

“It’s Just So Bloody Readable!”

Readability as a Concept in the Literary Field and Its Use in Reviews and the Posture of Nick

Hornby

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Abstract

In deze scriptie wordt het begrip *readability* (toegankelijkheid of leesbaarheid) onderzocht in de context van het literaire veld. *Readability* is een begrip dat zowel op een negatieve als positieve manier kan worden gebezigd in relatie tot literatuur, en deze scriptie poogt aan te tonen hoe en waarom dit gebeurt. Dit wordt gedaan door een koppeling te maken met het culturele concept *middlebrow* en door een casus te onderzoeken. De *posture* van de Engelse schrijver Nick Hornby en een corpus van 399 recensies van zijn boeken zijn geanalyseerd om te kijken naar hoe *readability* een rol speelt in het literaire veld. De bestudeerde recensies komen uit Britse media en van de website *Amazon.co.uk*, wat een vergelijking tussen amateurrecensenten en professionele critici mogelijk maakt. Het blijkt dat *readability* in beide soorten recensies wordt gebruikt, ondanks de dubieuze reputatie van het begrip. Uit het onderzoek komt naar voren dat *readability*, net als *middlebrow*, connotaties heeft die vooral aan de ‘legitieme’ zijde van het literaire veld niet worden gewaardeerd. Desondanks kan het begrip zowel positief als negatief bijdragen aan het positioneren van een auteur en zijn werk in het literaire veld, en wordt het in de evaluatie van een boek vooral als een positief aspect beoordeeld.

Keywords: readability, middlebrow, literary field, Nick Hornby, posture, reviews

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Introduction

“Ignore the Booker brouhaha. Readability is no test for literature.” This was the headline of a *Guardian* opinion article by Jeannette Winterson, directed at the Booker Prize jury of 2011 who had announced they would take ‘readability’ into account in their judging process. Winterson was not the only one to respond to this announcement, and although opinions varied, it was clear that readability was a controversial criterion as a “test for literature.” This is intriguing, because there are plenty of readers who are very interested in how readable a novel is. Many readers prefer an accessible novel over a laborious read, but still, this viewpoint is not always taken into account when discussing literature. The question posed by these readers is: is it actually ‘fun’ to read acclaimed, but difficult books, such as *War and Peace* or *Ulysses*? Some people will argue it is, but many will disagree and turn to something more ‘readable’, or more ‘accessible’. This thesis will investigate readability as an evaluative concept to gain a greater understanding of this controversial term and its use in the literary field.

‘Readability’ is defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “[t]he ease with which a text may be scanned or read; the quality in a book, etc., of being easy to understand and enjoyable to read.” The definition of ‘readable’ is “[o]f written text: clear, comprehensible; easy, enjoyable, or interesting to read; written in a lively or attractive style. Also (of an author): producing work of this nature.” It indicates that a readable text is enjoyable and easy to understand, which is closely related to the word ‘accessible’. ‘Accessible’, in the figurative sense, is defined as “[a]ble to be (readily) understood or appreciated.” Both words include the idea of being easy to understand and to be enjoyed or appreciated, and the Dutch word for accessible (‘toegankelijk’) is often used to indicate the kind of texts that are called readable in English. The fact that

readability is linked to enjoyment may be perceived as positive, but if a book is described to be ‘easy’, this may also have negative connotations to people who regard their tastes as above average. ‘Readable’ or ‘accessible’ are therefore not very straightforward concepts and are not directly positive or negative by definition. In this thesis, the use of the concept ‘readable’ will be explored in the context of the literary field and literary criticism, to discover how (positively and/or negatively) and where (in professional and/or amateur reviews) this term is used.

The concept of ‘readability’ has hardly been discussed before in academic research concerning imaginative literature. Examples of research into readability concern topics such as health education literature (Meade and Byrd), foreign language learning (Schulz), and the impact of children’s literature (Puurtinen). This type of research mostly uses ‘readability’ in the sense of ‘understandable’, but this is not directly related to the enjoyment of reading, even though the dictionary lists both meanings. Readability is treated in this type of research as an aspect of a text that can be measured by studying texts and people’s reactions to them. However, the use of ‘readability’ in the evaluation of literary texts has not been studied yet. Research into the use of the word ‘readability’ in the context of imaginative literature, not as an intrinsic aspect of a text but as a means to describe it, may be conducted through studying reviews, as will be proposed in this thesis. The analysis of reviews will attempt to show the importance of ‘readability’ as an evaluative criterion for readers.

An example of the problematic use of the word ‘readable’ can be found in the controversy surrounding the Booker Prize jury in 2011. Sarah Crown wrote the following in the *Guardian* on 26 September 2011:

[o]n announcing the shortlist, chair of judges Dame Stella Rimington said “We were looking for enjoyable books. I think they are readable books.”. Fellow-judge Chris Mullin echoed the sentiment, saying “What people said to me when it was announced I would be on the judging panel was, ‘I hope you choose something readable this year’. That for me was such a big factor. They had to zip along.” (Crown)

These statements sparked heavy discussion in the British media about the jury, the Booker Prize, literary quality, and the characteristics of literature. John Self expresses his regret that perhaps certain “novels [...] didn't get a look-in because of their experimentalism or non-zipalongability”. Newspapers reported accusations of the “dumbing down” of the Booker Prize (e.g. Massie; Kitchener). According to former Booker Prize judge Alex Clark, “this year has been more about the judges sticking two fingers up to an imaginary critical establishment than any other I remember,” and that this is part of a wider discussion about literature and literary criticism:

The arguments are various but connected: why don't the literary pages of newspapers review the books that people actually read, who the hell are the critics to tell readers what's good, and is the contemporary novel, once again, in its death throes. The judges' comments, and their general approach, have placed them firmly on the side of those who believe that wanting to be challenged rather than simply entertained by your reading matter veers dangerously close to cultural snobbery. (Clark)

However, Clarke's article shows that some party will always be offended: if the judges decide on 'readable' books, the critics such as himself will disagree and may perceive it as a dumbing down of the prize. If the judges decide on choosing something more challenging, people may react as proposed in the quote above. It shows that the discourse surrounding the Booker Prize is

not appreciative of the term ‘readable’, even though the concept can have positive connotations in other discourses. This also suggests that people still perceive a distinction between literature and “the books that people actually read” (Clark).

Jeannette Winterson commented on the judges’ decision too, explaining that their focus on readability demonstrates that they might not have a correct understanding of literature:

I don’t see this row as one about dumbing down though. Rather, it is a misunderstanding about literature and its purpose. We are nervous about anything that seems elitist or inaccessible, and we apologise for the arts in a way that we never do for science. [...] I don’t mean literature is obscure or rarefied or precious – that’s no test of a book – rather it is operating on a different level to our everyday exchanges of information and conversation.

Winterson appears to turn the discussion around: she claims that people do not fear the word ‘readable’, but that the use of the word ‘readability’ shows that people are afraid of elitism or inaccessibility. She also suggests that literature does not (directly) have the purpose of entertainment, using her own definition of literature. This portrays how the discussion, and the word ‘readability’, can be viewed from multiple angles, and how this also depends on one’s definition of literature.

The discussion (that mostly took place in the *Guardian*) also featured opposing views that placed the readability debate in a wider, socio-cultural context. Graham Joyce went against Winterson in his column titled “Don’t Confuse ‘Readability’ with Dumbing Down.” He writes:

What motivates people to spread a folk panic about this notion of everything “dumbing down”? Does some counterweight principle operate, so that they themselves can feel

elevated? It is, of course, the first recourse of every elitist to see social barbarism in others.

Joyce argues that the discussion is also a matter of elitism and socio-cultural status, something which may be understood in the context of the theory of the literary field, developed by Pierre Bourdieu. One of the ‘currencies’ in this field is symbolic capital, the prestige and cultural significance that an actor or institution in the field can gain. People who benefit from the notion of symbolic capital, such as Winterson, may use their definition of literature and of ‘readability’ to separate them from art with a lower degree of consecration, such as middle- or lowbrow literature. The theory of the literary field will be elaborated upon in chapter 1, in relation to ‘readability’ and middlebrow literature.

The discussion and criticism regarding ‘readability’ as a criterion ties in with the study of middlebrow literature, which will be another point of focus in this thesis. According to Kate Macdonald, a leading academic in this field, “middlebrow is shown to transcend the fixed linear cultural continuum, and to offer experiences not anchored to a desire to be considered intellectual or fashionable, but to the enjoyment of the individual” (8). Middlebrow literature, described in the most basic terms as literature between highbrow and lowbrow, is a category that entails a certain type of books that are read not for their artistic value, but for the enjoyment of the reader, and that are looked down upon by the highbrow and the avant-garde. The criticism the Booker Prize jury received is only one example of this attitude. The debate around the concept of middlebrow was especially active in England in the 1930s, but in this thesis it will be argued that it is still relevant, focusing on contemporary Britain. Middlebrow is a very useful concept to talk about literature that is described as ‘readable’ or ‘accessible’, as will also be proposed in this thesis. The *OED* describes ‘middlebrow’ as “colloq. Freq. derogatory,” and

defines it as follows: “[o]f an artistic work, etc.: of limited intellectual or cultural value; demanding or involving only a moderate degree of intellectual application, typically as a result of not deviating from convention.” The *Longman Dictionary* uses a milder definition: “middlebrow books, television programmes etc are of fairly good quality but are not very difficult to understand.” This difference in definition already demonstrates the problematic nature and reputation of the word ‘middlebrow’, which is similar to the ambiguousness of the word ‘readability’, and they both include the idea of being not difficult to understand and to cater to the enjoyment of the individual. The concept of middlebrow will therefore be used in this thesis to contextualise the status of ‘readability’ in the literary field.

After providing a theoretical framework in chapter 1, I will test the ideas about the middlebrow and readability by studying the position of an author who may be considered middlebrow, as well as the reception of his books. The case study in this thesis will centre on the English writer Nick Hornby (1957) and the reviews of his books. Hornby has written seven full-length books for adults, of which one memoir and six novels. He is a successful bestseller author, in addition to being a journalist and a screenwriter, and four of his books have been made into films. Considering his popularity and the nature of the responses to his writing, Hornby would qualify as a middlebrow author who writes ‘readable’ novels, as will be demonstrated in chapters 2 and 3. The writer’s position in this discussion will be considered in chapter 2, using interviews with Hornby in the British media. Hornby is a public figure who, because of his success, has been interviewed numerous times and has also often expressed his opinion on literature in the media. This thesis aims to discover how Hornby positions himself in relation to the middlebrow and to ‘readability’, in order to compare his position in the literary field to the opinions of his reviewers. To discover Hornby’s position in the field, I will describe and analyse his *posture*

(Meizoz), which is composed of Hornby's public behaviour and how he is portrayed in the media.

The third chapter will provide an analysis of the reviews of Hornby's books, studying in a quantitative and qualitative way how the concept of readability is represented in a corpus of 399 reviews. Hornby has published seven adult books before 2015, of which professional and amateur reviews will be examined. The professional reviews include all reviews of Hornby's books in the British media that can be retrieved online through *LexisNexis*. The amateur reviews will be collected from *Amazon.co.uk*: this website enables customer reviews, is a well-known distributor of books, and exists since 1994, which is longer than websites such as *Goodreads*, a popular book review website. Especially its date of establishment is significant for choosing *Amazon* as a source for amateur reviews, since the first of Hornby's books was published in 1992, long before *Goodreads* (2006) existed. Only reviews of a 100 words or more will be taken into account, to ensure the relevance of the reviews and to limit the scope of this research project. In the quantitative analysis, remarks in the interviews that describe Hornby's books as readable will be counted and examined. The qualitative analysis will discuss relevant remarks in reviews more elaborately and provide a context to them. This will amount to an overview of the ways in which readability is used as an evaluative concept in reviews, and ultimately, a discussion of the implied meanings of the concepts of readability and middlebrow. Additionally, this thesis hopes to discover whether amateur reviews use 'readable' as a more positive evaluative criterion than the professional reviews, and if so, to what extent.

The three chapters will serve to answer the main question: what kind of position does the concept of 'readability' have in the literary field and how is this concept used in the posture of an author and the evaluation of his books? The posture of Nick Hornby and reviews of the seven

adult books he published before 2015 will serve as a case study of a British middlebrow author, using both professional and amateur reviews to arrive at a greater understanding of the use of 'readability' to describe literature. All in all, this thesis aims to gain a greater understanding of both 'readability' and 'middlebrow' as concepts in the literary field.

Chapter 1: Theory and Definitions

Readability, the middlebrow, and the literary field

In this chapter, the theoretical context for this thesis will be elaborated upon to clarify the definitions of certain words and theoretical concepts, and to frame the discussion in chapters 2 and 3.

1.1 What is readability?

The introduction already suggested definitions for ‘readability’, such as ‘enjoyable’ and ‘easy to understand’. It is, however, difficult to define readability because it is a subjective notion. ‘Enjoyable’ is different to everyone, as is ‘easy’. However, to write this thesis, at least a general idea of what readability means and how this word is used is necessary. My understanding of this concept is derived from several sources: the introduction already provided the dictionary definition, which is a useful starting point; the review corpus of this thesis indirectly demonstrates what readability is through the way these discuss the concept; and several academic sources also comment directly or indirectly on this concept, although the concept has not been studied very often in an academic context. It should be noted that I specifically mean the definition of readability in a literary context here. Readability has been studied in a more linguistic context, as I will briefly mention in this section, but this linguistic approach considers readability in a different manner than is proposed in this thesis.

A recent publication that discusses the readability of literature is *On Lightness in World Literature* (2013) by Bede Scott. As the title indicates, this book focuses on lightness as a concept in literature and on the ‘lighter’ aspects of literature, such as superficiality, triviality, and

readability. In the chapter about readability, he discusses *The Code of the Woosters* by P. G. Wodehouse, which is according to him a “classic “light read,” providing many of the readerly pleasures we tend to associate with popular literature” (7). Scott directly links readability to the pleasure of reading, and analyses the appeal of such narratives. However, his argument in the chapter is based on the idea that Wodehouse “insulate[s] the narrative from all social and political realities, safeguarding the carefree equanimity of the discourse and protecting us from anything that might compromise our readerly pleasure” (8). From the interview and review corpus, it appears that Nick Hornby is perceived to be firmly connected to socio-political realities, so Scott’s argumentation is perhaps not directly applicable to the case study in this thesis. However, it is noteworthy that readability is named as an aspect of lightness in literature, and this notion also returns in the review corpus, in which Hornby’s books are occasionally described as ‘light’.

A linguistic definition of readability mostly focuses on how difficult a text is experienced, instead of also taking into account enjoyment and subject matter. Research into readability therefore usually concerns beginning readers such as children. Readability is often used to indicate how suitable a text is for a certain level of reader. The factors that contribute to this calculation of the readability of a text

includ[e] one or more of the following: percentage of high frequency easy words (i.e., words on a predetermined list defined as familiar to most students in a particular grade), percentage of hard words (i.e., words not on a list of familiar words), average number of words per sentence, average number of syllables per word, number of single syllable words, or number of words with multiple syllables. (Begeny and Greene)

This shows that readability research focuses specifically on the textual aspects of a text, mostly on word level. This is not the type of readability that is indicated in the newspaper articles about the Booker Prize, and is also not what is meant in reviews when a book is called 'readable': these articles or reviews generally do not discuss factors such as the length of words or sentences.

The Idea of Difficulty in Literature (1991), edited by Alan C. Purves, also comments on this distinction between two types of 'readability'. Purves writes: "[readability formulas] seem to work with nonliterary texts, but do these formulas really hold up when one deals with poetry, drama, or fiction?" (1). This book focuses on difficulty instead of readability, but this concept may be perceived as the opposite of readability and can perhaps be studied in the same way. Purves suggests a constructivist perspective in studying difficulty, instead of an objective one. About difficulty, he writes: "[it] is an aspect of the individual's estimate of the nature of the object and that individual's estimate of her or his capacity to deal with the object" (1). In this thesis, a similar approach will be kept in mind when studying readability. It is a subjective description of a text that largely depends on the individual, even if the use of the word evokes more general socio-cultural connotations. Both of these aspects of readability will be examined in this thesis: chapter 2 will focus on the socio-cultural context of readability in the literary field by looking at the author's posture and the middlebrow; chapter 3 will examine individual responses to books in order to discover how readability is used and perceived by readers.

