

“Vous en avez d’autres comme celui-ci?”
 (“Do you have any more like this one?”):
Teaching Françoise Sagan’s 1954 Novel *Bonjour tristesse*
to 21st-Century Students

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Since COVID, Americans’ interest in literature has dropped precipitously: “The percent of U.S. adults who read novels or short stories declined at a 17% rate, from 45.2 percent in 2012 to 37.6 percent in 2022” (“NEA Survey Finds Decline”). Instructors of literature courses are aware of this trend that certainly predates the pandemic. The first-week icebreaker prompt, “What is your favorite book?,” increasingly elicits the (disheartening) response, “I don’t like reading.” Inspiring students to read literature in a second language is challenging, but convincing them that reading, in general, is a worthwhile habit is both daunting and imperative. According to Anne Murphy Paul, “reading literature makes us smarter and nicer” and if we fail to instill in young people a desire and joy in “deep reading,” we will lose more than students in our classrooms—we will lose reflective and empathetic members of society: “[Deep reading]’s disappearance would imperil the intellectual and emotional development of generations growing up online, as well as the perpetuation of a critical part of our culture: the novels, poems and other kinds of literature that can be appreciated only by readers whose brains, quite literally, have been trained to apprehend them” (Paul). Combine the decline in interest in reading with the 29.3% drop from 2009 to 2021 in enrollment in American college-level foreign language courses (Michael Nietzel) and even the most enthusiastic post-secondary foreign language literature instructor can feel defeated before the semester even begins. Our job has been rendered all the more daunting because the students in our classrooms come from secondary programs that often no longer require students to read whole novels. In her recent *Atlantic* article, “The Elite College Students Who Can’t Read Books,” Rose Horowitch provides sobering statistics: “In a recent EdWeek Research Center survey of about 300 third-to-eighth grade educators, only 17 percent said they primarily teach whole texts. An additional 49 percent combine whole texts with anthologies and excerpts” (Horowitch 15). When students read only excerpts, they miss out on the intended experience—and benefit—of reading:

Books can cultivate a sophisticated form of empathy [...] Yet such benefits require staying with a character through their journey; they cannot be approximated by reading a five- or even 30-page excerpt.

According to the neuroscientist Maryanne Wolf, so-called deep reading—sustained immersion in a text—stimulates a number of valuable mental habits, including critical thinking and self-reflection, in ways that skimming or reading in short bursts does not. (Horowitch 16)

Reading texts in their entirety may be time-consuming but the task provides immense benefits to our students.

However, pressure, both internally (colleagues who do not teach literature assuming literature courses scare students away from declaring language majors) and externally (campus administrators questioning the value of advanced literature courses with enrollments of less than ten students), has led programs to offer literature courses that consist of excerpts packaged in convenient compilations or even to reduce literature offerings in favor of other (albeit valuable) subjects such as translation or “French for business” as a means to promise explicit career readiness outcomes. For those of us who continue to champion the benefits of foreign language literature courses—critical thinking skills, analytic writing, communication skills, cultural competency, to name only a few—the future of our work may depend on our ability to find and assign texts that appeal to our students as well as to craft activities that inspire them to keep reading. Only by demonstrating and convincing students of the pleasure of reading can we turn this tide.

In this effort, over the last 20 years I have varied the texts students read in our third-year “Introduction to French Literature.” That said, I have consistently ended the course with Françoise Sagan’s novel *Bonjour tristesse* ‘Hello Sadness’¹ about 17-year-old Cécile’s summer on the Côte d’Azur. Sagan’s novel proves to be an ideal final read in an introductory literature course for reasons that hit at both *forme et fond* (form and content). Starting with the content, after a long spring semester, students are drawn to what has the appearance—depending on the cover art of the edition purchased—of a “beach read.” Additionally, a book with a 17-year-old narrative agent proves to be relatable to the majority of my students between the ages of 18 and 22 (and even amongst my non-traditional students, the novel’s teenage narrative often elicits knowing nods). On the side of *forme*, the novel relates a complete, comprehensible narrative in a manageable length of 152 pages. Finally, with regards to style, *Bonjour tristesse* has proven accessible to students who fall in the Intermediate High or higher range of ACTFL’s Interpretative “Proficiency Benchmarks” (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages 4), perhaps thanks in part to the novel’s style. As Natalie Morello explains, Sagan “uses few adjectives and adverbs and [...] she is rather

¹ The title of the English translation of Sagan’s novel remains *Bonjour Tristesse*, suggesting that the title is either well-known to Anglophone audiences or the words themselves are recognizable.

