variously attend to the eighteenth-century preoccupations of liberty and sensibility (in well-known novels such as Prévost’s Manon Lescaut (1731) and Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s Paul et Virginie (1788), for example), individual chapters also explore the eighteenth-century taste for the memoir novel, another form of first-person writing popular during the period, that often blends fiction and history – as Jenny Mander shows – as well as libertine novels, ranging from the titillating to the pornographic, as surveyed by Marine Ganofsky. We also include a detailed study of the best-known libertine novelist of the period, Donatien Alphonse François, Marquis de Sade. Libertine fictions press upon the validity of limitations and, in Sade’s case, as Will McMorran suggests, leave us questioning the reliability and respectability not only of the intentions of the narrators we encounter in fiction, but also our own motivations as seekers of knowledge and readerly satisfaction.

After the Revolution: The Novel in the Long Nineteenth Century

The Revolution of 1789 continues to provide material for novelists well into the twenty-first century. As recently as 2009 the Académie française (established in 1635, dissolved by the Revolution forces in 1793 and re-established ten years later by Napoleon Bonaparte) awarded its ‘Grand Prix du roman’ to Pierre Michon’s Les Onze (The Eleven), an account of the production and fortunes of a fictional painting of the members of the Revolutionary Committee of Public Safety, captivatingly interwoven with the myth and history of the Revolutionary period known as the Terror. Few literary works that were produced during this period have endured, however. As Sandy Petrey notes, ‘it has long been commonplace to see the French Revolution as proof that great deeds dull the sensibilities needed for great
Indeed, data indicate that following the Revolution the publication of novels in France fell by some 80 per cent. As Katherine Astbury shows, however, under scrutiny, rather than being rejected out of hand in the manner suggested by Petrey, the novels of the period have much to tell us of continuities with pre-Revolutionary preoccupations and the new directions taken by novelists in the wake of the socio-political upheaval.

The explosion of the novel in the nineteenth century, with cheaper printing and circulation of texts, increased literacy and ever-growing appetites for fiction, means that even a work by many hands such as the present volume cannot aspire to comprehensive coverage (James Wood has memorably characterised the mid-nineteenth-century novel as ‘a stomach of genres, digesting satire, poetry, epic, the historical novel, realism, and fable’). What we do achieve, however, is a broad and rich spread of engagements with novel writing during the period, via chapters that repeatedly suggest links backward and forward in time that readers may choose to pursue across the volume and indeed in their own reading. Patrick O’Donovan examines the interaction, in novel writing of the early part of the nineteenth century, of what he encapsulates as ‘private pain and the public temper’, especially in writers such as Madame de Staël, Chateaubriand and Benjamin Constant, and stretching forward to Victor Hugo and George Sand. As O’Donovan’s allusions to Walter Scott, George Eliot, Tolstoy and Henry James (amongst others) make clear, the novel system – to return to Nicholas Paige’s term – never evolves solely in accordance with geographical borders or even linguistic boundaries. Subsequent chapters in this section underline the manifold ways in which French writers in the nineteenth century used the novel form to entertain and to edify whilst concurrently grappling with the shifting challenges of a politically volatile period. Alison Finch focuses on the first three decades of the century (with particular reference to Madame de Staël,

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whose influential work *De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales* (On Literature Considered in its Relationship to Social Institutions) appeared in 1800 and demonstrates the ‘sometimes precarious balancing-act’ performed by women novelists of the period ‘between “romance” and “social critique”, or between nostalgia for the Ancien Régime and radicalism’. In their contributions Maria Scott and Andrew Counter look at how the accessibility of the past and the immediacy of civic life in the present were addressed in the novelistic practice of writers including Honoré de Balzac, Gustave Flaubert, Stendhal and George Sand, in chapters respectively on the relation of French realism to history and on law and the nineteenth-century novel. The chapters by Jennifer Yee and Andrea Cabajsky extend the compass of our discussion beyond mainland France and address the impact on nineteenth-century novel writing of France’s colonial endeavours. Yee explores how a diverse range of novelists – from Bernardin de Saint-Pierre, Chateaubriand and Hugo, to Madame de Duras, Zola and Claude Farrère – reflect, enact and challenge (through theme, plotting and form) fluctuations in the French colonial project. Cabajsky charts the development of the French-Canadian novel, surveying the period preceding the appearance of the earliest novels in Quebec in the 1830s and 40s, and leading readers as far as the writing of the first half of the twentieth century. The section closes with Nigel Harkness’s chapter on gender and the novel from George Sand to Colette, a companion piece of sorts to Alison Finch’s earlier chapter and a reflection on how a range of more and less well-known women novelists grappled with and responded to prevailing prejudice and assumptions relating to gender and sexuality, seeking to legitimate their voices in an environment that persisted in its hostility towards female creativity well into the twentieth century.

**From Naturalism to the Nouveau Roman**

The fourth section spans the period from the 1880s to the 1960s, a time of intense experiment and renewal in literary writing. If the previous section attended in large part to writings that fall under the broad literary-historical headings of Romanticism and realism – novels preoccupied with sensibility, emotion and the self, and those that attempt a mimetic rendering of reality – we begin here with naturalism and what Claire White describes as the movement’s ‘expansion of the novel’s horizons to include, and do justice