Although Scott and Purves have mentioned and discussed readability, a straightforward definition of the word has not been provided, nor have separate factors of readability been distinguished, except for in the linguistic approach to readability. However, it is necessary to identify these in this thesis to prevent confusion about whether the readability of a text is discussed or not. It is easy to identify remarks about readability if this term is explicitly

mentioned, but reviews do not always do so, for instance when they comment on the ease of reading a certain book. Considering the approach in this thesis, a remark that comments on this would also be considered to be about readability. To provide more clarity about what is and what is not considered 'readability', I distinguished several factors of readability in a literary context. These include: ease and speed of the reading process; accessible subject matter that can be identified with; and a style that is enjoyable and undemanding. I have attempted to keep these factors as few and as simple as possible, while also not limiting the definition too strictly, for that would not do justice to the subjective aspect of readability. As Purves emphasises, what is readable and what is not can be perceived differently by different readers and in different time periods, and can thus not be objectively defined (1). The factors I distinguished are primarily derived from the dictionary entrance and are supported by the reviews in the corpus. They are also derived from the opposites of factors that can push away the reader. Push-factors of a book can include a tough and slow reading experience, a difficult topic that a reader cannot relate to, a protagonist that is hard to identify with, or a style that is difficult to understand or follow. If a reader finds a text has any of these push-factors, they will likely not call this book readable. These factors, combined with ideas from academic sources and the British media, amount to the following definition of readability in this thesis: the notion that a (literary) text is accessible, enjoyable, and/or undemanding, which is derived from aspects of this text but is determined by the reading experience of the individual.

1.2 Readability and the literary field

To better understand the discussion and controversy surrounding 'readability', it is necessary to know something about the workings of the literary world. "The Field of Cultural Production" by

Pierre Bourdieu is one of the most influential texts concerning literature and socio-cultural factors. It distinguishes the different players in the literary field, which include institutions such as publishers and newspapers, and actors such as authors and critics. The actions of these institutions and actors are usually aimed at gaining capital: symbolic capital (i.e. status, prestige, authority; also called consecration), economic capital (i.e. money, material wealth), or both. Symbolic capital is supplied by institutions and certain players in the literary field who have already gained authority and status, such as critics in broadsheet newspapers; economic capital is gained by selling many books or newspapers, for instance. In Bourdieu's representation of the literary field, authors who write for mass audiences usually have a very low degree of symbolic capital but do have economic capital, while literature with a high degree of symbolic capital is not as popular and therefore not as profitable. In this representation, symbolic and economic capital usually do not coincide, and exist at either ends of a spectrum, with relatively unknown, 'legitimate' literature on the one end, and 'pulp' literature on the other.

Bourdieu's frame of reference is very useful in describing the literary field and its actors, but the literary field is not the same in every period and every geographic area and/or culture, so it will not always match predictions based on Bourdieu's theory. For instance, Bourdieu shows that popular literature has a low degree of consecration, but there are examples of bestsellers that are perceived as literature and thus have gained symbolic capital as well as economic. The winner of the Booker Prize, for instance, usually becomes a bestseller but is also usually a novel that is regarded as 'legitimate' culture. Even in 2011, when the jury received a lot of criticism for wanting to choose a readable novel, the prize was eventually won by Julian Barnes, who is a serious and respected author – as well as a readable one. Bourdieu's theory does not account for

all that occurs in the literary field, but will nevertheless be used to describe it, considering its merits as well as its limitations.

The discussion concerning the Booker Prize jury is an example of when Bourdieu's theory effectively functions as an explanation for the occurrences in the literary field. The Booker Prize, an established and prestigious institution, is important in shaping the idea of literary fiction. It awards symbolic capital to those on the longlist, shortlist, and to the winner. The Booker Prize does perhaps not have as much symbolic capital as avant-garde poetry, for instance, but it is definitely on the legitimate end of the spectrum. It is therefore not surprising that when the jury of 2011 announced they were looking for 'readable' books that "zip[ped] along" (qtd. in Crown) – characteristics usually connected to literature with a low degree of consecration – they received a lot of criticism. Authors and critics apparently felt the need to defend themselves (see Winterson; Self) and to follow the 'rules' of the literary field, which in this case determined that 'readability' was not allowed at the high end of the literary spectrum. According to Bourdieu, this would make perfect sense, because literary authorities can only maintain that authority and symbolic capital if they distinguish themselves from the other end of the spectrum. Thus, 'readability' would be rejected as part of legitimate culture and discourse and would not be connected to symbolic capital.

'Readability', as has been suggested in the introduction, may be connected more effectively to middlebrow literature, which is a part of the literary field that is not clearly accounted for by Bourdieu. In his work *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, he distinguishes a category of *culture moyenne*, which "owes some of its charm, in the eyes of the middle classes who are its main consumers, to the references to legitimate culture it contains" (p. 232). On the other hand, 'middlebrow culture is resolutely against vulgarity' (p. 326)" (qtd. in

Pollentier 39). This is similar to the English idea of the middlebrow, which is more elaborately explained in the next section. However, Caroline Pollentier notes that Bourdieu's category of *culture moyenne*, or *art moyen*, is not directly exchangeable for the English 'middlebrow' (37-39). She explains that Bourdieu's *art moyen* is connected to the *classe moyenne* and *le français moyen*, which is used pejoratively and which does not exist in the exact same way in Britain (38). According to Pollentier, Bourdieu's "theoretical framework produces a restrictively negative assessment of middlebrow practices," and "the emergence of the middlebrow in England should ultimately be positioned outside Bourdieu's agonistic conception of culture" (38). She argues this because Bourdieu bases his idea of *moyen* on the negative connotations of the word ('average', in English) and its domination by legitimate culture. Even though the middlebrow is not always perceived as positive in Britain, it does not have the same negative connotations as the French word for 'average' and is therefore not the same concept (40-41). It becomes even more problematic when compared to Bourdieu's later binary model of 'pure' art and commercial art (*The Rules of Art*, qtd. in Pollentier), because it is not clear where the middlebrow is situated in that model. Bourdieu's emphasis on the aspiration for legitimate art has no explanation for middlebrow art that does not aspire to this legitimacy. This means that in studying middlebrow culture, the rules as proposed in Bourdieu's literary field do not always need to be accounted for. Bourdieu's theoretical framework will be used in this thesis, but it will only be used tentatively in relation to middlebrow.

1.3 The middlebrow

In the previous section, middlebrow culture was mentioned in connection to the literary field, and to readability, but it has often been studied in its own right. This section will outline some of

the most important and relevant ideas about the middlebrow, to demonstrate why and how this concept is significant to this thesis.

The middlebrow has especially been studied in the context of the first half of the twentieth century, when the discussion about ‘brows’ was at its height, and when readership changed greatly under a number of circumstances (see, Macdonald 2011; Brown and Grover 2012; Macdonald and Singer 2015). The word ‘middlebrow’ was first coined in the *Daily Chronicle* in 1923, and in the years that followed, the word emerged in many more newspaper articles (Macdonald 6-7). In recent research, ‘middlebrow’ has been defined by Ina Habermann as follows:

As the Oxford English Dictionary has it, middlebrow fiction should meet certain ‘moderate’ aesthetic and intellectual expectations. It should, therefore, in addition to being carefully written, relate to literary traditions, history, philosophy and science... The function of such narratives is neither ‘mere escapism’... and light entertainment, nor intellectual challenge through aesthetic innovation, but an imaginative projection of lived experience conducive of a negotiation of identity and emotional ‘entertainment’ in the sense of providing sustenance. (qtd. in Macdonald 2)

A definition of middlebrow fiction is useful in discussing it, but it has also been emphasised that middlebrow is a shifting cultural concept which is used across genres. It can therefore be interpreted differently in a different context.

The emergence of the idea of a ‘middlebrow’ can be traced back to the last few decades of the nineteenth century. For instance, in relation to theatre, G.B. Shaw noted a group of “ordinary, cultivated people” as a specific type of audience in 1896. Concerning literature,

[m]iddlebrow fiction was driven first by the economics of a new readership rather than a literary impulse, emerging as established ways of selling stories changed from hefty and high-priced three-volume books, to the cheap edition and the multiple edition sold at different prices for a range of readers. (Macdonald and Singer 3)

These economic factors, combined with the increase in modernist and avant-garde fiction in the early twentieth century, created a space in the literary field that was not ‘legitimate’ (in Bourdieu’s sense), avant-garde writing, but neither lowbrow, formulaic fiction (2-3). In this period, the literary field became a tripartite instead of a dyad, as it had been before (3). This is also why applying Bourdieu’s theory of the literary field to the middlebrow is problematic, for he maintained the binary division between legitimate and non-legitimate culture, as has been mentioned above. The emergence of this new, middlebrow culture sparked a lot of discussion in Britain, which heightened in the 1930s, in the so-called ‘battle of the Brows’. It concerned the question whether “middlebrow tastes and values were to be accepted” (Macdonald 9).

The discussion in the 1930s shapes our current understanding of the middlebrow, its emergence, and its legitimacy. An article in the *London Opinion* of August 1930 gives an interesting impression of thinking about the middlebrow in that period:

Frankly, we like this middlebrow country: it comprises the majority of decent men and women, and seems to us to stand for balance, sanity, substance, humour, the best of both worlds.

It lacks the precious posturing of the one extreme, the crude sensationalism of the other – which is probably why it is taken for granted. [...]

It does not represent solely the ‘middle-class’ or even the middle-aged, but bridges all classes and ages and most activities. (qtd. in Macdonald 8)

This shows how broad the idea of the middlebrow is, and that there is, in fact, no straightforward definition of ‘middlebrow’ presented here. It is defined by what it is not – “precious posturing” or “crude sensationalism” – and by its readers. Macdonald explains this quote from the *London Opinion* as follows:

Middlebrow cultural productions were largely unrelated in terms of their producers; and certainly had no single defining feature in terms of theme, subject, reader, form or message. Middlebrow could be a mode of reading, a stratum of society, a class of book, or a state of mind. On the cultural continuum, highbrow and lowbrow are not in a linear relationship of greater or smaller than middlebrow, or more or less powerful, but relate to each other in how they were perceived by their consumers, and by what they offered the reader. (11)

Middlebrow can be a very extensive concept, considering the ways it is used and the objects it can be applied to. The main characteristics of the middlebrow that will be used in this thesis are that “middlebrow is shown to transcend the fixed linear cultural continuum, and to offer experiences not anchored to a desire to be considered intellectual or fashionable, but to the enjoyment of the individual” (8).

Macdonald’s definition of middlebrow and her emphasis on the enjoyment of the reader without aspiring to the ‘legitimate’ will be continued in this thesis. This relation to enjoyment also links the middlebrow to readability, even though this is not explicitly mentioned in research on the middlebrow. It is a pity that middlebrow research does not focus on the latter part of the twentieth century and the twenty-first century, which is also why this thesis may provide new insights into the idea of middlebrow. As Habermann mentions, studying the middlebrow “promises important cultural insights since its widely disseminated products negotiate and

express the values, world views and mentalities of a large part of the population” (32). Studying the readable, middlebrow aspects of a contemporary British author and his books may prove valuable in further defining these concepts and may also contribute to research of the middlebrow in the current time period.

The middlebrow is almost proudly defended by the researchers of this cultural concept, but it must also be noted that it can carry negative connotations. Macdonald writes: “[m]iddlebrow is often associated with high commercial presence, and success, and a status based, like that of lowbrow, on units sold, rather than critical acclaim from an intellectual minority” (11). This similarity between lowbrow and middlebrow, both with a status based on commercial success, is a means for the highbrow, ‘legitimate’ culture to tar lowbrow and middlebrow with the same brush. The word ‘bestseller’, which also emerged in the same period as the concept of middlebrow, “was an especially vexed one in Britain, and many critics and authors expressed anxiety about it. Like bestseller, the term ‘middlebrow’ [...] often carried negative connotations” (MacLeod 21). This is another similarity between the middlebrow and readability: they are both distrusted by the highbrow and although they can certainly be viewed in a positive light, they also both carry negative connotations.

The difference between the two concepts is that middlebrow is a cultural concept, while readability is primarily a reaction of a reader to a text. For this reason, I chose to study readability mostly by looking at reviews (which are, ultimately, responses of readers to texts), and to use the concept of middlebrow to study the socio-cultural context of the author and his books. This context needs to be defined and limited as well, which is why I decided to look at the author’s posture (based on interviews) to explore the place of the author (and his books) in the literary field and his potential middlebrow-ness.

1.4 The author and posture

To study readability and the middlebrow in the literary field, I will use a case study of both responses to books and to their author. I will look at readers' responses in reviews to learn more about readability, but since reviews do not often explicitly describe the place of books or authors in the literary field, a different approach is necessary to study readability and the middlebrow in the context of the field. One way of examining positions in the literary field is by looking at the posture of an author. As will be explained in this section, posture is a useful concept to discover how the middlebrow and readability contribute to a position in the literary field. It will also be used to avoid a focus on the perspective of the reader only, for readers are not the only actors in the field who have an opinion about readability and the middlebrow. By studying Nick Hornby's posture, both the author's and (partially) the media's perspective on readability and the middlebrow will be uncovered.

'Posture' can be described as the way the author positions himself in the literary field and literary debate. Valia first defined this "in the sense of 'the manner of taking up a position' in the field" (qtd. in Meizoz 83). Meizoz's understanding of posture is even more encompassing, also including "the ethos or '(general) way of being (of a) writer'" (83). This means that posture is the way an author takes up a position in the literary field and the factors that contribute to this, which is an interactive process between the author's own construction and that of mediators such as journalists. This can be done in both conscious and subconscious ways. Examples of this are choice of clothing, speech accent, choice of anecdotes that are mentioned in interviews, or adjectives that are often used by interviewers to describe an author. Posture is a relational concept that depends on the structure of the literary field: without a literary field, there can be no

positions. Therefore, Bourdieu's theory will also influence how Hornby's posture is examined in chapter 2.

It is important to remember that the middlebrow does not function in the literary field in the same way as lowbrow and highbrow, as was explained in section 1.2. Nevertheless, to understand the cultural or literary implications of readability and middlebrow culture, one needs to discuss the 'reputation' or 'imago' of an author and his books, and Bourdieu's theory of the field and Meizoz's corresponding theory of posture have been acknowledged to serve this purpose. These theories will therefore be used in this thesis, although their limitations have also been acknowledged. They are especially relevant in demonstrating the author's and the media's perspective on a middlebrow author and his books, as will be demonstrated in the next chapter. The notion of posture will be discussed in chapter 2 specifically in relation to the author Nick Hornby, which will further clarify how Meizoz's theory functions in the literary field.

Chapter 2: The Readable Author

Nick Hornby's posture and his relation to readability and the middlebrow

'Middlebrow' and 'readable' are concepts that can play a role in how an author and his publications are perceived. In the introduction, I presented Nick Hornby as an example of a middlebrow author who writes books that are considered middlebrow and readable. Middlebrow and readability are both aspects that can be attributed to an author and/or a text, and can be part of how an author and his novels are perceived and experienced in the literary field. Thus, to learn more about middlebrow culture and readability, it is necessary to study the behaviour of the author and the perception of him and his books. This will be investigated in this thesis, starting with the author in this chapter. How an author is perceived depends on many factors and aspects, which together form his reputation or his 'posture'. Posture (Meizoz) can be roughly defined as the way an author behaves in public, and how he or she is described to behave. I will analyse Nick Hornby's posture in this chapter to arrive at a conclusion as to how the middlebrow and readability contribute to it, and how these concepts are deployed by the author and by journalists. Whether this corresponds to readers' reactions to Hornby's books will be elaborated upon in chapter 3.