‘economical’ in her expression [...] (Morello 36).” Her work is now recognized for its *économie des moyens* ‘economy of means,’ “that is both light and fluid, and evocative despite the apparent absence of ornamentation” (Morello 36). With respect to both content and style, the novel ticks multiple boxes with regards to both my students’ interests and proficiency levels.

The course is offered in the spring and by the time we read Sagan’s novel in April students have studied short stories by authors from around the Francophone world (Corrina Bille, Monique Proulx, Évelyne Trouillot, Guy de Maupassant), Claire de Duras’s *Ourika*, Molière’s classic 17th-century play *Tartuffe*, as well as Charles Baudelaire’s 19th-century French and Michèle Lalonde’s 20th-century French-Canadian poetry. Students read works in their entirety—no compilations, no excerpts. Over the course of the semester, students learn to recognize literary figures in texts and to write literary analyses. Despite the laundry list of accomplishments and all the forms of literature that they have read—from short stories to poetry to plays—they have yet to read a novel in French (neither in class nor typically outside of class).

In recent years, students have increasingly expressed how much they enjoy Sagan’s novel, going so far as to ask, “Vous en avez d’autres comme celui-ci?” ‘Do you have other ones like this?’ The question is, of course, music to my ears and I provide them with a “Summer Reading” list of titles with hopes that they do indeed continue to read in French over the summer. The recent trend that I have witnessed of unabashed admiration for the novel marks a relatively new development in my history of teaching *Bonjour tristesse*. From 2005 to 2012, some (frequently male) students in the course balked at being forced to read “chick lit.” For unknown reasons, such reductive assumptions have all but disappeared from my classroom (can we be so fortunate to assume that it is due to changing attitudes towards women in previously male-dominated professions such as that of author or due to realizing that reading a book with a woman as a main character can be just as enjoyable as reading about a male character?). In fact, in response to an informal survey of their reactions to the novel, recent male and female students shared that they “loved [*Bonjour tristesse*] because it was relatable and somewhat modern” and “easily digestible.” What is it about Sagan’s 1954 novel that renders it “relatable” to Generation Z? How can increased student appreciation for a post-war, non-canonical novel inform the future of teaching foreign language literature? In this article, I provide a summary of and justification for the inclusion of Sagan’s 1954 novel in 21st-century French literature courses as well as brief descriptions of sample lesson plans to facilitate discussion of key literary concepts, terms and pertinent themes. Additionally, and perhaps most useful to literature instructors at large, I provide additional recent student reaction to *Bonjour tristesse* and explore how evolving responses to the novel, and students’ relationship to reading in general, can inform the future of literary studies in the second language classroom.

Françoise Sagan (real name Françoise Quoirez, 1935-2004) is without doubt best known for her first novel, *Bonjour tristesse*, published in 1954 when she was 18—barely older than the novel’s narrative agent, Cécile. After the death of her mother and a stint at a boarding school, main character Cécile moves in with her handsome, well-to-do, pleasure-seeking father, Raymond, and his revolving door of young mistresses. The novel opens briefly on a present time that is marked enigmatically by the eponymous “sadness” of the title before a flashback to Cécile and Raymond’s summer happily spent in a villa near Juan-les-Pins on the Riviera. Raymond invites his current mistress, Elsa, on their trip and Cécile quickly hits it off with Cyril, an older college student she meets at the beach. Raymond and Cécile’s carefree existence is brought to an abrupt end, or at least question mark, when Anne, Cécile’s deceased mother’s friend, arrives at the villa. Raymond experiences a change of heart regarding his bachelor lifestyle, falls in love with Anne, and uncharacteristically proposes to her posthaste. Suffice it to say, the dynamics of the father-daughter relationship change dramatically. Whereas Raymond takes a *laissez faire* approach to parenting, Anne unflinchingly steps into the parental role. Notably, Anne insists that Cécile use her summer at the villa to study for the Baccalaureate exam that she has already failed once. Perhaps even more intrusively, she quickly attempts to put an end to Cécile’s relationship with Cyril, telling him “Je compte ne plus vous voir” (60) ‘I don’t wish to see you again,’ (Sagan; Ash 48) after which she warns Cécile that relationships like the one she has with Cyril often end up *en clinique* ‘in a hospital’—that is to say, with an abortion (60; 48).

