

Impact case study (REF3b)

Institution: University of Roehampton
Unit of Assessment: Panel D, UoA 29 English Language and Literature
Title of case study: The Literature and Culture of Food and the Domestic Middlebrow
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>This case study details Professor Nicola Humble’s pioneering research and its impact on popular engagement with cultural heritage. Humble’s research has increased awareness of the study of cook books as literary texts, of the middlebrow fiction of the first half of the twentieth century and the cultural politics that surrounded it. Through a sustained programme of public engagement including popular publishing, journalism, public speaking, radio and television broadcasting, her work has presented new forms of cultural heritage inspiring new forms of literary engagement amongst wide public audiences. The <i>significance</i> of this impact is demonstrated by the long legacy of her work and the increased public awareness of the approaches she pioneered; its <i>reach</i> by the frequent references to her work in a variety of forums on topics as diverse as baking, reading, crafts, eating, book collecting, feminism and parenting.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Underpinning this case study is Professor Humble’s research on both the literature of food history and the middlebrow, undertaken at the University of Roehampton between the mid-1990s and the present. This research has opened up important new fields of academic enquiry and established major new research paradigms. Humble’s research engages in conversation with many other disciplines, insisting on the need to understand food writing as <i>textual</i> rather than as simply an unmediated reflection of social and historical realities. One element of her work begins with the study of cook books as literary texts examining their engagement with audience, publication history and formal qualities. The research explores the relationship between food history and food culture, social and domestic history and texts, placing food writing of all sorts in active relation to other texts. Her major work in this area is <i>Culinary Pleasures: Cookbooks and the Transformation of British Food</i> (Faber, 2005), a cultural and literary history of cook books from 1840 to the present. She edited Isabella Beeton’s <i>Household Management</i> (for Oxford World’s Classics in 2000, the first scholarly edition of the text), focusing on the historical context of the text and on the ways in which it can be read as a work of literature.</p> <p>Expanding the field of literary enquiry to include cook books and domestic handbooks is a fundamental, highly original aspect of Humble’s research: she is the first to analyse most of the books she discusses. Specific insights and findings include the argument that cook books function more as documents of contemporary fears and desires than as guides for cooking; a demonstration of the gulf between the contents of recipes at any period and the foods that people actually cook; a challenge to the presiding assumptions about the poor quality of British food; demonstrations of the long internationalist tradition of British food culture; and an analysis of the complex discourses that make up the literature of food.</p> <p>A related facet of Humble’s research explores the intersection of domestic fiction and a broader non-fictional literature of domesticity. In <i>The Feminine Middlebrow Novel 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity and Bohemianism</i> (OUP, 2001) she reads cook books and other domestic texts alongside works of literature. The book closely examines the contemporary construction of the notion of the middlebrow and takes seriously the literature and cultural artefacts so designated. In chapters on the home and the eccentric family it deals with the construction of the domestic in middlebrow fiction and culture, reading household manuals, cook books and women’s magazines alongside literary texts. This book has been central to the reassessment of the popular literature of the interwar years and after. Humble is acknowledged as a major pioneer in the field of middlebrow studies. The book’s importance is in defining an area of legitimate literary enquiry in between the experimental and the mass popular literature of this period. It asserts the cultural importance of middlebrow fiction in Britain in the years following the first world war, offering a significant challenge to the conventional construction of the literary culture of the period and to the previous academic dismissal of most of its women writers. In this and later work she has argued that the</p>

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middlebrow is a more sophisticated and ideologically flexible form than has previously been acknowledged, and she has offered literary and historical frameworks through which its works can be reintegrated into the cultural map of the period.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

Nicola Humble, *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity, and Bohemianism* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 272pp.

Nicola Humble, 'Little Swans with Luxette and Loved Boy Pudding; Changing Fashions in Cookery Books', *Women: A Cultural Review*, 13.3 (2002), pp. 332-338. DOI: 10.1080/09574040220000266441.

Nicola Humble *Culinary Pleasures: Cook Books and the Transformation of British Food* (Faber & Faber, 2005), 342pp.