Nick Hornby is a bestseller author and a public figure who has been interviewed numerous times in the British media. To analyse Hornby's posture, these interviews will be examined for Hornby's own statements and behaviour, and for how he is described and framed by journalists. Only interviews in the British media that concern a book release will be used, in an attempt to discover the influence Hornby exerts on how his books are perceived, and to limit the scope of this research project. This means that this chapter will not present a complete picture

of Hornby's posture: for instance, TV and radio interviews will not be discussed, and neither will photographs or public events that include Hornby. However, it will demonstrate how Hornby is often framed in the media and how Hornby presents himself as an author in interviews, which is an essential part of his posture. I will consider a total of 31 interviews with Hornby between the years 1992 and 2014, and will use the concept of posture to describe and interpret Hornby's behaviour in these. By studying Hornby's posture, it is possible to construe how Nick Hornby behaves in relation to middlebrow culture and readability without making assumptions directly based on his novels.

I am not the first to associate Nick Hornby with middlebrow culture: Andrea Ochsner links Hornby to lad-lit novels and to the middlebrow in her book *Lad Trouble: Masculinity and Identity in the British Male Confessional Novel of the 1990s* (2009). In the introduction, she notes that books like *High Fidelity* by Hornby are often called 'lad-lit' (as opposed to 'chick-lit'), but that she dislikes this term "because it is a rather broad term and is sometimes applied to all books written by male authors for a predominantly male readership" (31). The male confessional novel, which Ochsner uses as a genre definition in her book, is "a label created by the publishing industry" (32) which was used especially in relation to this type of popular fiction in the 1990s. "[T]he male confessional novel is more often than not considered to be popular rather than literary" (32-33), Ochsner writes, and she states she prefers the term 'middlebrow' instead of 'popular' for male confessional novels. Her research does not focus as much on Hornby's reputation as it does on his lad-lit novels, such as *High Fidelity*, and is therefore not directly relevant for Hornby's posture and the rest of his oeuvre, because his later books do not qualify as 'male confessional novels'. However, it must be noted that Hornby's bestseller status was first achieved with *Fever Pitch* and *High Fidelity*, which were very male-oriented. Hornby's

reputation is connected to this type of male confessional novels – which are considered middlebrow by Ochsner – because they established his success as an author. I will take this into account in the analysis of how Hornby's posture is formed.

Posture is a concept that depends on relational structures of the literary field and should therefore be used carefully in this thesis. As I have mentioned in chapter 1, the theory of the middlebrow and Bourdieu's description of the literary field do not effectively overlap or complement each other, because they do not follow the same rules. The middlebrow, as a cultural concept, relates in a different way to legitimate culture from typical non-legitimate culture. This is because the middlebrow does not primarily aspire to the consecration of being 'legitimate', but rather attempts to entertain and educate its readers. Meizoz's theorisation of posture is directly dependent on the structure of the literary field, and therefore can also have problems positioning the middlebrow, because it does not function according to the same rules. Despite this, the following section will describe Nick Hornby's authorship in terms of posture, because it is an all-encompassing way to frame his behaviour in the cultural-literary field, which is necessary to establish Nick Hornby's position at all. If, as according to Pollentier, the middlebrow has a problematic relation to the literary field, this will also show in Hornby's posture, if he is considered and considers himself as middlebrow. This problematic relation means that Hornby's actions cannot always be explained by Bourdieu's theory of the field and its rules – which dictate that all actors in the field aspire to legitimacy. The following sections of this chapter will attempt to describe Hornby's posture, based on the abovementioned texts, and will demonstrate how this functions in relation to the middlebrow and the literary field.

2.1 Nick Hornby's posture

As was mentioned above, Hornby's posture will be deduced from his interviews about his novels in this thesis. These interviews have been retrieved through *LexisNexis* by searching for the author's name and the name of one of his publications in English news, in the geographic area "United Kingdom" (although this does not exclude sources outside of this area), between (and including) the year of publication and two years after. From the articles this has generated, I have distinguished interviews based on their contents and their source of publication, using only sources from media in the British Isles. This geographic area has been chosen to narrow this research project down to British culture, which is both Nick Hornby's background and the source of the cultural concept of middlebrow.

In the interviews, I have distinguished several categories of remarks that contribute to Hornby's posture. These are categories that return multiple times and that demonstrate how the author behaves in public, and how he is described to behave in the media, and are conducted mostly from the introductions to the interviews. The categories I propose here are: Hornby's appearance and behaviour (section 2.1.1); Hornby's popularity and wealth (2.1.2); Hornby's relation to lad-lit (2.1.3); and Hornby's poetics and position as an author and reader (2.1.4). The first category is a more general category of how Hornby is portrayed in interviews, while the other categories focus more on specific aspects of his posture that can contribute to his middlebrow reputation. The last category is most relevant to the relationship of Hornby's posture to middlebrow culture, and will be followed by an overview of Hornby's posture and a discussion of his posture as being middlebrow and/or readable (2.2).

To introduce the analysis of Hornby's posture, I will provide a short biography of him to contextualise the interviews. Most of these facts (place and date of birth, education, et cetera) are

mentioned in many of the interviews, so these will be summarized here. A short description of each of his novels can be found in appendix A, to prevent confusion about the contents of the interviews. These descriptions are based on information from Nick Hornby's website, on the interviews, and in some cases on personal experience, but are kept as short and neutral as possible.

Nicholas Hornby was born in Redhill, Surrey, on 17 April 1957. His parents divorced when he was 11. His father, Sir Derek Hornby, was chairman of Rank-Xerox, and his mother a secretary. He attended the Maidenhead grammar school and did English at Jesus College, Cambridge. After this, he had jobs as an English teacher, a TEFL teacher, a host for Samsung executives visiting the UK, a journalist, and a pop music critic for the *New Yorker* (taken from Nick Hornby's official website). When *Fever Pitch* (1992), a memoir about his life as a fan of Arsenal, was published, it became a bestseller that made Hornby very famous. He has a son called Danny with his first wife, Virginia Bovell. Danny is severely autistic and Hornby and his ex-wife have taken care of him together, before and after their, which was partly caused by the strain Danny put on their relationship. Hornby used the money he earned with his books and his film deals to pay for Danny's care and to contribute to the TreeHouse School in London, a school for children between 8 and 19 with autism. Hornby later married film producer Amanda Posey, whom he met at the set of *Fever Pitch*. They have two sons, called Jesse and Lowell. In 2010, Hornby founded The Ministry of Stories, "a creative writing and mentoring centre for young people in east London. It uses storytelling to inspire young people aged between 8 and 18 to free their imagination, helping to build confidence, self-respect and communication" (Hornby's official website).

2.1.1 Hornby's appearance and behaviour

Hornby's appearance, the setting of the interview (if relevant) and Hornby's behaviour will be described in this section, keeping in mind that these descriptions come from journalists, but that they also demonstrate some of Hornby's choices (in clothing, for instance) that contribute to his posture. After all, appearance remains a large part of a person's reputation, even if that person is an author.

An early interview with Hornby as a writer, in the *Irish Times* in 1993, describes Hornby elaborately and in a fashion that sets the tone for many later interviews:

He's in his mid-30s, short, almost bald, with a casual denim dress sense that could be a chameleon blending with the crowd when he watches Arsenal at their home ground, Highbury, in London. Nothing pretentious, yuppie, or declassé the real thing, on the terraces [...] where red and white flourishes for his team. When he speaks, the accent is definitely London, almost working class.

You could say all this belies the sophistication of his book, but that's the knuckles-dragging-the-ground syndrome rearing its ugly head again. He is polite and gentle. His gestures, facial expressions and words have the same sense of the ridiculous which gives his book balance and perspective. (Comiskey)

First of all, Hornby's baldness is mentioned, which returns in virtually every interview that describes his appearance. His length and his casual dress sense are also aspects of Hornby's posture that return in several other articles. His description is connected to not being pretentious, and not being sophisticated. However, as Comiskey notes, Hornby's behaviour is more in line with the sophistication of his book, and therefore his exterior is no more than that: the exterior. This contradiction between looking casual but being sophisticated is the most important aspect of

Hornby's posture concerning his appearance. Several other articles explicitly comment on this: see, for example, Aitkenhead and Hughes or Bradley.

Hornby's casual clothing is not only described as contradictory to being a good writer: it has also been described as at odds with his status as a wealthy, famous author (see also section 2.1.2). Especially some of his later interviews highlight this, possibly because of Hornby's then firmly established status as a celebrity. In an interview in the *Scotland on Sunday*, Hornby's appearance is described as "looking quietly furtive and doing his best to appear anonymous. [...] He is wearing jeans, a baggy leather jacket that appears at least two sizes too big and clutching a carrier bag. The overall effect is that he could scarcely look less like a celebrity" (Massie 2001). Massie emphasises that Hornby does not look like a celebrity at all. In an interview in the *Times* it was already mentioned that Hornby is "uncomfortable with fame" (Crampton 2001), and his clothing and behaviour seem to mirror this. In the *Sunday Herald*, this same image is invoked: "[Hornby] is slumped in an armchair and dressed for the terraces in black jeans and an unattractive orange T-shirt. It's hard to say what a literary superstar who transfers from Gollancz to Penguin for £2 million and who sells film rights to Robert De Niro for a similar sum should look like, but it's not Nick Hornby" (Ross). Again, Hornby looks very casual, which puzzles journalists because it is not a typical look for a celebrity or a wealthy author. John Preston in the *Irish Independent* agrees, even though Hornby is wearing different clothes for that interview: "[w]ith his grey cap, his grey T-shirt, his frizz of grey hair and his shapeless black jacket, Nick Hornby hardly looks like a best-selling author." Hornby's choice of clothing may not be writerly, but he dresses like this fairly consistently, so this look has become part of his posture. Therefore, at the same time, his casual clothing confirms his identity as Nick Hornby, the author. However,

it also strengthens his reputation as a blokish, normal type of person and his posture of a non-highbrow author.

There are few interviews that contradict this image. In an interview in the *Times* in 1998, Hornby's appearance is described as follows: "[t]empted to expect a Where's Wally? cod football fan dressed from head to toe in red and white hoops, it is a pleasant surprise to see him attired in jeans and a blue silk shirt" (Bradley). This interviewer expected to see Hornby's connection to football directly reflected in his choice of clothing, which is not the case and which is described as "pleasant," and his actual attire is not very remarkable otherwise, although the word "silk" might suggest a certain degree of sophistication. This interview, as well as an interview by Jan Moir, does not describe Hornby in the same casual way as the other interviews that comment upon his clothing, even though Bradley seems slightly disappointed that Hornby is not as stereotypical as he thought he was.

How pervasive this stereotypical, one-sided reputation can be is demonstrated in the rest of Bradley's interview with Hornby. Bradley describes Hornby's appearance as "[b]ald. Incontrovertibly, frankly, unapologetically bald. No Charltonesque comb-overs, no exotic syrups or gameshow-host toupees," connecting even Hornby's (no-)hairstyle to his reputation as a normal, unpretentious person. Even though Hornby probably cannot help his lack of hair, this is described as significant by the interviewer, who remarks that "[b]ald Englishmen can be hard to read, ironically, since they lack the plumage that can signal so much." The word "ironically" refers to the fact that Hornby has written very popular books, and therefore not books that are hard to read, apparently. The other interviews do not describe Hornby's looks in particular and also do not ascribe any significance to his baldness – perhaps for the best.

The interview by Moir in the *Guardian* describes Hornby as a nice person and reports on several events that show how he reacts to particular situations. Hornby is described as being nervous for the reading event he attends at the start of the interview, which is called a “nice thing” by the reporter. It also demonstrates Hornby’s inexperience (in 1995) with reading events and being a famous author in general. ““Did I do okay?” he asks afterwards” is another quote that shows this insecurity, which is bound to make the reader feel empathetic. This behaviour confirms his description as a nice, normal person. Subsequently, in a restaurant, the journalist receives a call that leaves her very distressed. The following conversation ensues:

I burst into tears. Poor Nick Hornby looks stricken. “Are you okay?” he asks. “Just give me a minute,” I say. A long, silent moment passes while I smear mascara all over the nice, linen napkin. “Shall I pop out and get us some more cigarettes?” he asks tactfully. “That would be great,” I blub. Another thing about Nick Hornby: he is a great man in a crisis.

When he comes back, he asks the right questions, he is kind and sensitive for he is no stranger to heartbreak himself. We have a cigarette then we are both okay again, the awkward moment is forgotten.

This event is an explicit example of Hornby’s nice behaviour and the sensitivity that is also attributed to his books. The journalist may have exaggerated a little bit, but she relates the story from her perspective, and has experienced Hornby as an emphatic person. Apparently, his reputation as a nice guy comes from more than his appearance or his books, but speaks directly from his actions.

Another interview in the *Guardian*, from 2005, discusses how Hornby accompanies his interviewer Hattenstone to a school. During the interview, the journalist tells Hornby that he

needs to go to a school for children with cerebral palsy for a talk. Hattenstone also says that “the school had been hoping to find a well-known author but failed, and I’m stepping in at the last minute,” implicitly suggesting that Hornby might be able to. Hornby then asks whether it would help if he came along, and even though Hattenstone admits that it would not make a big difference to the children, they go to the school together. After Hornby offers to come, Hattenstone writes:

I can sense Hornby already analysing his motives. Has he offered because he wants to come, because it would be a good thing to do, because it will create a favourable impression? When I told him earlier I’d yet to meet somebody who dislikes him, he took umbrage - oh God, not that nice Nick Hornby thing again. It’s not even true, he says. “I think I am quite nice in public. I think you’d be an idiot not to be.” And in private? “I don’t think I’m a nightmare in private, but I’m tetchy and unreasonable.”

Hornby is obviously aware of the fact that he has a certain reputation and he claims that this is different from his behaviour in private. He says he wants to be nice in public, but is not always like that in private. Nevertheless, Hornby’s behaviour does not appear to be just an act to gain sympathy, for many of the interviewers have described him as genuinely kind, and it is not likely that they were all misjudging Hornby, even though they may just have been (subconsciously) reconfirming the already prevalent idea of Hornby.

Another example of Hornby’s behaviour is his addiction to cigarettes. Hornby’s smoking, which has been casually mentioned in several interviews, is described as follows by Crampton: “the writer made serious inroads into a packet of Silk Cut. “Do you always smoke so much?” I ask. “Only during interviews”.” An interview in the *Western Morning News* also mentions that Hornby is “[l]ighting up the first of many cigarettes” (Marlow). Not only does Hornby smoke, he

smokes a lot. Smoking is an act that can be interpreted in various ways. It is an unhealthy habit, and it is indulged in by many artists (musicians, often) as well as by the lower classes of society. It may therefore have different connotations to different readers, but the interviews do not seem to judge his smoking behaviour very strongly. Two interviews in 2014 describe him to be “puffing on an e-cigarette” (Thomson and Sylvester; Calkin), which signals that Hornby does care about his (and others’) health, for this is a healthier alternative to tobacco, but it is not further commented upon. The fact that it is mentioned does contribute to his often repeated description as a smoker, even though it is an e-cigarette.

An important part of Hornby’s ‘behaviour’, so to speak, is the fact that he is in therapy and is or has been depressed in his life. The first time that this is explicitly discussed is in the *Times* in 1998. About therapy, Hornby himself says that “I think it helps you to recognise patterns. [...] It’s remarkable how much you can link backwards and how helpful it can be to be able to see the big picture. I see a Jungian therapist who makes suggestions which I find helpful and interesting” (Bradley). Hornby’s specific problems or mental health are not discussed any further, and his being in therapy is not linked to his books. Hornby’s depression is discussed more elaborately after the publication of *A Long Way Down* because it is a novel about suicide and depression. This novel highlighted depression as a theme in Hornby’s work, which had not been discussed as such before. The interview about this novel in the *Guardian*, titled “Laughing All the Way to the Cemetery” now succeeds to link all of Hornby’s novels to depression, and adds: “[t]he thing about all these books is that they are funny and warm and cute, and you don’t have to mention the word depression when talking about them” (Hattenstone). Admitting that Hornby’s books are perceived as “funny and warm and cute,” Hattenstone now shows that depression was actually always a theme for Hornby, despite him being “feelgood”.