Anne’s warning for Cécile touches a nerve that sparked many of the criticisms waged against the novel, perhaps precisely because what Anne threatens could happen to Cécile never occurs. Cécile has a sexual relationship out of wedlock (unheard of in 1950’s novels) without consequences (she does not get pregnant nor does she marry Cyril). In other words, she is never punished for her aberrant behavior nor brought into compliance with societal norms. According to Judith Miller, promiscuity is just one of the many ways Cécile fails to conform to convention: “At seventeen, she drinks too much, loves fast cars, and resembles more a skinny cat than a ripening woman” (Miller 23). Given her free, unconventional spirit, Cécile cannot imagine a future controlled by Anne and attempts to prevent the anticipated loss of freedom. With the help of Cyril and Elsa (Raymond’s now ex-girlfriend), Cécile plays the role of “director” in a charade meant to insight Raymond’s jealousy. In multiple passages, Cécile proposes that Elsa and Cyril play the role of lovers and orchestrates their actions so as to pretend that they are in a relationship. Her scheme works without fail and Raymond cannot resist pursuing Elsa. After having seen Elsa and Raymond together—pardon the spoiler—an emotional Anne takes off in her car and subsequently drives off a cliff, leaving Cécile and Raymond to wonder if her death was an accident or suicide.

Narrated by Cécile, her teenage point of view provides our knowledge of the novel's events: "All that can be known or understood about the characters and the situation is filtered through Cécile's mind" (Miller 25). Thanks to her narrative perspective, readers (and for the purposes of this current study, college students) fluctuate between feeling sorry for, frustrated by and angered by Cécile. The forced identification with a character whose manipulative behavior brings about the death of another character often leads students to form very strong feelings about the characters and the novel, which in turns leads to propitious and engaging moments of interpersonal communication in the classroom. In France, Sagan's novel is experiencing a resurgence in recognition with *Classiques Garnier's* 2024 publication of an edited volume of articles dedicated to the novel (Falantin and Hromadova, *Bonjour Tristesse 1954-2024*). As enthralling as all of this may sound, my inclusion of Sagan's breakout 1954 novel in a 21st-century college literature course may raise some eyebrows, namely because *Bonjour tristesse* has not been considered a canonical work to be found on a list of required 20th-century reading in American French graduate programs. In other words, as scholars, we are not trained to appreciate and analyze a work like Sagan's novel, thus why would we in turn spend time on such a text with our students?

The absence of Sagan's name on lists of American academic "must reads" may be due in great part to the publicity surrounding the novel and its author: "Because of its popularity and the author's celebrity status and hedonistic image, [the novel] has never been given much serious analysis by literary critics" (Pamela S. Saur 198). Conversely, the novel was a commercial hit—within the first two years, over 350,000 copies of the novel were sold in France alone (Richard Williams). The success, nevertheless, was often discounted for having been fueled by controversy. In 1954 the novel was awarded the Prix des Critiques—the same prize bestowed upon Camus in 1947 for *La Peste* [*The Plague*])—by well-known critics Jean Paulhan, Georges Bataille, Roger Caillois, Gabriel Marcel et Maurice Nadeau. However, even the members of the prize committee took issue with the content of the novel. Gabriel Marcel criticizes the novel's "image déshonorante que donne ce roman de la famille française" (Annelise Signoret and Odile Dereuddre) 'dishonorable image of the French family.' The Catholic Nobel laureate, François Mauriac, recognizes the literary merits of the novel that "éclate dès la première page" (Signoret and Dereuddre) 'explode from the first page' but also worries that it does not represent the French "vie spirituelle" (Signoret and Dereuddre) 'spiritual life.'