Nicola Humble, ed., *Household Management*, Isabella Beeton (Oxford World's Classics, 2000; 2008), abridged edition, 629pp.

Nicola Humble, 'Sitting Forward or Sitting Back: Highbrow v. Middlebrow Reading', *Modernist Cultures*, 6.1 (2011), pp. 41-59. DOI: 10.3366/mod.2011.0004.

Monographs available on request from the submitting institution.

Indicators of quality include rigorous peer-review of monographs and journal articles. For example, one reviewer of the book proposal on *The Literature of Food* for Berg commented: 'Nicola Humble is an enormously influential figure in the field of food studies. She is at the forefront of scholars who legitimized the reading of "women's texts" such as cookbooks and probably one of the most recognized names in the field.'

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The long legacy of Humble's research has enabled her to present cultural heritage in the form of under-read culinary and middlebrow texts to new and expanding audiences, which has inspired new forms of literary engagement. As a result, there is a significantly increased public awareness of the literature of food and of the middlebrow, both of which are frequently discussed and understood in terms derived from her research.

Humble's three major books each had an immediate popular impact on first publication, with mainstream engagement in the form of radio and television exposure (e.g. Radio 4's *Open Book*, BBC TV's *Food and Drink*), and popular newspaper and magazine reviews and articles. They have continued to have a sustained popular presence in the years since. The lasting *significance* of the research is indicated by the naming of *Culinary Pleasures* as one of the 'best food books of the decade' by *The Guardian's* Word of Mouth blog (23.12.09) in a selection judged by major food writers and critics, where it is described as "an immensely readable history of the cookery book" (Tim Hayward) and, a "scholarly volume [which] offers a feast of diverting information" (Will Skidelsky).

The high-profile public recognition of Humble's work has legitimated the discussion of both cook books and middlebrow fiction as literary texts, changing the ways in which these texts are discussed by journalists. For example, Rachel Cooke, writing in the *Observer Magazine* on 'Why there's more to cookbooks than recipes', (15.8.10) uses *Culinary Pleasures* to provide a historical account of cook book publishing. Similarly, An extract on the subject of Nouvelle Cuisine was included in *How the British Fell in Love with Food* (Simon & Schuster, 2010), a collection to mark the best writing of members of the Guild of Food Writers in the last 25 years, and was singled out for praise by a number of reviewers ('sharp and brilliant', Sam Leith, *Mail Online*, 12.3.10).

Complementing this high-profile impact is widespread reference to Humble's research in blogs and web forums. The term 'feminine middlebrow' for example, coined by Humble, is now widely used in popular as well as academic contexts. The *reach* of this impact is indicated by the range of food blogs (Poires au Chocolat, DollyBakes), reading blogs (20thcenturyvox, dovegreyreader), 'domestic' blogs (Yarnstorm) and web forums on topics as diverse as book collecting, parenting, feminism and food culture (including LibraryThing, Mumsnet, thefword and egullet) that have referenced and discussed different aspects of this research. A theme that repeatedly emerges in online discussions is the readers' surprise and pleasure at finding cook books and middlebrow novels discussed as literary and historical texts. Many bloggers comment specifically on a sense of recognition and relief in finding books they love named, organised and given a cultural identity in Humble's work.

Humble broadened the *reach* of her food research to a wider audience with *Cake: A Global History* (2010). A popular microhistory in Reaktion's new 'Edibles' series, this publication drew extensively on Humble's earlier research, and explores the genesis of cake, its history across the world and its cultural identity through literature, art, psychology and ritual. The series won a Special Commendation at the Andre Simon Awards 2010. This edition has sold 2,133 copies worldwide. Humble discussed the contemporary phenomenon of the cupcake on Radio 4's *Woman's Hour* (17.3.11), and wrote on 'Women and Cake' for the popular history journal *Herstoria* (3.11). Helen Rumbelow drew on this work for an article on the new baking culture and its gender politics in the *Times* (18.10.12).