The focus on depression seems to transform Hornby into an author about weighty subjects instead of one about popular culture. Hornby himself says: “I think I am naturally depressive” (Hattenstone). But immediately after, the interviewer returns to describing Hornby in terms of obsessions: “Hornby is not simply a football nut, he’s a music nut and a literature nut. He may be a misery guts, but he’s also one of life’s enthusiasts.” He is linked to his usual hobbies of football and music once more, and is apparently not completely pessimistic. Although Hornby’s books may feature some serious themes, the writer appears to want to remain hopeful, in his books as well as in life, to comfort himself and perhaps also his readers. Hornby also stresses in this interview that writing uplifting books is not a commercial decision, although that can be debated. His posture as a depressed author who writes uplifting books can be interpreted in different ways: it could be a strategy to show that Hornby is not superficial; it can also be a sign of his character, which demonstrates he does not wallow in his depression but still sees the positive side; it can also be seen as evidence that Hornby does not write books with the intention to ‘create art’, but to console and to make people identify with them; or it can be all of these. Either way, it will probably come across as sympathetic to his readers, and his depression does not seem to contribute negatively to his posture at all.

Another part of Hornby’s posture is the appearance of his office. Several interviewers who visited it have described it in the interviews, most elaborately in the *Sunday Herald* by Peter Ross. Like Hornby’s house, it is very close to Highbury, the home of Arsenal. The description of Hornby’s office seems to be a perfect summary of all the usual remarks about the writer. It shows his connection to football (it is close to the stadium, and has an ashtray in the shape of a football boot); it is described as a small flat in an unremarkable street, stressing Hornby’s ordinariness; the framed posters of his filmed books and the rock biographies indicate Hornby’s

close relationship to popular culture and his obsession with music; a picture of his autistic son is mentioned, often in the context of Hornby's involvement in charity projects concerning autism; and the ashtray also suggests Hornby smokes a lot. His choice of music for writing appears to be minimal music, which is perhaps not as highbrow as classical music but not as common as top 40 artists. All in all, nothing unexpected and nothing that contradicts Hornby's posture elsewhere.

In an interview in 1998, Hornby expresses his opinion about the fact that he has his own office, which he did not have previously. He says that "it's great having somewhere to work [...]. It's a big thing to be able to go somewhere different and have a different phone number. I really enjoy it" (Kelly). This demonstrates that Hornby is not accustomed to this type of luxury, and this may endear him to his readers, who will also often not have access to such possibilities. About the writing process in his office, he says: "once something has happened in my head then I work every day. There's something that goes off in your head that tells you it's going to work and that you really want to do it. But the writing itself is hard and I get fed up with myself and I pace around the room and do anything I can to distract myself from it." It shows that he works during moments of inspiration, but that the writing itself does not go naturally and that he has to work for it, and even procrastinates from it. He does not depict himself as a genius who writes effortlessly, but instead shows that it takes hard work and perseverance, even though he has some experience in writing.

2.1.2 Hornby's popularity and wealth

An important part of Hornby's posture is the fact that he is successful, popular, and wealthy because of his bestseller books and his film deals. This section will discuss how Hornby is described in terms of handling this well-known characteristic of his authorship.

1998 was the year of the huge success of his third book, *About a Boy*, of which Hornby sold the film rights for a large sum even before its publication. In an interview in the *Times* of that year, Hornby says the following about money:

“I don’t spend a lot of money on clothes,” says Hornby. “I don’t drive, I don’t do expensive drugs and a really big house seems like quite a lot of hassle. The big thing about the money is that it will take care of Danny.” A slice of his latest royalties will go into TreeHouse, a project to set up a school for autistic children in north London.

One of Hornby’s agreeable characteristics is that he seems to be genuinely unfazed by fame and wealth. (“The Boy Is Father to the Bestseller”)

Hornby emphasises that he does not care much about money, except for that he can use it for the care of his autistic son. This is another sign of Hornby as a ‘nice’ person who is very normal and not celebrity-like. The interviewer even explicitly describes this as an ‘agreeable characteristic’. This part of his posture is continued in all the other interviews: it is never mentioned that Hornby seems smug (on the contrary) or a big spender. This is another of his characteristics that shows his ordinariness and his closeness to the average person. Like Hornby as a person, both the characters in his books and his readers have been described as ordinary people, which strengthens this idea in Hornby’s posture.

Hornby as a celebrity and a person is also positively described by Bennett in the same year: “[he] is as likeable, unpretentious and humorous as his writing. He obviously invests much of his own character in *High Fidelity*.” About his enormous popularity, “Hornby says he can’t take the idea of fame at 40 seriously. “I don’t feel famous and I’m glad this all happened now because I don’t think your character can be changed that greatly once you’re in your late 30s.”” Hornby shows how he is still unaffected by fame and that he does not have any airs about him. In

a different interview in 1998, he is asked about his status as a well-known, celebrity writer:

“Hornby modestly and sincerely tells [Bradley] that he doesn’t regard himself as a “proper star, like Ian Wright or Liam Brady”.” About fame, he says that “[o]ne of the most interesting aspects is money,” to which he adds that the film money for *About a Boy* is going towards the care for his autistic son. By saying this, Hornby shows that he does not personally care a lot about money, but that it is mostly a convenience concerning the care for his family, which contributes to Hornby’s posture of a humble, emphatic family man.

Hornby does admit that money has advantages, but he mostly demonstrates that he does not think it needs to be spent on extravagant matters. In an interview in 2001, answering the question why he does not have a more expensive house and other luxuries, Hornby replies; ““You know, I’ve got a six-bedroom house in Highbury and no mortgage and that seems to be preposterously fortunate,” he grumbles between chugs on a ubiquitous Silk Cut. “The idea that I have to defend that, that I should be flasher than that, seems absurd”” (Ross). Even though he appreciates what he has, he emphasises that he does not need more and that he is astonished people expect that of him, which confirms other remarks about Hornby’s disregard for wealth and fame.

Hornby’s popularity, at this point, has become a given, and apart from being described as a bestseller author, Hornby is not asked many questions about being famous or rich any more. Apparently, this is no longer interesting, and perhaps Hornby is not expected to change anymore in this respect, which Hornby claimed himself as well.

In one of the 2014 interviews, Hornby reflects on his time as a starting author, and shows that he remembers well how unexpected his success was. He tells Calkin an anecdote of after the release of *Fever Pitch*, when he was in a bookshop in Camden: ““I thought, Oh they probably

had three copies and they've sold them and now they can't get any more.' The sales assistant recognised him and asked if he'd sign some books. 'I said, Yeah, but you haven't got any...'

And then he was led over to an enormous stack, piled up in their own display." On the one hand, this quote shows that Hornby did not expect success and was not accustomed to it, but on the other hand, it is an example of how incredibly popular and successful Hornby became after publishing *Fever Pitch*, and the following quote demonstrates even more strongly that Hornby even seems to appreciate the "glamour" sometimes: "if you're lucky, the glamour - proper glamour, which, if you've spent most of your time on your own, sitting in a room in north London, is a lot of fun." Hornby here refers to the Oscar nomination he received for the screenplay of *An Education* (2009), which he wrote. It appears that Hornby now manages to deal with fame more easily, and actually now thinks it is "fun" at times. This is a big change that could not have been expected from reading Hornby's early interviews. Hornby overall comes across as less insecure, both as an author and a person – made visible by studying his interviews over the years. Indeed, both interviews about *Funny Girl* feature mentions of how Hornby is now a more established, somewhat older author. Hornby even elaborately discusses politics in an interview in the *Times* (Thomson and Sylvester), something which he probably would not have done in the same way before. This confidence in expressing his opinions is a change in his posture, and may indicate that he, after all, is now accustomed to being a famous and influential author.

Almost every remark about Hornby's fame is accompanied by how this has not affected him and that the money he earns is used for his son and for charity. Nevertheless, Hornby never really avoided the spotlight, so it would go too far to say that Hornby does not like fame.

Hornby's posture is affected by this in the sense that it shows repeatedly that fame and wealth do

not have a great influence on his character, even though he is so immensely popular. That fact will probably only contribute to his popularity, because he is never arrogant or self-indulgent, which can be perceived as negative effects of being a celebrity.

2.1.3 Hornby's relation to lad-lit

Another aspect of Hornby's reputation that is repeatedly discussed in interviews is his relationship to lad culture and lad-lit. This started in the interviews about *Fever Pitch* and *High Fidelity*, but continued to be a way to describe Hornby, even when his novels moved away from the themes of masculinity and 'blokishness'. I will give several examples here that demonstrate this, and that show how Hornby himself reacts to this.

In 1996, an interview titled "Why everybloke is Liverpool's fan of the moment" claims that "[f]ootball and rock, however, are only one small aspect of blokishness, which is Hornby's underlying real theme" (Robinson). The interview keeps insisting on this 'blokishness', even though Hornby does not actively and explicitly confirm this. It is mostly the interviewer who keeps writing remarks about "Hornby's affable Everybloke style of writing." Sometimes Hornby seems to agree with this idea of his character: in the interview with Moir, he talks about his observations about men and women, quite firmly separating the two, and obviously identifying with men. Nevertheless, Hornby himself never insists on the masculine aspects of his writing, in contrast to the interviewers.

In 1998, Hornby already starts to move away from this theme, both in his books and his interviews. The hook of an interview in the *Journal* says that "[Hornby] is moving away from his previous bestsellers" (Bennett). The article explains how Hornby is connected to lad culture and what he thinks of this:

However, because he writes about everyday topics like football, music, television and film he has been credited with being the driving force behind Loaded's "lad" culture, a ridiculous claim considering the way they de-constructed masculine clichés, a tag which Hornby rails against.

"I find that kind of claim so silly," he said.

"I just don't think anything I've written could be interpreted as having any influence on all these lads mags at all and I don't really recognise their representation of men."

Clearly, Hornby is not pleased with this association with laddishness, and the writer of the article agrees by saying that Hornby goes against masculine clichés. Hornby thus explicitly tries to distance himself from this type of culture.

The interview in the *Sunday Times* in 1998 also goes into the matter of lad culture. The following quote is interesting, because the writer of the article seems to claim that Hornby himself tries to maintain his laddish reputation, but that he does not live up to that:

His oft-repeated theme, that blokes never really grow up, is (regrettably, perhaps) untrue. Many of them, moreover, have no serious interest in football (unless it is the World Cup on television, but that is an exercise in raw nationalism, not sport). What's more, any of them who takes responsibility for his children - handicapped or otherwise - is rather more than a lad, my son. ("The Boy Is Father to the Bestseller")

This is peculiar, because most other interviews appear to insist on describing Hornby as a writer about laddishness and masculinity, whether he agrees with this or not. This one, however, claims Hornby is "more than a lad" even though he, according to this article, maintains the idea that blokes never grow up. The journalist seems to believe that Hornby wants to keep his reputation as a lad, even though he repeatedly stated he does not. It is possible that this journalist was not

aware of that, or that he read Hornby's books in a different way than others may have, but the idea that Hornby is connected to lad culture is, apparently, pervasive.

Hornby continues to defend himself against accusations of laddishness. An interview in the *Times* in 2001 by Robert Crampton opens with the following statement: "Nick Hornby's books have always mirrored his life - from football fandom to fatherhood. [...] But then, he tells Robert Crampton, he's never been the lit lad he seemed." Hornby explains that "[p]eople don't realise how female my audience has become. It started off for obvious reasons almost entirely male," and Crampton even says that *Fever Pitch* "was a long way from being the 'lads' book" it was portrayed as being in the press." Hornby's focus on masculinity and his reputation as a lad-lit author seems to be questioned here seriously for the first time, and it is acknowledged that the media portrayed *Fever Pitch* too strongly as a "lad's book." About *Fever Pitch*, its depiction in the media and their depiction of Hornby, Hornby himself says: "I think it was a soppy book [...]. I've had at least three media incarnations in ten years. I was the New Lad, then I was this Middle Class Yob, now one critic has said that me having a female narrator is 'an ideological U-turn on a par with Mrs Thatcher distributing leaflets for the Communist Party'" (Crampton). This displays a certain contempt for the media, and Hornby's disagreement with and ridicule of his different 'incarnations'. In the *Scotland on Sunday*, Hornby is described as "at the forefront of what has been termed 'lad lit' or 'writing that you can enjoy but will make you think as well'," which is apparently the same according to interviewer Alex Massie. Hornby again explicitly defends himself in this article and explains how the idea was formed:

Hornby insists that his books are more complicated than is sometimes believed, less about faltering and fractured masculinity and more rooted in the real world than in the emotional shallowness of their protagonists.

“I don’t believe any generalisations about men and women any more. Certainly in *Fever Pitch* it was probably the case that the women were more mature than the men but when you examine any stereotype like that in depth it starts to fall apart.” (Massie)

He admits that *Fever Pitch* had a more stereotypical portrayal of men and women, but says that his novels after *Fever Pitch* are not as shallow as their protagonists. Crampton also notices a certain tendency in Hornby’s oeuvre: “[w]ith each book, from the non-fiction football-obsessed debut to creating a female narrator for the new one, Hornby has invented more and more. His own, actual personality has beat an orderly retreat from the page.” The separation from lad-lit writing and autobiographical writing seems to occur simultaneously in Hornby’s oeuvre and posture. The fact that his first book was autobiographical is probably one of the reasons why Hornby is still depicted as a ‘bloke’ in the media, even though his novels have progressed from this. The posture of Hornby is for many people still rooted in *Fever Pitch* because this was largely autobiographical, and it seems that Hornby’s image in the media does not change so easily.

A later interview does attempt to slightly reshape Hornby’s laddish reputation by describing his books as domestic literature. In this 2009 interview in the *Times*, Hornby’s work is described as follows: “Hornby’s obsessions can be crudely classified as Ladlit and Dadlit: coming to terms with your inner geek, and fatherhood” (Muir). The interview also claims that “that underbelly of ironic discomfort about him makes the readers keep on coming, many of them men who might normally avoid domestic novels.” The ‘domestic novel’ as a genre has not been used previously for Hornby’s books, and may signal that Hornby and his books are now associated with domestic struggles, instead of (or next to) laddishness, football, and music.

In short, Hornby's posture concerning laddishness is shaped by the interviews that show conflicting attitudes: the media, which continue to frame Hornby as a "lit lad", and Hornby himself who dislikes the term and would prefer a different imago, possibly of domestic literature. However, it seems as if Hornby's protests are not emphasised enough or do not convince, for most journalists prefer to take the easy road of reconfirming his laddish imago instead of questioning it.

2.1.4 Hornby's poetics and position as an author and reader

This section considers Hornby's posture as an author and a reader, and Hornby's opinions about literature. This is therefore the most relevant section in determining whether Hornby is perceived as middlebrow and how he is connected to readability, even though the other sections also describe aspects that can contribute to a middlebrow posture.

In some of the interviews, Hornby explicitly talks about what kind of writer he wants to be and what he considers good literature. The following examples will show how Hornby positions himself as a writer. For instance, a duo-interview with Hornby and his brother-in-law, author Robert Harris, emphasises the differences between the two related authors. Because of the comparison, it becomes very clear what type of writer Hornby is not. He is not sophisticated, for instance, does not have a fancy car, and writes about normal people instead of geniuses. This article does not highlight Hornby's sensitivity, but rather his 'common-ness'. For instance, the fact that Hornby chose to wear a leather jacket instead of "intelligent tweed" signals that he does not have the same style as Harris and that he possibly prefers more casual clothing. Apparently, Hornby does not want to present himself as a very sophisticated type of writer either. Concerning the "winning formula" of his writing, "[p]ersonal insight, individual experience, a humorous take

on the modern condition[, a]nd an outstanding ability to write” is mentioned (Aitkenhead and Hughes). Hornby’s talent as an author is being acknowledged, even though, next to Robert Harris, he seems rather unambitious and perhaps not as intelligent. This could be a downside of the posture of the ‘average bloke’: people could perceive him as less intelligent than other writers. Whether Hornby considers this to be a problem can be questioned, but this interview does not go into that.

The interview with Hattenstone mentions, as do some of the other interviews, that Hornby graduated from Cambridge. About this, Hornby says: “[s]tudying English was useless, completely useless. It took me years to recover from that. Every time I tried to write, it sounded like a bad university essay” (qtd. in Hattenstone). This is a fairly strong critique on English in the academia, and Hornby firmly places himself outside of this climate. To be fair, he also claims that he never felt at home there, but to say that studying English is useless is a bold move. It does agree with Hornby’s reputation as a non-highbrow writer, and demonstrates that Hornby himself does not wish to be regarded as an English graduate in his writing because his education did not contribute to that, according to him. Whether he thinks that he personally was not suitable for college or whether he rejects the entire idea of studying English is not clear, but it shows Hornby’s dislike of literature in university which also suggests a dislike for the (study of the) canon and highbrow literature.