Controversy did not deter Sagan from continuing to write. Before her passing in 2004 at the age of 69, her literary career was long and varied, replete with "20 novels, three volumes of short stories, nine plays, two biographies and several collections of non-fiction pieces on places, things and people she loved" (Williams). Far from a "one-hit wonder," "her novels and plays have rarely sold

fewer and usually more than 150,000 copies, in a country where books that sell 50,000 copies are considered tremendous bestsellers” (Miller 5). Diana Holmes underlines Sagan’s conflicted status as bestselling author to the masses who was simultaneously compared to canonical authors: “*Bonjour Tristesse*, its massive sales figures sustained over the following year (by September 1955, Julliard claimed sales of 350,000), also placed her firmly on the middle ground of novels that are acclaimed for the quality of their writing (Sagan was compared to both Proust and Colette) and simultaneously read by a huge public for their compelling plots and characters, and accessible topicality” (130). According to Williams, “*Françoise Sagan* became a scandalous success, the echoes of which would prove impossible to silence” (Williams). According to Aurélie Adler, Sagan’s personal life—from her frequent trips to Saint Tropez and being friends with French president François Mitterand, to her drug, alcohol and financial problems—overshadowed her work and diluted her recognition as an author: “*La vie de l’écrivaine s’est progressivement substituée à la lecture de ses œuvres, disqualifiées hâtivement par des critiques jugeant que Sagan se contentait de répéter les mêmes histoires sentimentales jusqu’à l’étiollement*” (5) ‘The life of the writer gradually replaced the reading of her works, which were hastily dismissed by critics who judged that Sagan was content to repeat the same sentimental stories until they became depleted.’ Consequently, Sagan’s work has long been undervalued: “[M]ost critics neglect the psychological depth present in Sagan’s writing and choose instead to treat her work as if it holds little consequence to literature, a prolific contribution to the field that remains relegated to the status of leisure reading” (Robin McArthur Long 75).

Thus stigmatized, it may be hard for instructors to justify the inclusion of a novel that has (misguidedly) been reduced to “leisure reading.” Conversely, the literary canon we were trained to revere does not need to be taught solely because it is “the canon.” As Jeffrey Boakye explains, the concept of a “canon” dates back to 1860 when poet Matthew Arnold described it as “the best that has been thought and said” (Boakye). But because of when the canon was established (one could assume this applies to most languages), it was “conceived from one particular point of view, you automatically commit to whatever ideologies come in tow [...] white supremacy, class and gender bias, and many other blind spots created by societal norms” (Boakye). Cautiously, Boakye explains that we should not throw the baby out with the bathwater: “I’m for curating something new, pruning, rummaging and bringing things together in unexpected ways. And at a time when teaching is facing a crisis of recruitment and retention, it’s vital that educators are encouraged to develop autonomy in their craft” (Boakye). Including Sagan on a reading list responds to this call to “curate” and “prune” as well as to “develop autonomy.” Despite the absence of Sagan’s name on most American universities’ lists of canonical 20th-century French literature, Sagan’s accessible writing style

combined with *Bonjour Tristesse*'s so-called taboo topics and psychological depth conversely make the novel an ideal "gateway" read for reluctant college readers. By letting go of preconceived notions of what constitutes a "worthy" read, we can create new paths for students to be capable of and able to enjoy deep reading and, by extension, literary analysis.

As mentioned earlier, *Bonjour tristesse* is the last work that students read in our "Introduction to French Literature" course. Prior to reading the novel and throughout the semester, students have contributed weekly to a Padlet entitled "Figures de style" where they demonstrate their understanding of various rhetorical figures by providing examples in French that they have either found in literature, on the Internet, or that they have written themselves. At the start of each class period, we review their examples for accuracy and see which, if any, are in our reading for that day. By the time we read *Bonjour tristesse*, they have learned /reviewed over thirty terms, from alliteration to litotes. Over the course of our reading of Sagan's novel, in particular, they are able to recognize similes and metaphors, to name only a few. Frequently, the terms assigned on the Padlet for a given class period can be found in the text read for class that day. Given that the majority of the Sagan's novel's narration consists of a lengthy flashback, I intentionally save *analepse* 'flashback' and *prolepse* 'flashforward' for the end of the semester to inspire reflection on the role time plays in the narrative's structure.

