

# INTRODUCTION: THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY SOCIAL NOVEL IN FRENCH

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Upon awarding the 2022 Nobel Prize in Literature to Annie Ernaux, the jury noted that her œuvre ‘examines a life marked by strong disparities regarding gender, language and class’, adding that ‘she with great courage and clinical acuity reveals the agony of the experience of class’.<sup>1</sup> In 2018, Nicolas Mathieu won the Goncourt Prize for *Leurs enfants après eux*, a novel about class differences and youth in the deindustrialization context of North Eastern France. A commentator remarked that ‘Nicolas understands the destitute, the working class, in a way that most writers don’t’.<sup>2</sup> Since 2014 and the critically acclaimed *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule*, Édouard Louis has likewise been committed to shedding light on his childhood in a poverty-stricken village in the North of France and regularly examines how politics affects the lives of working-class individuals, because it is a matter of ‘life or death’.<sup>3</sup> In the same vein, Mauritian-French writer Nathacha Appanah’s work, including *Tropiques de la violence* (2016), plunges the reader into the intimacy of its characters while discussing social injustice, marginalization and immigration in a slum in Mayotte; Haitian writer Kettly Mars’s *Aux frontières de la soif* (2013) denounces the precarious post-earthquake living conditions of those living in refugee camps and their experience of poverty, famine or prostitution; Cameroonian writer Djali Amadou Amal’s *Les Impatientes* (2020) examines the feminine condition among the Peuls in Cameroon; and Québécois writer Kevin Lambert’s *Querelle de Roberval* (2018), a queer ‘fiction syndicale’, tells the story of a strike in northern Quebec and explores conflict, desire and domination. All of these writers make contributions to the contemporary social novel genre, as they seek to raise awareness about social issues, injustices and the conditions of the working class and marginalized groups.

Arising in the 18th century and gaining prominence during periods of significant social and economic upheaval, such as the Industrial Revolution and the post-

1. <<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2022/ernaux/facts/>>.
2. <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/08/books/nicolas-mathieu-prix-goncourt.html#:~:text=Nicolas%20understands%20the%20destitute%2C%20the,deindustrialization%2C%20where%20people%20are%20angry.>>.
3. <<https://jacobin.com/2022/01/edouard-louis-interview-working-class-politics>>.

Revolutionary era, the social novel, or *roman social*, provided a strong critique, through fiction, of the status quo and highlighted the consequences of unchecked capitalism, political corruption and moral decay. From Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* (1862) to Émile Zola's *Les Rougon-Macquart* (1871–1893), literature offered a space to explore questions of poverty, crime, injustice, labour exploitation, class inequality and the struggles of the oppressed. In her study of social class and the contemporary French novel, Helena Chadderton however remarks that 'traditionally in the French context the gulf between literature on one side, and society and politics on the other, has been wide', adding that 'there is [...] a dominant current of thinking which dismisses the link between literature and the social and political'.<sup>4</sup>

While the 'autonomy of literature is sacred' still today – that is 'that art should be independent of political ideas' – the contemporary social novel in French (and its authors) demonstrates a more porous relationship between the space of literature and the socio-political space.<sup>5</sup> As such, today's writers, and the ones analysed in this special issue in particular, seem not concerned with conservative or traditional conceptions of literature. They might in fact agree with Chadderton who argues that: 'the sense that literature is, or can be, unaffected by social and political considerations is perhaps only to be enjoyed by those who are safely esconsed within the system'.<sup>6</sup> The emergence of social media, news channels, and reality television has simultaneously played a key role in reshaping the figure of the author. As such, not only are authors publishing novels, but they are also entangled in mediatized networks where they can promote both their works and a worldview. Édouard Louis is certainly one such figure who capitalizes not only on literature but also on public interventions to put forward his political agenda.

This special issue brings together eight contributions, which investigate contemporary productions from different French-speaking regions of the world and the ways in which they use the literary space to shed light on poverty, inequalities, working conditions and politics. Among others, the articles ask: what do these novels say of the contemporary moment? How do they account for these struggles, and to what end? Who is telling the story, and are they speaking about or for others? Given our hypermediatized world, this special issue also explores how authors may rely on or resort to other tools (social media, television shows, podcasts, etc.) to draw attention to their work and to the lives they depict. Each contribution provides an intersectional analysis of recent works in French and the relation between working-class conditions/poverty and other forms of oppression (race, gender, disability, ethnicity, sex, etc.).