Hornby’s difference from other British writers can also turn out positively for his posture. The interview by Robinson positions Hornby on the ‘blokish’ side of literature, but also emphasises the difference between Hornby and “[t]he bleak tricks of post-modernism, the ego-surfers of pure style and - most of all, and a particularly British curse - novels which hate their own characters,” that have, according to Robinson, “no appeal.” This separates Hornby from the

more avant-garde, post-modernist writers in Britain, such as Will Self, for instance (who in turn has strongly criticised Hornby in the media – but that is another story). Instead, according to Robinson, his writing “seems, like a realist painting, deceptively easy to imitate. The hidden trick is in the emotional accuracy.” This ‘hidden trick’ is apparently what makes Hornby’s books good after all, even though they are not post-modern and may appear “easy to imitate.”

Hornby himself also often expresses his opinion about art and literature. He says: “[a]rt isn't about being contented[.] There aren't many books or records about being okay. Ha, imagine an opera about being okay. But I wanted to write about being okay because it is the most common experience of life” (Muir). In this quote, Hornby seems to say that his books are not actually art, but at the same time, he also points out a lack of books or music about being okay, which he wanted to write about because everyone experiences this. This signals that he wants his readers to identify with his books. About style, Hornby says that “[a]part from one or two people like Dickens [...] description tends to drive me nuts when I'm reading it” (Bradley), which is telling about Hornby as a reader but as a writer as well (Bradley says *About a Boy* “is couched in the straight, engaging style which has won him such an enormous readership”). Also, the fact that Hornby mentions and seems to appreciate Dickens shows that he is well-educated and knows his classics, even though Dickens may not be one of the most ‘intellectual’ writers in history.

The Crampton-interview talks about Hornby’s relationship to other writers and books. It says that “although he “started off with the assumption I’d be patronised and in fact a lot of other writers have been incredibly generous”, he is still not part of any London literary set.” Hornby comments that “[t]here’s still that assumption that if something is any good then it’s difficult,” which signals that he thinks that his books are good but not difficult, as opposed to books by the

“London literary set.” Even though he was not patronised for it, he still perceives the divide between ‘legitimate’ literature, and his own books. He does admit that this divide is not as big as it used to be and that he contributed to that: ““in the Seventies and Eighties there was a huge gap between bestselling books and literary books. [...] Now, various people have bridged the hole.” You among them? “Yes, I would say so.””

This bridging of the gap between bestselling books and literary books is often attributed to *Fever Pitch*, one of the first books that showed that literature and sport or popular culture do not need to be separate genres. Bennett, in the *Journal*, writes that “such topics [records and football] weren’t considered critically worthy or commercially viable but the 40-year-old’s brilliant *Fever Pitch* and *High Fidelity* have radically altered that”, and that Hornby has “shown that books about the realities of modern life are worth writing.” This demonstrates how Hornby is perceived as having changed, in a way, the literary field, by writing about these topics. Again, he is confirmed to be a popular writer and it is mentioned that Hornby “hates writing description,” and “would rather use the type of TV programme they are watching or music to which they are listening to reflect their mood,” which is a sign of his close relationship to popular culture instead of highbrow culture.

This bridge between bestselling and literary books could perhaps be described as middlebrow: fairly good books that are popular. In the interviews about *How to Be Good*, Hornby is described as middlebrow several times. For instance, in the hook of the interview by Massie, Hornby is called the “a contender for the title [of] the Manchester United of the middlebrow fiction world.” In a “You Ask the Questions” (2001) article in the *Independent*, Hornby is asked (and replies):

What's it like being middlebrow?

Anthony Hyde, by e-mail

Why, thank you – it's pretty good, as you might imagine. The only real advice I can offer highbrow writers is to keep working at it. Write a couple of extra drafts, just to make the prose digestible. And put in a few jokes - people like 'em. Some of my favourite middlebrow novelists include Dickens, Steinbeck, Anne Tyler, Jane Austen... You put up your best five highbrows, and I'll put up my best five middlebrows, and you watch – we'll wipe the floor with you. Personally, I don't want to be distracted by a book's brow. I want to look it in the eye.

This shows Hornby does not resist being middlebrow, but rather embraces it and places himself among the likes of Dickens and Austen (not the worst writers to compare yourself to). In the last sentence, he also seems to reject the notion of 'brows' completely. This will also be discussed in the second part of this chapter. Finally, an interview in the *Irish Times* is titled "Middlebrow and proud of it." In this article, the quote above is repeated, and Hornby says that he has "had some of the most 'highbrow' writers come over to me and say how much they enjoyed such and such a book," after which he relates how Edmund White once told him he liked *High Fidelity*. This shows at the same time that Hornby does not consider himself highbrow, but that he may also think that he is not that different from highbrow writers either.

Hattenstone adds a critical note to the idea of Hornby's perfect balance between quality and popular writing: "[a]s much as Hornby's prose is praised for its pared-down simplicity, it has been criticised, too, for lacking depth." Hornby responds to this by saying that "of all his books *How to Be Good* was the most praised by critics. "I had a lot of feedback from proper literary people that that was a proper literary book. Probably because it ended miserably"." Hornby

seems to say that books that do not have happy endings are perceived as more literary than books that do. He does not go into this any further, unfortunately. When Hattenstone asks: “[d]oes he think there’s a snobbery about his writing? “Erm . . .” A long time passes. “I don’t think it’s for me to get into that sort of question”” is the answer. Hornby, at least in this interview, does not want to accuse anyone of snobbery about his books, even though by avoiding an answer he basically says that there is indeed a certain snobbery. Hornby, at least, does not seem to think a happy ending makes a book less literary, and concerning writing about serious topics, he says: “[i]f I wrote a book about depression that was incredibly depressing, why would anybody want to read it?” Clearly, Hornby does not want to write books to depress his readers.

Hornby’s opinions about literature later become even more clearly defined. In the interview in the *Times* in 2009, Hornby says that the book *What Good Are the Arts?* by John Carey made a big impression on him. Muir explains this as follows:

In rough summary, Carey says that high art is not superior to any other art form, and patronising and self-serving snobbery underlies those critics who bolster it. The majority should not have to pay for the artistic pleasures of the educated minority.

No wonder Hornby likes that theory, because he is a strong believer in making his writing accessible. He may have studied English at Cambridge, but as he wrote in *The Complete Polysyllabic Spree*, a collection of literary columns for *The Believer* magazine: “I do not wish to produce prose that draws attention to itself, rather than the world it describes.”

What before had been mostly suggested is here made explicit, and Hornby’s preference for prose that can be read and understood, and does not draw attention to itself, is probably his most important and explicit opinion about literature. Many writers (and readers) may disagree with him, but Hornby argues that “[i]t is troubling that what we regard as important books are

basically taking no part in the cultural conversation in this country” (Muir). It seems as if he refers to his own books as the important ones, which can also be seen as a sign of arrogance. If Hornby looks down upon books that are not like his, that can also be regarded as a form of snobbery, even if it is against the highbrow. However, it is possible that he merely suggests that both types of books should take part in the “cultural conversation,” instead of clearly marking the difference between them.

2.2 Hornby as a readable, middlebrow author

As will be demonstrated in chapter 3, reviews of Hornby’s books frequently discuss their readability. Because interviews focus mostly on the author instead of the books, readability is not as often discussed in the interviews as in reviews. Middlebrow, however, is discussed several times, which is reasonable because writers as well as their books can be perceived as middlebrow. One could argue that a person can also be ‘readable’, but this notion is less common, and readability is almost always discussed in relation to a text.

What can be discussed about readability are the intentions Hornby displays in interviews about his books. Hornby is quoted twice from his introduction in *The Complete Polysyllabic Spree*, in which he writes “I am not particularly interested in language. Or rather, I am interested in what language can do for me, and I spend many hours each day trying to ensure my prose is as simple as it can possibly be. But I do not wish to produce prose that draws attention to itself, rather than the world it describes” (qtd. in Calkin). Hornby himself says that he wishes to write his books as simple as possible. In an interview in the *Guardian* in 2005, Hornby says the following about writing and reading:

I think part of the reason I became the writer I became is because of teaching in a school, and you're always looking for this stuff that is really intelligent but really simple and everyone can understand it. I always thought *Of Mice And Men* was such a perfect book because there's nothing not to understand, but it's still really clever and moving and complicated, but everybody understands the complication. It doesn't leave anybody out. I think that's what books should be like. (Hattenstone)

Hornby wants to write both intelligently and understandably, and whether or not he succeeds in this, this intention would already qualify him as a more middlebrow author than many other authors, who may first and foremost focus on literary merit.

Concerning intelligent but accessible writing, Hornby's opinions were already outspoken in 2001, after publishing *How to Be Good*. This quote shows how Hornby sees the way literature should be:

There's still that assumption that if something is any good then it's difficult. I've never written to ensure mass appeal but I'm aware of writing to be read. If you write something that will end up in a shop with a price on the back then everyone should write to be read. An awful lot of literary novels are three drafts short of being any good. They're lumpy and spiky and haven't been sorted out properly. (qtd. in Crampton)

Hornby says several interesting things about literature here. Firstly, he states that something does not need to be difficult to be good. Secondly, he says that writers should write to be read, and that literary novels should aspire to this more. In the interview, he also talks about one of his examples in literature, Anne Tyler (he mentions Tyler in several other interviews too), a Pulitzer Prize-winning American novelist who is known for her realist novels in a domestic setting. Hornby uses her as an example of how a certain kind of writing, both intelligent and accessible,

can be a success both with critics and readers. In one of his last interviews, about *Funny Girl*, Calkin writes: “‘His books are so popular that you forget how intelligently he writes,’ a literary editor remarked to me recently.” This is yet again an indication of how popularity, accessibility, and readability are not often connected to intelligent writing.

Readability is mentioned explicitly in only a few interviews and usually not directly in relation to Hornby’s oeuvre, but many journalists describe Hornby’s style in terms that relate to readability, such as ‘easy’, ‘accessible’, and other descriptions that indicate it is understandable. In an interview about *How to Be Good*, readability is briefly mentioned, when Hornby talks about the quality of his work. He says:

I am incapable of telling whether one book is better than another or even readable. With this one I went to my partner and said: ‘I don’t want to know if you think this book is any good, I just want to know if you understand it. Is it complete gibberish or not?’ (qtd. in Massie)

It shows that Hornby is first and foremost interested in whether readers think his books are readable, because he cannot always see that for himself that when he is writing. Readability is also explicitly discussed in the *Irish Times* in 2009, which talks about Hornby’s contributions to “American literary journals the *Believer* and *McSweeney’s* (founded by Dave Eggers). Both publications are considered to be at the vanguard of experimental but readable literary fiction” (Butler). This is an example of how readability is described to go hand in hand with experimental writing, which is usually considered more avant-garde than popular, but perhaps the fact that these publications are American is significant. It is possible that American culture is more open to readability as a characteristic of literature, but this will not be researched in this thesis. Butler also writes that “[r]eadability is very often a stick used to beat writers of material as accessible as

Juliet Naked,” which means that readability should not be a valid reason to criticise accessible novels, according to him. As the introduction already pointed out, readability often has a negative connotation, and Butler seems to defend that type of writing here. Hornby too fervently supports the idea of readable literature, as is demonstrated in many of his quotations.

An interview about *Funny Girl* also mentions Hornby’s column in the *Believer*, which “deals with not only recently published books but anything he has been reading. It feeds into Hornby’s strongly held belief that people should read exactly what they want to, and not something that they feel they ought to read.” Hornby’s belief is a belief that is often associated with middlebrow, for example in Macdonald, who discusses “the emphasis on middlebrow choices as personal choices” (8). The following paragraphs will further consider Hornby’s posture as middlebrow.

Hornby is not described as middlebrow before interviews about *How to Be Good*. Interviews from 2001, however, mention Hornby as “Middlebrow and Proud of It” (Boyd) and “The Manchester United of the Middlebrow Fiction World” (Massie 2001). Possible explanations for this late occurrence are that his first three books were mostly considered lad-lit and were thus already ‘labelled’ without the need to use middlebrow as a genre, or that one journalist used the term in 2001 to describe Hornby and that other media adopted this description consequently.

Hornby is explicitly called middlebrow for the first time in 2001 in an interview in a “You Ask the Questions” feature in the *Independent*. It has been quoted in the first section of this chapter as well, but will be repeated here to discuss it in more detail. To a question about what it is like to be middlebrow, Hornby replied:

Why, thank you – it’s pretty good, as you might imagine. The only real advice I can offer highbrow writers is to keep working at it. Write a couple of extra drafts, just to make the prose digestible. And put in a few jokes - people like ’em. Some of my favourite middlebrow novelists include Dickens, Steinbeck, Anne Tyler, Jane Austen... You put up your best five highbrows, and I’ll put up my best five middlebrows, and you watch – we’ll wipe the floor with you. Personally, I don’t want to be distracted by a book’s brow. I want to look it in the eye.

Hornby speaks jokingly, but his answer does seem to contain a serious point. Hornby admits he is middlebrow, and at the same time seems to reject the idea of brows altogether. He humorously suggests that highbrow fiction should aspire to being more middlebrow. The argument that middlebrow does not aspire to legitimacy (and therefore does not function in the literary field of Bourdieu as it is supposed to) has been brought up in chapter 1, and also means that the distinctions between ‘brows’ are not especially relevant to the middlebrow. That is also what Hornby seems to be saying by stating that he does not “want to be distracted by a book’s brow.” By rejecting the idea of brows, Hornby confirms his status as middlebrow even more strongly. Highbrow authors will (according to Bourdieu) always maintain that they are different from other art, because they produce legitimate art and gain symbolic capital from that notion, but Hornby says he does not want to make such distinctions and can therefore be considered middlebrow. Of course, Hornby will have some ideas about legitimate culture too, and he will probably also make a distinction between pulp and literature, but it may not matter as much to him as it will to certain other writers who are perceived as highbrow.

Once more analysing the quote about middlebrow, Hornby names a few authors such as Dickens and Austen which are usually not considered middlebrow at all, which prompts the

question of what Hornby's definition of middlebrow is. What the four authors he names have in common, speaking in very general terms, is that their "prose is digestible," as Hornby suggests, and that they have a large readership (maybe as a result of that). This, however, does not necessarily mean that these writers are middlebrow, because middlebrow also incorporates a certain disregard for the rules of the literary field and a certain inclination of the writer. It is possible that Hornby studied how these authors and their postures relate to middlebrow culture, but I highly doubt it, and would suggest that he uses 'middlebrow' rather to indicate 'readability'. In the introduction and chapter 1, I already argued that these concepts are related, and considering the way Hornby discusses literature and middlebrow, it seems as if he does too, only implicitly. I would not say that Hornby's use of the word 'middlebrow' is wrong, because I think many people have not studied this concept in depth and can therefore have their own interpretation of this concept, but he does use it in a way that suggests a strong link to readability, of which he is a great supporter.

The interviews after *How to Be Good* do not mention middlebrow culture again, confirming the suspicion that the media adopted the word somewhere and passed it on during the publicity period of *How to Be Good*. The only later mention of 'brows' is when *Fever Pitch* is mentioned in an interview with Hornby in the sports section. "It was the first football book to win highbrow critical acclaim as well as reaching a wide readership. Winner of the William Hill Sports Book of the Year award in 1992, Hornby's writing "voice", intelligent but rooted in popular culture, resonated beyond literary circles" (Smith). Because this article is mostly about sport, it is not clear how the word 'highbrow' is used, for sports culture is very different from literary culture. In this article, Hornby says about different types of culture:

I have always believed in a unified culture -books, sport, music [...]. In that way, I am probably quite American. To me, there is no contradiction in loving all those things. In England, we still have this strange debate about whether it is odd to be immersed in football as well as literature. (Smith)

Hornby here speaks out in favour of loving different things and different types of culture, and that it does not matter whether it is “odd” if you happen to enjoy it. This is also part of the idea of middlebrow, or maybe even ‘broadbrow’ culture, even though Hornby does not explicitly use these words.