Regarding the delivery of course materials, students purchase texts that we read in their entirety from the bookstore or online and I provide shorter works (short stories, poems, related articles and secondary sources) via Google Sites and Google Classroom. They have purchased Sagan's novel which is divided into two parts ("Part One" consists of 6 chapters, "Part Two" is considerably longer with 12 chapters). With my students' proficiency level(s) in mind, I divide our reading of the book into manageable portions of about 30-40 pages. For instance, before our first discussion of *Bonjour tristesse* students have read pages 11-44; 5-33 (Part 1, Chapters 1-IV) and have responded to discussion questions on a communal Google doc. For some of the texts we read during the semester, students respond to comprehension questions individually that they turn in before class time via Google Classroom. However, for Sagan's novel, I opt for collaborative documents for two primary reasons. First, given that they are asked to read several chapters for a single class period, the communal document provides students with a quick comprehension check—"are other students understanding the novel the same way I did? Is there something I missed?" Second, at the end of the semester, students welcome the chance to contribute to a document instead of being held accountable for a set of questions that they must answer individually. They receive credit for responding to a minimum number of questions.

After the aforementioned review of the final rhetorical figures of the semester, we transition to a more general discussion of the narration based on

student responses to the discussion questions in the Google document: Who is narrating? (Cécile, first-person narrative agent) What sort of story? (*bildungsroman*) How would you describe the style—have you found any rhetorical figures (answers vary)? What is the time frame for the narration (flashback)? During the remaining time, students work in groups to confirm comprehension through activities that ask them to describe the characters and their relationship to each other, all while citing the text in support of their answers.

In preparation for our second discussion period, I ask students to reflect on the ever-changing power dynamics that characterize the next passage that they read—the final two chapters of Part One and the first two of Part Two (pages 45-86; 57-71). In this section of the novel, Anne begins to assume an increasingly authoritative role. An effective way to chart these changes visually is to ask students to plot out major events or conversations in this portion of the novel as a series of relationship triangles. However, before we launch into a discussion of their triangles, we discuss a few other relevant terms / topics: the use of the expression *femme fatale*, the significance of cars in the novel, and the use of the word “*rôle*” ‘role’ in the novel. The term “*femme fatale*” appears twice on the first page of chapter five and thus I ask students which characters they perceive as a *femme fatale* (the ones associated with the term in the novel or others?). Up until recently, students shared their responses to this activity via a Jamboard, replete with supporting quotations from the text. However, as is the case with ever-changing educational technologies, Google’s Jamboard has been phased out and, in the future, I will use a FigJam board for this activity.² Subsequently, we discuss the importance of Cécile’s use of the word “*rôle*.” For instance, when she says she needs to “revenir à un rôle de [son] âge” (59) ‘play a role more suitable to [her] age’ (46), what does she mean by that? What role, other than teenager, has she been playing? The question of “playing a role” will return in future discussions involving a theatrical lexicon that pervades the text. Additionally, I draw students’ attention to the importance of cars in the novel in order to set them up for discussions in subsequent class periods. Conveniently, discussing which character at this point in the novel is in the “driver’s seat” (48-49; 36-37) provides a segue to our following discussion of power dynamics. Essentially, the discussion of these three terms serves to help students to develop attentive reading skills, providing them with suggestions for what they can underline or look for in future passages.

After sharing their ideas on the aforementioned topics, students change groups and discuss with new group members the series of triangles that they have each prepared. They compare and contrast their illustrations and choose the most important triangles to share on the whiteboard (virtual or real). Students are then asked to reflect on why studying the triangles could be helpful. What do the

² If the link does not function properly, I’ve provided a [screenshot](#) of the activity.

triangles and their changing formation tell us about power relations in the novel? What power struggles do you expect to see in the rest of the novel? In a novel about a young person and her family, what do we predict or assume will happen based on our knowledge of similar stories?