The Japanese translation of this publication has sold over 2,200 copies. The impact of this work in Japan is further indicated by Humble being interviewed by the editor of national newspaper *Yomiuri Shimbun* (reputedly the paper with the world's largest circulation) for an article on British food culture (4.10) and being invited to write the preface for a series of nineteenth-century British cookery books for Eureka Press, Kyoto (1.11). There was also considerable interest in *Cake* in Australia and New Zealand, where Humble was interviewed on Radio New Zealand National (13.6.10) and on 'Book Show' on ABC (Australian national radio, 1.9.10). Both broadcasts drew comment in the blogosphere, and particular interest was shown in the history of the Lamington, an iconic Australian cake.

This presentation of cultural heritage to wide audiences through popular publishing has not only inspired new forms of literary engagement, and increased public awareness, but has also had a range of practical impacts. For example, Nigel Slater devoted a column to the book in the *Observer Magazine* (20.6.10): 'I had been awaiting Nicola Humble's *Cake – A Global History* with as much anticipation as a warm Dundee cake coming out of the oven on a winter's afternoon ... I have found it as difficult to put down as a slice of village-fête chocolate cake. This sliver of a tome is testament to research.' His inclusion of a recipe from the book and suggestion that readers try it broadened the impact and had practical applications.

Humble has actively sought new audiences and forms of engagement, which has continued since 2008, including speaking at libraries (such as Earlsfield on food in Dickens, 19.4.12) and literary and food festivals (for example, 'Toast', Shoreditch, 2.6.13). This type of work has been complemented by frequent invitations to write, speak and broadcast on these topics. The 2000 edition of Beeton's *Household Management* was reissued by Oxford University Press in 2008, and Humble wrote a blog for their website in response to Sophie Dahl's BBC2 programme on Beeton (3.2.11). The edition generated massive publicity on first publication (including a Martin Rowson cartoon in the *Independent on Sunday*), and continues to be referenced in popular books and articles as well as in academic texts (for example, Panayi, *Spicing up Britain*, Reaktion, 2008).

Humble has also contributed to the third series of BBC TV's *The Great British Bake-Off* as an expert consultant. Drawing on her research, in June 2013 she filmed a segment on the National Loaf in WWII for the fourth series (broadcast 8.10.13). In her involvement with the programme, Humble has consulted with producers and researchers about many aspects of the history of baking which have led to changes (most recently on baking techniques, the reasons for the loaf's dryness

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and public reactions to it).

Humble's impact is ongoing, and her research continues to reach broad public audiences.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

'Best food books of the decade' Word of Mouth blog, *The Guardian*, 23rd December 2009.

<http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/wordofmouth/2009/dec/23/best-food-books-decade>

Rachel Cooke, 'Why there's more to cookbooks that recipes' *Observer Magazine*, 15th August, 2010. <http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2010/aug/15/why-we-read-cookbooks>

Sam Leith, 'Cooking's come a long way, Fanny' *Mail Online*, 12th March 2010 on *How the British Fell in Love with Food* (Simon & Schuster, 2010).

<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/home/books/article-1254903/How-British-fell-love-food.html>

Examples of reference to the research in the blogosphere include:

<http://vintagereads.blogspot.co.uk/2009/01/feminine-middlebrow-novel.html>: 'I also wanted to defend reading purely for pleasure. I wasn't sure how to define the genre until I came across Nicola Humble's wonderful book [*FMN*]'

<http://heroineintraining.blogspot.co.uk/2008/11/feminine-middlebrow-city-of-bones.html>: 'She makes it clear that even though some of this [middlebrow] literature is indeed conservative, we find many radical elements in it, which is basically what I've been saying for years [...] it was some serious relief to find somebody I could fully agree with.'

<http://www.poiresauchocolat.net/2013/04/seed-cake.html>: providing historical context for a recipe.

The series won a Special Commendation at the Andre Simon Awards 2010:

<http://www.andresimon.co.uk/past.html>

Helen Rumbelow, 'The Great British Bake Off isn't great for women and it isn't British', *The Times*, 18th October, 2012. <http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/life/food/article3571309.ece>

Nigel Slater 'Summer cake recipes' *Observer Magazine*, 20th June 2010.

<http://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2010/jun/20/nigel-slater-recipes-summer-cakes>

Testimonial from Junior Production Manager, Love Productions (producers of BBC2's *The Great British Bake-Off*).