Despite the fact that Hornby does not actively use the word ‘middlebrow’ himself, it can most certainly be argued that he uses the ideas of the middlebrow to shape his posture. His posture as an accessible, nice, blockish writer who writes readable novels is probably, if not to other things, at least beneficial to his sales figures. Journalists have gladly adopted this posture and almost exclusively describe Hornby in positive ways, even though this sometimes means that Hornby has to defend himself against accusations of ‘laddishness’. This posture has been shaped over the years and is a representation of the concepts that Hornby values, such as accessibility and readability. It can therefore be claimed that Hornby’s posture has a very close relationship to readability and middlebrow culture and predominantly benefits from it.

The fact that the middlebrow is not mentioned again outside the interviews about *How to Be Good* indicates that Hornby himself does not explicitly present himself as a middlebrow author. He agrees with it when asked about it, but he does not actively suggest he is a middlebrow writer and does not use the word to position himself. Considering the fact that Hornby said that he does not want to be distracted by ideas of ‘brows’, this is not surprising. It is also possible that Hornby perceives that the concept of middlebrow can have negative

connotations as well, and is therefore not inclined to use it himself. Nevertheless, it can certainly be argued that Hornby is middlebrow. In his posture, it has been repeated over and over how Hornby is not and does not want to be part of the elite, and how he presents himself as a normal, unsophisticated man. At the same time, he did study at Cambridge (even though he says he was no better for the experience) and he has spoken in favour of intelligent writing multiple times, so he could hardly be considered lowbrow. Of course, not every writer between the elite and lowbrow needs to be considered middlebrow. But as chapter 1 has demonstrated, middlebrow is often about reading for pleasure, for enrichment, and for a greater understanding of the world, without any restrictions or rules about what to read. That is exactly what Hornby advocates in interviews, and that is why his posture may be termed decidedly middlebrow.

Chapter 3: Rated 'R'

Readability in reviews of Nick Hornby's books

In the previous chapter, I have analysed Nick Hornby's posture and its relation to readability and the middlebrow. This chapter will consider the reader's attitude, by examining reviews of both professionals and amateurs. The reviews will be analysed with a view to establishing how readers think about readability and the middlebrow, and how they experience books by a writer who publicly proclaims his intention to write in a way that is both intellectually satisfying and readable. This will serve to answer the question how readability is used and perceived in the literary field.

This chapter will discuss the reception of Nick Hornby's books in detail. For each book, reviews from professional media in the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland will be examined. In addition, amateur reviews on *Amazon.co.uk* will be studied to discover whether there are differences between professional and amateur reviewers in their discussion of readability. Reviews of all seven books, up to 2014, will be discussed, and subsequently compared. I have chosen not to discuss Hornby's novel *Slam* because it was targeted at a teenage audience, and therefore has a different readership and is not reviewed under the same conditions as the other books.

3.1 The review corpus

The review corpus is, in terms of quantity, considerably larger than the collection of interviews that was studied in the previous chapter. This is also what enables a more quantitative approach

to the texts, although I have carefully read every review as well to prevent any irrelevant results in the analysis, and to also enable a qualitative approach.

The professional reviews from British media sources were retrieved in the same way as the interviews with Nick Hornby: I used *LexisNexis* to search for the author's name and the name of each of his relevant publications, in the geographic area "United Kingdom" (this does not exclude foreign sources but adds more relevance to the sources that are listed as UK), between (and including) the year of publication of a certain book and the two years after. From the articles this generated, I selected the reviews based on their contents and on their source of publication, using only sources from media in the British Isles. These added up to a total of 71 reviews. It must be noted that there are still great differences between newspapers and between the regions these are from, but the scope of this research project did not allow for a study of these differences. However, the reviews from the British media are certainly different from amateur reviews, because they are written from the perspective of a professional critic, while the amateur reviews are voluntary contributions to a website.

The amateur reviews are taken from the internet, nowadays the most common place for everyone to express their opinions publicly. Online reviewing was not as common in the 1990s as it is now, because internet access had only just become generally available and not many websites existed that were specifically designed to review books, such as *Goodreads*. *Goodreads* was founded in 2006, so its reviews start in that year. This makes *Goodreads* a less suitable source for reviews of Hornby's books, which were published from 1992 onwards. To find these older amateur reviews online, a website such as *Amazon.co.uk* is more appropriate, because it features older reviews. The *Amazon* website went online in 1995, the same year *High Fidelity*, Hornby's second book, was published. The period it covers qualifies *Amazon.co.uk* as the most

appropriate website to select reviews from, and it is a generally used and widely known outlet for books as well as the publication of reviews. The fact that there is a UK version of the website also contributes to the relevance of the reviews, for this research project focuses on the British Isles as its cultural domain.

Not all reviews of Hornby's books on *Amazon.co.uk* will be included, because this would exceed the scope of this thesis (*High Fidelity* alone already has 152 customer reviews before 2015) and would not necessarily serve the purpose of answering the research question. Only reviews of a 100 words or more will be included here, which rules out the one-line reviews that lack a certain involvement from the author of the review. I will also exclude reviews from audio books if they only review the audio book, and not the book itself (i.e. the reading experience). After filtering these out, reviews that appear to be from outside the British Isles will be excluded from the corpus as well. I intend to focus this research on British culture as much as possible, in order to pinpoint the specific cultural implications of the subject of this thesis. Also, the difference between a native speaker of English as a reader and a non-native speaker will influence how Hornby's books are judged (in terms of readability). The difficulty with internet reviews is that they do not always mention what country the reviewer is from. Reviewers that name their location as the British Isles will of course be included, and reviewers that do not name their home country will be included as well, for the chances that a reviewer on *Amazon.co.uk* is British are fairly large: 63.8% of its users are from the UK, 2.4% from Ireland, and all other countries except for the USA (4.3%) contribute a lower percentage of visitors (*HypeStat*). The selection of amateur reviews adds up to a total of 328 reviews.

3.2 Quantitative analysis

My aim is to discover how (positively/negatively) and where (in professional/amateur sources) ‘readability’ is used as an evaluation of a book. I researched this by selecting the remarks in a review that describe a book as readable. The word ‘readable’ does not necessarily have to be used explicitly: the factors I identified in chapter 1 that contribute to readability will serve to identify the relevant remarks. These factors include: ease and speed of the reading process; accessible subject matter that can be identified with by many people; and a style that is enjoyable and undemanding. If any of these are mentioned by a reviewer, it will count as a ‘hit’. I realise that this is a subjective way of marking the hits, because I decide whether a reviewer means what I think they mean. These factors can be mentioned in many different ways, and do not always have to be explicit, so it will be my responsibility to mark the reviews as objectively and unambiguously as possible. There is no completely neutral way of marking these unless I only count hits when specific words are mentioned. This method, however, would exclude hits when a concept is described instead of named explicitly. I therefore chose to use a less precise but more inclusive method. The results of the quantitative analysis will only be used to identify certain tendencies, but no relevance will be attributed to slight deviations, for this method is not precise enough to accomplish this. It will also be used to create a general overview of how reviews discuss readability and to inform the qualitative analysis. The qualitative analysis (section 3.3) will go more deeply into the tendencies identified in the quantitative analysis, and will also discuss whether and how the middlebrow and the literary field show their influence in the review corpus.

A total of 399 reviews, both professional and amateur, have been examined in order to produce an overview of how and when Hornby’s books are described as readable. The results are

sorted into tables. Not only did I count the hits, I also indicated whether readability is discussed in a positive, negative, or neutral/unclear way. By doing this, I want to discover in what way and what context reviewers discuss readability, and what this suggests about readability as a concept in the literary field.

I will give examples of the three ways in which readability is discussed, especially when ‘readability’ is not explicitly mentioned, but when I mark it as a comment about readability anyway. A positive example of how readability is used is in an *Amazon* review of *About a Boy* on 24 May 1999, where the anonymous reviewer writes: “[e]ven my husband who’s not much of a reader read it from cover to cover and loved it.” This signals that Hornby’s book is appreciated by people who generally do not read, which is an argument in favour of the readability of the book. The next example shows how readability is criticised: in an *Amazon* review of *About a Boy*, the book is called “[an] unchallenging read” (17 Sept. 2002). The word ‘unchallenging’ could perhaps have been used positively or ambiguously in another review, but because this review is very negative overall and uses this word in a sentence that also sums up other negative aspects of the book (“over rated [sic] and unmemorable”), it shows that this is a negative evaluation of readability. As this example demonstrates, the context for a remark about readability is crucial for categorising it. Finally, remarks about readability can be ambiguous or neutral, and slot into the residual category of ‘neutral/unclear’. It is not always obvious how readability is used in reviews: likely, this is caused by the fact that the dictionary definition of ‘readable’ is fairly positive, but that its connotations are often negative. An example of when it is unclear whether it is used positively or negatively can be found in a *Daily Mail* review of *About a Boy*: “[b]ut it's a delightful, observant, funny and good-hearted novel that will give pleasure to all but the most demanding of readers” (Blacker). The first part of the quote shows a positive

attitude towards the book, but the second part is much more ambiguous: yes, it is pleasurable, and probably to many people, except for “the most demanding of readers.” Who are these readers? Are they more sophisticated, more highbrow, and therefore more demanding? And if yes, what does this mean for the novel? Is this still an argument that judges *About a Boy* positively? If these kind of questions arise from a remark about readability, I will categorise them as neutral/unclear, which in this case is an example of ‘unclear’. An example of a neutral use of ‘readable’ as a criterion can be found in an *Amazon* review of *About a Boy*: “The diction of this novel is easy to read and understand. Hornby doesn't write hypotactic sentences and long chapters. Therefore the reader does not have to concentrate that much to grasp the story” (6 July 2004). This part of the review is written as a factual statement, and does not offer a very strong judgement of the novel. It is part of a positive review, so I might be inclined to categorise this as positive, but the reviewer’s stance on readability is not clearly articulated and this quote will therefore also be categorised neutral/unclear.

The full collection of reviews can be found in appendix C. Appendix B shows all the data from the review analysis, showing either the professional or amateur reviews per book on each separate Excel sheet. Each sheet shows the dates of the reviews (and their source, in case of the professional reviews), the number of positive, negative, or neutral/unclear remarks about readability and their total per review, the word count per review, and in case of the *Amazon* reviews the number of stars awarded. The relevant numbers and percentages will also be displayed in this chapter in the form of tables. The left top corner of each table indicates the type of reviews the table is about (professional or amateur) and the relevant book title, which will be abbreviated (FP=*Fever Pitch*; HF=*High Fidelity*; AAB=*About a Boy*; HTBG=*How to Be Good*; ALWD=*A Long Way Down*; JN=*Juliet, Naked*; FG=*Funny Girl*).

One of my expectations is that professional reviews will discuss readability less often than the amateur reviews. This prediction is based on the Booker Prize discussion, in which readability was rejected as an aspect of literature, and thus, it may not be discussed in literary reviews either. Another prediction is that readability, if it is mentioned, is more often judged negatively in the professional reviews than in amateur reviews, because of the negative connotations that readability often seems to carry in the context of legitimate culture. In return, I expect the amateur reviews to judge readability mostly as a positive aspect of a book, especially since amateur readers may have read Hornby's books in a different context than professional critics; for instance, they may have selected Hornby's books especially for their enjoyableness and not their literary value.

3.2.1 Reviews of *Fever Pitch*

Hornby's first full-length published book was his memoir *Fever Pitch* (1992), which only slowly became a bestseller and received more widespread attention after it became the William Hill Sports Book of the Year. This is probably the reason why there are hardly any professional reviews about *Fever Pitch*: when it was just published, it was not regarded as a book worth reviewing. I only encountered two articles about *Fever Pitch* that can be described as reviews (although they do not exclusively write about *Fever Pitch*), with an average length of 580 words. Otherwise, the media coverage of *Fever Pitch* mostly documented its unexpected success, which occurred when it was too late to review the book in newspapers. The two reviews of *Fever Pitch* do not mention readability at all.

The thirty-two *Amazon* reviews of *Fever Pitch* in this thesis range from 1998 to 2014, with an average length of 206 words. In the thirty-two reviews, readability is discussed in

seventeen of these, therefore in 55% percent of the reviews. In these, readability is only discussed negatively once, on 6 June 2003, by a reviewer who writes that the book “reads like a juvenile confession,” which suggests a low level of difficulty. It is discussed positively eighteen times, which is approximately 58% of all the remarks about the readability of *Fever Pitch*. A comparison with the professional reviews about *Fever Pitch* is not relevant, for there are only two professional reviews and they both do not comment on readability.

Table 1

Amateur FP	Quantity	Percentage
Total reviews	32	100%
Reviews with 1+ hits	17	55%
Hits	31	100%
Positive	18	58%
Negative	1	3%
Neutral/unclear	12	39%

3.2.2 Reviews of *High Fidelity*

With Hornby’s name already established, his first novel received much attention in the British media. I found nine professional reviews, with an average length of 566 words and all from 1995, with one exception from 1996. Readability is discussed eleven times in total, in six of the reviews. Six out of nine reviews discuss readability, which is a fairly high percentage of 67% of the reviews, although this does not straightforwardly compare to the amateur reviews because there are only nine professional ones. Readability is discussed negatively once, in the *Times*, where it is said that “much of this book reads like the worst sort of fashion-conscious journalism” (Crampton). However, it is discussed positively eight out of eleven times (73% of the remarks about readability), which is more than I would have expected from the professional reviews. Positive remarks include ones such as in the *Guardian*: “Hornby’s purchase [on “the

universal”] feels so effortless that his is a pop book in the best sense of the word” (Moore). The emphasis on “effortless” and “pop book” suggest an accessible and easy reading experience, which in turn relates to readability.

Table 2.1

Professional HF	Quantity	Percentage
Total reviews	9	100%
Reviews with 1+ hits	6	67%
Total hits	11	100%
Positive	8	73%
Negative	1	9%
Neutral/unclear	2	18%

High Fidelity was reviewed many times on *Amazon*, which led to fifty-six amateur reviews between the years 1999 and 2014 to be included here. These reviews in the corpus have an average length of 248 words. Readability is discussed fifty-nine times, in thirty-four of the reviews. Therefore, 61% of the reviews discuss readability, of which one mentions it as often as five times. This reviewer was especially impressed by Hornby’s talent to write a readable book, and says, for instance: “[i]n terms of sheer enjoyment and accessibility, I would put *High Fidelity* as one of my top five books!” (15 Feb. 2005). The other reviewers also have a more or less positive attitude towards readability and this novel, for none of the reviews discuss readability in a negative fashion, and only eleven are neutral/unclear. The other forty-eight remarks about readability are positive, which is 81% of all remarks. This is a very high percentage, which may be due to the overall positive reception of *High Fidelity*. The reviews discussed here award an average of 4.3 stars to *High Fidelity*, which is equally high as the *Amazon.co.uk* rating of a classic work of fiction such as *Wuthering Heights*.

Table 2.2

Amateur HF	Quantity	Percentage
Total reviews	56	100%
Reviews with 1+ hits	34	61%
Total hits	59	100%
Positive	48	81%
Negative	0	0%
Neutral/unclear	11	19%

3.2.3 Reviews of *About a Boy*

Hornby's third book was reviewed professionally eleven times, largely by the same media that reviewed *High Fidelity*. These reviews had an average length of 838 words and they were all published in 1998. There are not enough professional reviews of *Fever Pitch* to be able to compare them to the professional reviews of *About a Boy*, but a comparison between those of *High Fidelity* and *About a Boy* is possible and shows a considerable change. The number of comments about readability has not increased or decreased greatly, but in the case of *About a Boy*, most remarks are suddenly negative or neutral/unclear instead of positive. It is not directly clear where this change came from. From the negative remarks, three hits are from the review in the *Guardian*, while the *Guardian* review of *High Fidelity* had three positive hits.

Table 3.1

Professional AAB	Quantity	Percentage
Total reviews	11	100%
Reviews with 1+ hits	7	64%
Total hits	12	100%
Positive	1	8%
Negative	4	33%
Neutral/unclear	7	58%

Apparently, the positive or negative perception of readability does not have anything to do with the news source: it is more likely to be influenced by the reviewer. It could also depend on the book, but if both books are described as readable and one is appreciated for it and the other is not, while the news source is the same and the reviews are only three years apart (so probably no great culture change will have taken place), it is likely that the most prominent influence on the evaluation of readability is the fact that they were reviewed by different people.