On the third discussion day, we return to our initial exploration of the word “*rôle*” and add to it by underlining and discussing words that belong to the lexical field of theatre. A discussion of theater allows students to compare and contrast characters from different works we have read; in particular, I ask students if Cécile is similar to Tartuffe (the eponymous character of the Molière play they read earlier in the semester). Akin to Tartuffe, is she guilty of manipulating people for her own benefit and in ways that may hurt others? They collect quotations from the novel in support of both sides: 1. Yes, she is like Tartuffe or 2. No, she is not like Tartuffe. The activity concludes with a debate where students either accuse her of wrongdoing or defend her actions. Sometimes on their own and other times with guidance, the debate leads students to a discussion of the role that narration plays in our assessment of the characters: while Molière’s play, through humor and logic, encourages spectators to “side” with the characters who question Tartuffe’s sincerity, the first-person narration of Sagan’s novel lends itself to identification with (and thus perhaps sympathy for) the “offending” character.

Our fourth and final discussion of the end of the novel allows us to return to and conclude multiple conversations that have been started in previous class periods. In preparation, students once again respond to comprehension questions on a shared [Google document](#) as a means to prepare for class discussion as well as for a practice “close reading” or *explication de texte* to be performed in class. The following questions come up in our final discussion as a means to wrap up several discussions as well as to check for understanding: Who is “really” the femme fatale? Why? Having read the end, is Cécile as horrible as Tartuffe? Why or why not? What happens at the end? Who is to blame for the tragic events? The questions serve not only to assess their comprehension but also to provide students ways in which to synthesize the material that they have read and potentially imagine topics for a written analysis. In this vein, in class with partners, students write a draft of an outline for an *explication de texte* or a close reading of a passage, describing a car ride that Anne, Raymond and Cécile take to a cocktail party (117-18; 98-99). In contrast to previous passages featuring car rides, Anne drives the three of them in her “*lourde américaine décapotable*” (118) ‘huge American convertible’ (99). I have intentionally chosen a short passage for this exercise in order to encourage students to analyze as many aspects as possible—from vocabulary and rhetorical figures (symbolism, comparisons, etc.) to foreshadowing. Students also must situate the passage in the novel—what happens before it, after it? Why is the scene important? How is this passage different from other passages featuring cars and the relationship between the three main characters? Can we trace an evolution in the

characters' relationship through these scenes? Bringing in passages from Kristin Ross's *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Reordering of French Culture*, especially those devoted to the significance of cars in post-World War II France literature, film and culture, can help students imagine how they might incorporate quotations from Ross's work into an analysis of the passage, thus preparing them for citing secondary sources in advanced literature courses.

After students present their outlines for their *explication de texte* to the class, we return to the title of the novel and its meaning. What has changed in the lives of the main characters and how would you describe the eponymous "sadness"? We also return to the relationship triangles discussed in previous class periods and students reflect on the remaining characters. Without Anne, the "family triangle" no longer exists. Cécile and Raymond have returned to their original non-conventional father-daughter dyad that Cécile now describes as "un veuf et une orpheline" (153) 'widower and an orphan' (129) Students consider how both the content and the narrative structure of the novel are unconventional. We list the topics and themes of the novel that would have been considered taboo in 1954 (and that still are in some cases)—unwed teen sex, drinking, gambling. Then, we reflect on the narrative structure. Unlike traditional novels, the series of triangles we traced earlier does not lead to a marriage for any of the characters—neither Raymond nor Cécile. The latter's continued single status provides perhaps the strongest rebuke of traditional values: "Sagan's novel refutes the pattern of the girl's eventual acceptance of her role as 'woman' and her consequent reinsertion into a new patriarchal family" (Miller 26). Although, as the title suggests, sadness colors the conclusion of the novel, in many ways the ending is progressive and offers a new path forward for young women in conservative 1950's France, or, as Miller has described it, "a radical reworking of the family romance model and an unorthodox victory for the protagonist" (Miller 24).

Despite Anne's death and the mystery that surrounds it (did Cécile's actions push her to the edge of the cliff, figuratively and literally?), students are often upbeat and excited to discuss the end of the novel. Students connect with Sagan's novel in a multitude of ways that have in turn led them to read more or to encourage others to read more. In my informal Google Form survey, one student shared that reading Sagan's novel inspired her to read more French books over the summer. Another told me that she convinced her mom (a native French speaker) to read *Bonjour tristesse*. Similarly, a student shared that he bought copies of Sagan's novel in English to give to friends. Recently in class, a student qualified the novel (in English) as "giving a coastal grandma vibe." Admittedly, I had no idea what this glowing comment meant and had to ask for clarification. "Coastal grandma" is an "aesthetic" in 2024, described as "cozy comfort" and "stylish, creative and marginally kooky" ("Why the Coastal Grandmother Aesthetic"). For this student, the uniqueness of the plot and its setting, as well as the ease with which she found