4. Chadderton, Helena. "Am I not an Author?" Social class and the contemporary French novel. *Modern & Contemporary France*, 27:3 (2018), p. 283.

5. Chadderton, "Am I not an Author?", p. 283.

6. Chadderton, "Am I not an Author?", p. 290.

In ‘Gisèle Pineau, or the literary voice of a caregiver’, Jennifer Boum Make analyses Pineau’s memoir and work as a nurse. By examining how Pineau portrays the confined and isolating environment of the psychiatric hospital and brings attention to the lives of those pushed to the margins, this article explores the intersection of the literary, care and the social perspective. Turning to the institution of classical dance and the arts world more widely, Brittany Murray’s ‘Reeling: violence, exploitation and artistic labour in Lola Lafon’s *Chavirer* (2020)’ examines the novel’s representation of artistic labour, beginning with a case of abuse and developing a wide-ranging critique of how inequity, exclusion, and exploitation shape artistic labor. Emerging in the post #metoo context and the publication of other novels on sexual abuse, such as Vanessa Springora’s *Le Consentement*, *Chavirer* intervenes in debates about the specificity of the aesthetic and its response to conditions of artistic labour. Likewise reflecting on the complementary relationship between creative work and real-life emancipation, Maryse Condé’s *L’Évangile du nouveau monde*, attends to some of the world’s most pressing issues: police brutality, misogyny, xenophobia and exploitative work practices, among others. In ‘The Gospel According to Maryse Condé: Black Feminist Literary Ethic in *L’Évangile du nouveau monde* (2021) and What’s Love and Laughter Got to Do with It’, Corinne Labridy sheds light on Condé’s literary ethic and commitment to social justice and the freedom of literature. Nathan Dize and Jocelyn A. Franklin, in ‘Reading Subjects Amidst Subjection in Jean D’Amérique’s *Soleil à Coudre* and Emmelie Prophète’s *Les Villages de Dieu*’, examine the construction of subjectivity amid social violence and how, in particular, the novels frame the abject violence of life in contemporary Haiti. They argue that both narratives incorporate metatextual elements, expanding the generic mode of the social novel to meditate on globalizing means of communication. Moving to Madagascar, ‘Precolonial remains: Michèle Rakotoson and the Neo-Andevo narrative’ by Franck H. Andrianarivo shows how Rakotoson breaks off the tabooed topic of enslavement, which is still in pursuit of sustainable historicity on her island and demonstrates how she resurrects her island’s precolonial and colonial past to expose the afterlife of slavery in the present, simultaneously expanding knowledge of African diasporas and Blackness from a uniquely Malagasy perspective. Patrick Lyons’s ‘Red Threads: A ‘Left-melancholic’ walk through Paris in Joseph Andras’s *Au loin le ciel du sud*’ is equally concerned with history and the deployment of a radical heritage. Lyons argues that the novel takes its readers on a ‘left-melancholic’ tour of Paris, one whose particular epistemological posture stirs to life sedimented layers of radical social history at each stop, and in doing so, begins to cultivate a reading subject who in turn becomes their living repository. Pooja Booluck-Miller takes us to Mauritius with ‘Where Heaven Meets Hell: A Literary Representation of a Postcolonial Society in Priya Hein’s *Riambel*’. This article analyses its use of literary devices, intertextuality and feminist perspectives to challenge postcolonial power structures and amplify marginalized voices, particularly those of Afro-Mauritian women.

Finally, Loïc Bourdeau and Charly Verstraet focus on class oppression and homosexuality. In 'Becoming Édouard Louis and the transmedial social novel', they provide a comprehensive analysis of Louis's œuvre, highlighting how the space of the novel becomes as much a space of exploration of the various processes of domination that shaped his and his family's lives as it is a space of self-reinvention. Further, this article shows how Louis deploys his politics and worldview by controlling the narrative thanks to his novels and his public interventions, his use of social media, his theatre work and his political activism.

This special issue features social novels from different French-speaking regions by more or less established, mediatized or studied authors. They all turn to literature to try to make sense of or to share their views on the complexities of modern life and the impact on vulnerable individuals. As they reflect on issues such as the colonial history, identity, abuse, inequality, violence and oppression, the novels offer nuanced insights into the lived experiences of marginalized communities and challenge readers to engage with social and political realities. These contemporary *roman sociaux* provide a lens through which we can examine the tensions and transformations shaping today's world. They might also allow us to foster empathy, critical thinking and a deeper awareness of ongoing social challenges.