The amateur reviews, forty-five in this case, were uploaded between 1998 and 2014 with an average of 241 words and 4.2 stars (only slightly lower than *High Fidelity*'s rating). They have a higher percentage of positive remarks about readability than the professional reviews, but like the professional reviews they also feature more neutral/unclear and negative remarks than the reviews of *High Fidelity*.

Table 3.2

Amateur AAB	Quantity	Percentage
Total reviews	45	100%
Reviews with 1+ hits	29	64%
Total hits	53	100%
Positive	34	64%
Negative	2	4%
Neutral/unclear	17	32%

The cause for this change cannot be derived from the data. Another suggestion for this change, except for coincidence caused by the different reviewers, is that a second novel by an author (and his third book, in this case) is likely to be criticised more strongly. However, its *Amazon* rating is nearly identical to *High Fidelity*, and *Amazon* reviewers have often not read Hornby's book in chronological order, so this is likely to apply more to the professional reviews than the amateur ones.

3.2.4 Reviews of *How to Be Good*

The professional reviews of *How to Be Good* were all published in 2001, with an average length of 705 words. Half of these discuss readability, and they do so mostly in a positive or neutral/unclear fashion. The subject matter of *How to Be Good* is perceived to be slightly more serious than Hornby's previous books, but the professional reviews do not directly reflect this, for they still comment on how readable the book is.

Table 4.1

Professional HTBG	Quantity	Percentage
Total reviews	14	100%
Reviews with 1+ hits	7	50%
Total hits	10	100%
Positive	4	40%
Negative	1	10%
Neutral/unclear	5	50%

The percentages shown in the table of the amateur reviews are very similar to the ones for *About a Boy*. Especially the percentages of the types of remarks are nearly identical. Even though the total number of reviews is higher in this case, there are fewer remarks about readability. As I said above, this might be influenced by the more serious and darker subject matter (and ending) of the book, but the differences are not striking enough to be able to conclude this. It has probably influenced the rating of the novel, which is an average of 3 stars, but it is not possible to say that the subject matter influenced the remarks about readability in the case of this book.

Table 4.2

Amateur HTBG	Quantity	Percentage
Total reviews	80	100%
Reviews with 1+ hits	45	56%
Total hits	43	100%
Positive	28	65%
Negative	1	2%
Neutral/unclear	14	33%

3.2.5 Reviews of *A Long Way Down*

Similarly to *How to Be Good*, *A Long Way Down* is a book that discusses serious topics, even though it is still often described as ‘funny’. Only three out of fourteen professional reviews comment on the book’s readability, and mostly in a neutral/unclear way. A quote from the *Mirror* suggests why Hornby is not described as readable any more: “he’s become too serious and too literary, and this isn’t exactly a joy to read” (Sutton). These types of remarks do not show in the qualitative analysis, for they do the opposite of what I am looking for: they say that a book is *not* readable. This, however, may certainly contribute to the decline in remarks about how readable a book is.

Table 5.1

Professional ALWD	Quantity	Percentage
Total reviews	14	100%
Reviews with 1+ hits	3	21%
Total hits	5	100%
Positive	1	20%
Negative	0	0%
Neutral/unclear	4	80%

The amateur reviews, as shown in table 5.2, also feature a higher percentage of neutral/unclear remarks about the readability of *A Long Way Down*. However, there is still a

higher number of positive hits than neutral/unclear hits, like with all the other amateur reviews.

The percentage of reviews with remarks about readability is lower than for the other books, but the total hits is still almost sixty.

Table 5.2

Amateur ALWD	Quantity	Percentage
Total reviews	64	100%
Reviews with 1+ hits	26	41%
Total hits	57	100%
Positive	31	54%
Negative	2	4%
Neutral/unclear	24	42%

3.2.6 Reviews of *Juliet, Naked*

Juliet, Naked was reviewed nine times, with an average article length of 583 words, all in 2009.

Hornby's fifth novel was seen as a return to the subject matter of *High Fidelity*, even though the characters and the problems addressed in the novel are more serious and more adult.

Nevertheless, the professional reviews only commented on readability in a positive way this time, while *About a Boy* was criticised for it.

Table 6.1

Professional JN	Quantity	Percentage
Total reviews	9	100%
Reviews with 1+ hits	4	44%
Total hits	8	100%
Positive	8	100%
Negative	0	0%
Neutral/unclear	0	0%

The amateur reviews of the book show similar numbers as of the other books, and the slightly smaller quantity of reviews can be explained by the release date of *Juliet, Naked*, because reviewers had fewer years to read and review this book than for the other ones. The *Amazon* reviews are usually fairly evenly spread over the years, with a peak at the release of a book, and the reviews of *Juliet, Naked* are only from 2009-2014, instead of from a period of ten years or longer, like the previous books. Nevertheless, there is a fair number of hits, including one review from 2010 with as much as six positive hits.

Table 6.2

Amateur JN	Quantity	Percentage
Total reviews	40	100%
Reviews with 1+ hits	22	55%
Total hits	39	100%
Positive	19	49%
Negative	2	5%
Neutral/unclear	18	46%

3.2.7 Reviews of *Funny Girl*

Hornby's most recent book, *Funny Girl*, was reviewed twelve times, all in 2014, and the reviews' average length is 586 words. Its readability is described negatively once, and the other hits are mostly positive and some neutral/unclear, like with most of the other books. A more interesting discovery is that readability is discussed in 75% of these reviews, which is higher than in any other set of reviews. With twenty hits, this means an average of 1.7 hits per article, which is also higher than for the other reviews. This change may be caused by several things: it could be a coincidence, caused by the different reviewers; it could be caused by the book itself, which has a fairly light topic (a sixties' comedy show) and illustrated with photographs and fake newspaper articles; or, and this is speculation, reviewers may have become more open to

discussing readability as a part of their evaluation of a novel. Factors that may have contributed to that are the jury of the Booker Prize 2011, who named readability as one of the qualities they were looking for, or Nick Hornby himself, who proclaimed at the Cheltenham Literature Festival in 2014 that he wants to “get everybody - adult, kids, everybody - to read something that they’re loving. And if they’re not loving it, stop reading it” (qtd. in Furness). Hornby says that people should read for their enjoyment, and perhaps reviewers had that advice in their minds when they reviewed Hornby’s latest book.

Table 7.1

Professional FG	Quantity	Percentage
Total reviews	12	100%
Reviews with 1+ hits	9	75%
Total hits	20	100%
Positive	12	60%
Negative	1	5%
Neutral/unclear	7	35%

Funny Girl is the only book with fewer amateur than professional reviews, due to its recent release date. As already explained in the previous section, if a book has not been released very long ago, this will generate fewer *Amazon* reviews. Reviews of 1 January 2015 and after are not included, to avoid any confusion about the time period the reviews are from. Therefore, only eleven *Amazon* reviews of *Funny Girl* are analysed here. They awarded *Funny Girl* an average of 3.3 stars, and featured no negative remarks about the readability of the book.

Table 7.2

Amateur FG	Quantity	Percentage
Total reviews	11	100%
Reviews with 1+ hits	6	55%
Total hits	9	100%
Positive	8	89%
Negative	0	0%
Neutral/unclear	1	11%

3.2.8 Total reviews

To compare the separate outcomes of the books to the total corpus, I also calculated these, which can be viewed in appendix B and in figures 1, 2, and 3. All reviews have an average of 0.89 hits per review. The professional reviews have a 0.93 average, the amateur 0.89. This is unexpected, for I predicted more hits in the amateur reviews. This is probably due to the fact that professional reviews are usually longer than amateur reviews, which allows them to comment more elaborately on every aspect of a book, including readability. Therefore, when professional reviews discuss readability, they often feature several hits, instead of mentioning it once without further elaboration, as is more often the case in amateur reviews. 55% of the amateur reviews have one or more hits, and while the professional reviews may have more hits per review, they have slightly fewer reviews that mention readability (51%). Nevertheless, all these averages and percentages are close to each other and I cannot attribute significance to small deviations, because the corpus and this type of research are not sufficiently precise for this.

The division between positive, negative, and neutral/unclear hits is fairly evenly spread between the professional and amateur reviews. As I predicted, readability is more often judged positively than negatively or ambiguously. The only significant difference between the analyses of the professional and amateur reviews is that 11% of all hits in the professional reviews are

negative, while only 3% in the amateur reviews is negative. This shows that professional reviews may sooner judge readability in a negative way, as I predicted. This will likely also be influenced by the fact that reviewers are assigned books, and cannot always freely choose books they expect to enjoy. The percentages also confirm the idea that readability is not necessarily judged as a positive aspect of a book. The full results of the analysis can be found in appendix B. Below, a graphic portrayal of the classification of hits can found. It demonstrates that professional reviews have indeed a larger percentage of negative remarks about readability, but that in total numbers these differences are not substantial.

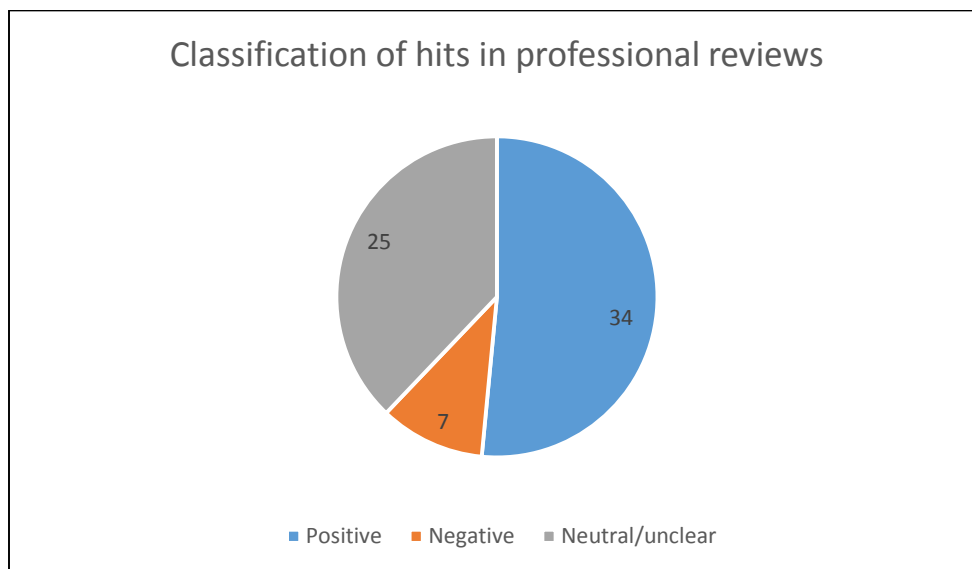


Fig. 1

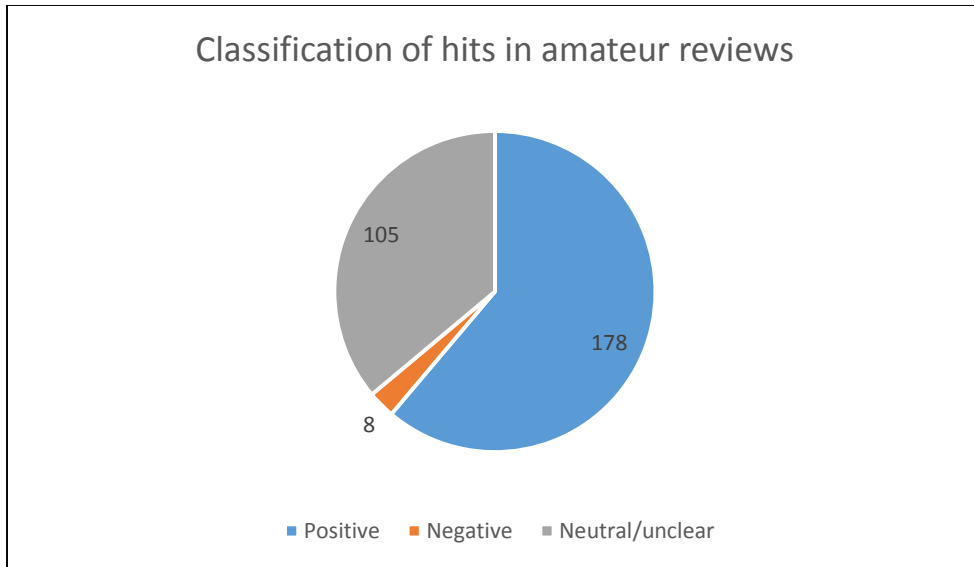


Fig. 2

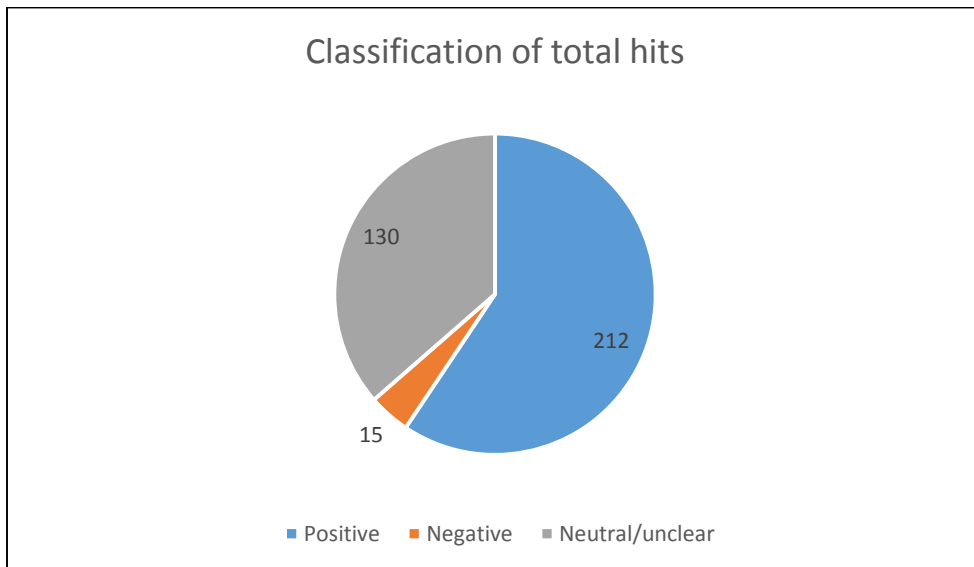


Fig. 3

3.3 Qualitative analysis

The analysis in section 3.2 has outlined several expected and unexpected results that were discovered in the research corpus, but this has not been put into full context yet. A surprising

outcome was that both professional and amateur reviews describe readability fairly often: readability is mentioned in 51% of the professional reviews and in 55% of the amateur reviews. This section will contextualise this, for even though the reviews often use it positively, amateur reviewers often phrase this differently than professional critics, which will be demonstrated by providing examples. Remarks that (directly or indirectly) comment on the place of Hornby and his books in the literary field will be discussed in this section too, to examine whether Hornby's books and readability are related to the middlebrow by reviewers.

What happens fairly often in reviews, is that a remark about readability is worded positively, but accompanied by a negative remark about the book. An example of this can be found in an amateur review of *About a Boy*: "I'll say the book is okay, but some pages are boring to read because some situations are drawn to [sic] long. But otherwise it is easy to understand and not too difficult to read" (4 March 2004). The fact that the book is easy seems to be a redeeming factor, but also a 'last resort' to add a positive spin to the review. I categorised this type of hit as neutral/unclear, because even though it seems positive, the reviewer's opinion on the readability of the book is not sufficiently positive to name it as a positive remark. Another example, from an amateur review of *A Long Way Down*, even has a clearly visible negative undertone: "[o]verall, I would still recommend this novel for anyone looking for a fun read. It's a Big Mac of a book - ultimately unsatisfying, and not quite as worthy as it should be, but very enjoyable while it lasts" (8 May 2005). Even though the positive phrases "enjoyable" and "a fun read" are used, they are linked to the idea of an "unsatisfying" fast-food novel, which is never considered positive in a literary review. Both the amateur and professional reviews use this type of two-sided remarks about readability. A professional review of *How to Be Good* comments that the novel "besieged by flaws of its creator's making (rank unbelievability and exhausting

equivocation, to name a couple) is nonetheless enormously readable and ultimately powerful” (Clark). Although sounding slightly more positive than the previous review, readability is once again used to give a positive spin to a negative remark. This portrays the ambiguousness of readability as a criterion, for the essential idea is positive, but its connotation and context are often negative. The habit of using readability as a last resort to make a positive remark does definitely not contribute to the idea that it may be a worthy criterion to judge a book by. Yet, 54% of all reviewers evaluate the readability of books.