she could read the book, inspired her to find connections between it and a current trend. For her, the term referenced not only the text but also her relationship to it (reading it was a more “comfortable” activity than perhaps other works we had read). Twenty years ago I likely would have chuckled at a seemingly frivolous assessment of the novel and moved on. Today, however, I find myself leaning in and asking students to use current vernacular to describe their reactions to literature (in this case, we translate it into French the best we can—, “*ambiance de grand-mère côtière*”) and to explain their descriptions. Not only do I learn something (though I will never claim to be able to accurately use the term in a remotely “hip” manner), but when students couch their appreciation for texts in their own terms, they effectively change how they themselves and other students in the class feel about and relate to the works. Exclusively asking students only to use literary and scholarly terms shrouds our courses in pretension and suggests that texts can only be appreciated through academic lenses. As we face classrooms with increasing numbers of students who may have never been asked to (nor chosen to) read a novel during their high school career, we must meet them where they are and guide them in finding their reader persona—a persona that may best interact with literature when given the freedom to describe a text’s “coastal grandma vibe.”

“Coastal grandma” or not, this so-called “beach read” is deceptively complex and provides excellent fodder for in-class discussion. Admittedly, in writing this article, I worry that *Bonjour tristesse* is a unicorn text (few texts in French or any other language may inspire students in the same ways that I have described here) or that the recent passion expressed for Sagan’s work will be short lived. Can literature instructors in other languages find similar “gateway” novels that inspire Generation Z students to read? I would like to propose that the takeaways from student response can help form future decisions regarding text selection for foreign language literature courses and they can also influence how we encourage students to interact with any text we read. In lieu of coming to a work with rigid and prescribed notions of what students must “get out of” it, as instructors, we can only gain from leaving space for more “coastal grandma” reactions, all while scaffolding activities that build to discussions of narrative, rhetorical terms, and literary concepts. By meeting students where they are, all the while providing them the tools needed to advance their critical thinking and analytic writing, we (hopefully) ensure that the novel read in our class will not be their last.

In this vein, I propose the following three tips for refreshing literature course offerings. To begin with, consider the reading comprehension level of your students and structure the course to progress and build on their existing knowledge base and competency. In a third year literature course, my students’ interpretive skills can range from Intermediate High (they have just finished their fourth semester of French) to Advanced Mid-High (they are native speakers). Consequently, some students will find the texts we read more accessible than others. The course

progresses from modern (relatable) short stories to a 17th-century play and 19th-century poetry in an attempt to level the playing field and improve intermediate students' comprehension (and confidence) before launching into Molière's 17th-century *Tartuffe* and Baudelaire's 19th-century poetry. Molière's play is an important cultural artifact that is often referenced in French culture (thus important for students' cultural competency); however, it can prove a heavy lift for many students and is not likely to be the work that gets them "hooked on reading." By contrast, after reading a challenging play like *Tartuffe* (the effort required is on par with that of reading a Shakespeare play—the syntax and vocabulary will not be familiar even to native speakers), a novel such as *Bonjour tristesse* is revelatory. Students' reading skills have already been tested and proven through their reading (deciphering) of 17th-century French and 19th-century poetry. The fact that they can now read with increased ease and speed a (more) modern text that they find relatable and less dense, provides students with proof that they have made progress and can go on to read other full-length works in French (or English, for that matter). One might suggest that it could be more pedagogically sound to scaffold students' interpretive skills by reading *Bonjour tristesse* before reading older, more challenging works. However, the current timeline works well for student energy levels—they are inevitably more exhausted the closer we get to finals—and for providing a confidence boost before students are released into summer break. Student responses corroborate this assessment of the current schedule. As one stated, "I thought it was nice to wrap up French lit with this book after having read pretty difficult poetry, playwrights, and short stories from a multitude of time periods throughout the semester."