Another example from the reviews that demonstrates the ambiguousness of readability, is how amateur reviews sometimes suggest that Hornby’s books are a good ‘holiday read’. An example of this can be found in one of the amateur reviews of *About a Boy*: “[t]he book has a definite “feel-good” factor to it and without wishing to detract from Hornby’s talent, would make an excellent holiday read” (16 April 1999). The reviewer evidently signals that it may come across as degrading to propose this book as a holiday read, even though this is used as a recommendation to potential readers of the book. A review of *Juliet, Naked* comments even more explicitly on this: “[b]oth myself and my wife read it during our holiday, it’s a damn fine book for the beach or by the pool and I mean that as a recommendation not an insult” (23 Aug. 2010). Apparently, it is possible to insult a book by saying it is suitable to read by the pool. Likely, this idea exists because holiday reading is mostly seen as recreation, and the beach is perceived as an unsuitable place for more laborious reads (i.e. more intellectual or highbrow books), for which a reader would need to concentrate. All this is dependent on the idea that ‘good’ literature demands more effort on the part of the reader, and in return, effortless reading will usually not be good literature. Hornby himself has criticised this notion, for instance by naming Austen and Dickens as middlebrow authors, or, authors who are generally enjoyable to

read. These authors are definitely perceived as literary, but are, according to Hornby, also “digestible”. The notion that holiday reads are often not ‘good’ literature is thus not maintained by everyone, but can still be perceived in how people review books and how they think about readability.

It must be noted that not all remarks about readability are this ambiguous: in fact, 61% of all remarks use readability as a positive aspect of a book, without suggesting that readability is of minor importance. For example, an amateur review of *High Fidelity* comments: “[h]is dialogue is an object lesson in authenticity for any aspiring writer; effortlessly fluent and compulsively readable” (14 March 2012). Although the book is described as readable, the review does not criticise or questions this aspect of the book, but rather emphasises its positive value. An example from a professional review in the *Spectator* shows that amateurs are not the only people who can fully appreciate readability: “*Funny Girl* manages to make his case for him, eloquently and entertainingly. Like all Hornby's best work, it is both hugely enjoyable and deceptively artful” (Miller). The fact that Hornby’s book is entertaining is not downplayed here, but is an argument in its own right that positively contributes to this review.

This same review by Miller also comments on the position of Hornby and his books in the cultural-literary field, as do some of the other reviews. A few examples of these will be discussed here so as to be able to compare Hornby’s posture from his interviews to how he and his works are described in reviews. Miller says Hornby is not “ashamed to be populist” and that “*Funny Girl* may also be read as Hornby's latest defence of popular entertainment against high-culture elitism.” These statements are from 2014, when Hornby’s posture as a supporter of reading for enjoyment had already been established. Miller even connects the subject matter of Hornby’s latest novel to this attitude towards culture. Other, older reviews also describe Hornby

in the same fashion as many of the interviews described in chapter 2 do, and do not evoke a different image of his posture.

Concerning the middlebrow, only a few reviews seem to classify Hornby's work as a certain type of brow: mostly, reviews categorise Hornby's books in genres, such as lad-lit, or do not comment at all on their place in the literary field. The few exceptions, however, are worth discussing here. An amateur review from 1999 described *Fever Pitch* as ““high art masquerading as low art” [...]; it ranks alongside *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and any Terry Pratchett novel as a seemingly whimsical or juvenile book that nonetheless explores serious issues about life in the 90s” (19 Feb. 1999). Hornby's book is compared here to science-fiction and fantasy novels, but in a positive way that signals that novels that seem “whimsical or juvenile” can also have quality. The distinction between high and low art, according to this reviewer, is whether a book “explores serious issues about life,” in this case of life in the 1990s. However, according to the rules of the literary field, it would not be likely for high art to try and disguise itself as low art – perhaps only in order to make money. This is a possibility, but it is also possible to define this type of art as middlebrow, for this can combine the aspects of both accessibility and a certain level of quality, while not being perceived ‘literary’ enough to be described as highbrow. The fact that Hornby is not perceived as highbrow returns in a few other reviews, for instance, an amateur review of *High Fidelity* that claims that the book “isn't going to win a sweeping amount of awards for being high literature” (28 Dec. 2007). Nevertheless, this review is very positive about the novel and does not seem to see a problem with the idea that it will not win awards. Another *High Fidelity* review echoes this sentiment by saying there is “no pompous literature here, just British vernacular,” but also says that this “might make it a harder read for some” (11 May 2010), signalling that not all of Hornby's readers are familiar with British vernacular. This

demonstrates that non-highbrow literature and readability are not perceived to necessarily go together. Literature that is not “pompous” is not automatically readable, according to this reviewer.

If middle- or lowbrow literature is not automatically readable, the question remains whether readable literature is automatically non-highbrow. There are certainly books that can be perceived as readable and are also considered highbrow, but it still seems as if readable literature needs to be defended in the eyes of a reviewer: the example of ‘holiday literature’ supports this idea. It confirms the negative reputation of readability, which was also suggested by the discussion about the Booker Prize in 2011.

Although the focus of this chapter has been on reviews that describe Hornby’s books as readable, it must also be noted that not all reviewers agree with this. Several reviews even mention that Hornby’s books are challenging instead of easy: for example, an amateur reviewer writes that “‘How to be good’ is a challenging title and a challenging book. [...] because it doesn’t offer the easy comfortable content of his previous work” (2 Oct. 2001). Another *How to Be Good* review describes the novel as a “laborious read” (2 May 2002). A professional review of this book also criticises the notion that Hornby’s books are simply easy reading material: “Nick Hornby’s anti-style is not rocket science (like *White Teeth*), nor rocket fuel (like *Trainspotting*). But nor should it be dismissed as Islington-friendly, literary-lite rocket salad (like *Bridget Jones’s Diary*)” (McClean). Unfortunately, this thesis does not include a comparison with reviews of another author’s books, so I cannot demonstrate whether Hornby’s books are called readable more often than those of other writers. However, from studying the reviews, I am able to state that there are many more remarks about how readable Hornby’s books are than about how challenging they are. Nevertheless, there will always be readers that deviate from the

average, and especially in the case of Hornby's novels with more serious subject matter (*How to Be Good* and *A Long Way Down*, especially), reviewers will sometimes comment on how challenging they are, rather than light and readable.

To sum up this chapter, readers provide different attitudes towards Hornby's books and towards readability in reviews. Both professional and amateur reviews discuss it fairly often, and usually in a positive way, although it is also often ambiguously or apologetically mentioned. Despite this, reviewers have commented on the readability of Hornby's books for over 20 years, which suggests that it is certainly an aspect of a book that contributes to its final evaluation.

Conclusion

The goal of this thesis was to gain insight into the position of ‘readability’ in the literary field and its connectedness to middlebrow, and to consider these as aspects in an authorial posture and as evaluative concepts in reviews. I studied this by looking at interviews with the author Nick Hornby and by analysing a review corpus of the responses to Hornby’s books. Now, to conclude this thesis, I will briefly outline and summarise my findings, as well as evaluating the approach and method that were applied to the case study, and then move on to the conclusory notes and suggestions for further research.

In the introduction and the first chapter, I brought together the concepts of readability and middlebrow by studying their respective definitions, their cultural connotations, and their place in the literary field. I did not locate these concepts in the field yet, but research into the middlebrow convinced me of the fact that the middlebrow is not simply a place between legitimate and non-legitimate culture in the literary field. It rather assumes a special position because the concept of middlebrow does not adhere to the rules of the literary field (see Pollentier). I chose the case study to provide me with information about the place of readability in the literary field: Nick Hornby is a British author who is known for his disregard of highbrow conventions, and is a supporter of reading for enjoyment instead of having to struggle with difficult novels. I studied his posture to learn more about the position in the literary field that is associated with readability. The posture of this author, which may be considered middlebrow, and his reception in Britain were chosen to gain a greater understanding of readability and the middlebrow in the literary field.

After drawing up a theoretical framework, I studied the posture of Nick Hornby to provide a possible example of a middlebrow position in the field, and to examine the relationship of ‘middlebrow-ness’ to readability as well as the connotations of both these concepts. This resulted in the confirmation that Hornby can indeed be perceived as middlebrow, for his behaviour and his portrayal in the media feature exactly those ideas and values that are also essential to middlebrow culture. Hornby presents himself as an author who does not simply write ‘lad-lit’, even though he is often portrayed in the media as such, but neither does he behave like a highbrow author. Hornby positions himself ‘in the middle’, and when asked about the middlebrow he names authors who are acclaimed but are also “digestible”, in his view. Hornby has stated that he aims to write like that too, thus confirming both his tendency towards the middlebrow and his inclination towards readability. He has also promoted the same idea as the Booker Prize jury in 2011: that books should be read and not just admired. Both parties met resistance after stating this idea, possibly because it is not beneficial to the part of the literary field that relies on consecration instead of popularity. ‘Readability’ was therefore widely discredited as a criterion for literature in the British media, mostly by writers and journalists that can be expected to rely on consecration. This led to the expectation that professional media would disregard the readability of works of fiction in their evaluation of them or that critics would use it as a negative aspect, which was accordingly investigated in the reviews of Hornby’s books.

In the third chapter, I examined whether Hornby’s inclination towards readability was recognised by studying reviews of his books. I collected professional reviews of Hornby’s adult books in the British media through *LexisNexis*, and I chose to study *Amazon.co.uk* reviews to provide the perspective of ‘the average reader’ as well. A corpus of 399 reviews in total was

analysed for the evaluation of books in terms of readability. This led to the discovery that both professional and amateur reviews discussed readability in their evaluation of Hornby's books: 51% of the professional reviews discussed this aspect, and 55% of the amateur reviews. These percentages are much closer together than I expected them to be, which indicates that professional reviews do not avoid discussing this aspect of a book. Despite the correspondence in percentage of remarks about readability, there is a slight difference in the evaluation of this concept. Negative remarks about readability in the amateur reviews add up to only 3% of the total remarks in these reviews, and 11% in the professional reviews. This indicates that readability is indeed used as an ambiguous aspect of a book that is not necessarily (although very often) used as a positive criterion.

In the introduction to this thesis, I introduced 'readability' as a problematic concept that carries little to no symbolic capital and has ambiguous connotations. By considering this concept in the context of middlebrow culture and an author's posture and reception, I was able to gain a more detailed understanding of the position of readability in the literary field. Actors in the field, such as the author, journalists, and reviewers, demonstrated in their discussion of the middlebrow and readability that these concepts are often associated with entertaining and accessible texts and authors, but that the position of these in the field is not straightforward. A middlebrow position, exemplified by the posture of Nick Hornby, cannot directly be explained in Bourdieusian terms, for it signals that not all actors aspire to the legitimacy of the highbrow. Instead, factors such as entertainment, enjoyment, reaching a wide audience, and the encouragement to read many books determine Hornby's poetics, which directly relate to the characteristics of readability and of middlebrow literature. As such, I was able to draw several conclusions: if an author positions himself as middlebrow, this may lead to confusion about his reputation and his position in the

literary field; the concept of readability is, although mostly implicitly, connected to aspects of books that can also be related to middlebrow literature; and even though the symbolic capital and the connotations of these terms can be questionable, they continue to be used in the literary field not just in a negative, but also in a positive and ambiguous sense.

Because the object of research of this thesis was largely unexplored, I had to choose and devise a method to examine readability as a concept in the literary field. However, an untested method is a risk and only shows its inadequacies during or in retrospect of the study. One of the issues I encountered was that the *LexisNexis* search system is not always adequate and is no guarantee for a complete corpus. After doing the quantitative analysis, I discovered that not all leading national newspapers were represented in the reviews of Hornby's later releases, but upon further inspection these newspapers had published reviews after all, only they had not been included in *LexisNexis*, and are therefore not part of the corpus. Also, to reduce the bias in the results, it would have been commendable to have had at least a second opinion on the readability 'hits', because it depends on interpretation whether a remark in a review is marked as such, and whether it is considered positive, negative or neutral/ambiguous. This method still depends on interpretation but a second reader will reduce the risk of far-fetched results. However, even introducing a second reader would not allow for the quantitative results in this type of analysis to be subjected to statistics formulas, because the study is focused on one specific and subjective concept in the reviews and will therefore always be partly biased. Nevertheless, the assembled corpus and this method may induce new research into the same or similar topics, and the corpus will be made digitally accessible to all who may be interested.

The problematic position of the middlebrow and readability in the literary field has undoubtedly contributed to the fact that it has not been studied as elaborately as the highbrow,

but both these concepts offer many opportunities for further research. Even though readability may not serve as a criterion to select literature, it remains an aspect of the reading experience and is generally not avoided in reviews, which signals that it is a significant aspect of a text after all. This is why further research into this aspect of books and of reading may contribute to the understanding of why certain books are preferred over others and what shapes the opinion of readers and reviewers. Both the intrinsic readability of literary texts (as far as that can be determined) may be studied to achieve this, or, similarly to in this thesis, more responses on the part of readers may be explored to learn about the use of readability as an evaluative criterion. A promising method to further define the concept of readability is to compare its usage in reviews from different time periods, or in reviews of different books from different writers, or even to compare reviews from different countries. Unfortunately, the scope of this thesis prevented a study such as proposed here, but I would have been greatly interested in comparing Hornby's British and American reception, which may have led to results about readability that are significant for the study of the cultural and literary climate in these respective regions. Another suggested comparison is to choose an author who is generally considered highbrow and not very readable, and to conduct a parallel study to this thesis. For a comparison to Nick Hornby, it might be especially revealing to choose Will Self: Self has openly criticised Hornby and his books in the media, and reportedly deliberately writes novels that are hard to identify with, such as *Umbrella* (2012) in which the stream-of-consciousness technique was used. A study of these two contemporary English authors may demonstrate significant differences in their postures and in reviewers' responses to concerning readability.

So what does readability mean, and what does it tell us about the literary field and the appreciation of literature? The discussion about the Booker Prize jury in 2011 which was outlined in the introduction provides a number of ideas about what readability is. The discussion does not elaborately go into the definition of readability, but rather discusses it in an indirect way, which implies certain aspects of this term and of literature in general. These implications prompted the research question of this thesis that was intended to clarify and position this controversial term. In the Booker Prize debate, Rimington revealed her intention to want to choose a novel people actually enjoy to read instead of only admire, which is, in itself, not a completely ridiculous idea. All the same, she received a lot of criticism: John Self, for instance, calls this “a shock dichotomy to those of us who like to read and admire good books.” Bennett also criticises Rimington and says that “readability vs literary merit is a mischievous dichotomy that condescends, funnily enough, to the very audience that Rimington aims to please.” Both Self and Bennett acknowledge the fact that readability and quality are no opposites. Nevertheless, they heavily objected to Rimington’s statement, which suggests that they also perceive a certain aversion to using ‘readability’ in the literary discourse. Alex Clark explains this as follows: “[t]he readability debate is in fact another retread of various arguments that beset what has become known as literary fiction – a woolly genre that encompasses books that don’t sell very well, books that aren’t “genre” fiction and anything with a taint of modernism or experiment.” He argues that the readability debate is not actually about readable books at all, but that it is a stick to beat the ‘literary fiction’ that has the reputation of being unreadable. This strengthens my suspicions that readability is not looked down upon as an aspect of a text, but rather as a notion in the literary field that is associated with non-legitimate culture. The review analysis in this thesis also confirms this notion, because readability is discussed in both professional and amateur

reviews, which signals that readers take this aspect of a text into account when judging it, but do not necessarily judge the use of the concept itself. Readability is therefore an acceptable concept in the evaluation of a book, or even an oeuvre, but still has negative, non-legitimate connotations when used in literary discourse.

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