Second, instructors should research novels that have the potential to hit the aforementioned optimal balance—not too long, not too wordy and on a subject matter that will be of interest to the student population. The question remains: How does one find such a novel? In an advanced literature course, "Survey of French Literature," I ask students to present on historical and cultural topics related to the works we read in the course. The final student presentation of the semester asks the student presenter(s) to predict future classics of French literature based on current topics, events and lists of best-selling novels. To research the topic, I ask students to consult websites such as [Fnac](#) or [Amazon](#) in France and to look for "most read" current books. I also suggest that they consult [Babelio](#) which is the French equivalent of [The StoryGraph](#) or [Good Reads](#). The students are asked to present on current themes in French and Francophone literature as they present titles that they predict will have staying power. In many ways, this assignment is a useful exercise for instructors looking for a read akin to *Bonjour tristesse*. Alternatively, instructors should search for bloggers who share book titles that they have found to be accessible to non-native readers. For instance, Benoît Landon, a librarian blogger, has expressly provided titles of authors who write shorter works in French (Sagan

included) (“French Novels”). These sites can help language instructors choose a text, or ideally a few texts, that act as a gateway to (more) reading for students.

Third, I wish to advise fellow instructors to stand firm in their commitment to supporting students in their reading of books in their original language. Over the years, students have requested that, instead of reading books from France, we read well-known English language books translated into French (for example *Harry Potter*) or colleagues have suggested that we teach our courses in translation in order to increase enrollment. The latter, unfortunately, leads to lower target language proficiency gains. The more we teach literature translated into English, the harder it is for our students to improve their Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) scores (given to all our French majors their final semester in our program) or to pass the PRAXIS to become secondary foreign language teachers.

Proficiency benchmarks aside, our goal is to expose our students to diverse ways of thinking and living. Literature provides an access to cultural understanding all while improving language skills. Literary references pervade French and Francophone culture, politics, and society—so much so that well-read students come to any conversation with a native speaker, or to the reading of any news article from a French-speaking country, with better tools to unlock comprehension than their non-reader counterparts. For instance, when students read Honoré de Balzac’s *Père Goriot* in the aforementioned advanced literature course, I share with them Agathe Logeart’s article from *Le Nouvel Obs* and Raphaëlle Bacqué’s article from *Le monde* in which 21st-century political figure Rachida Dati is repeatedly described as a “Rastignac” (one of the main characters of 19th-century *Père Goriot*). The articles never explain who Rastignac is nor how the reference should be understood. The onus is on the reader to recognize his name, the novel in which he is the main character and why his story may or may not be similar to that of Dati. This is a key benefit that I believe (even fear) cannot be fully grasped by language instructors and administrators who do not teach literature: the benefit of reading French literature does not lie simply in the acquisition of new vocabulary or in the analysis skills attained. If that were the sole perk, we could surely get away with only ever reading short infographics and non-fiction articles. Reading French novels, plays, and poems in their entirety unlocks keys to understanding contemporary French society and culture in ways that non-readers will never access. In turn, literature courses offered in their original language enable readers to reach proficiency and cultural competency levels non-readers can never attain.

As we attempt to meet our students where they are (possibly having never read an entire novel) and try to ignite in them a passion for reading literature, we should strive to find a balance between the canon (replete with key cultural references) and the lesser taught yet valuable works (that are culturally relevant and may hold [more] appeal for some students), just as we should balance the academic framework we bring to studying literature with the unique perspectives and

vocabulary that students propose and understand. To end on a hopeful note, and perhaps further underline the importance of the latter (invaluable student input and insight), my students shared with me the existence of BookTok, a TikTok sub community where users share their favorite books. According to a “Publishers Association” 2022 poll, “[O]f over 2,000 16-25 year olds, almost two-thirds (59%) say that BookTok or book influencers have helped them discover a passion for reading” (“The BookTok Generation”). Further, thanks to BookTok, young people are forming communities of fellow readers: “[BookTok] has also allowed Gen Z-ers to connect with their peers and create communities based on what they’re reading. Nearly one in five (19%) say that following the Booktok hashtag helped them find a community and another 16 percent reported that they made new friends through BookTok” (“The BookTok Generation”). Trends like BookTok (and others that I am sure will come into existence by the time this article is published) can in turn influence activities we create in our classes going forward. In addition to asking students to analyze passages and hone their critical thinking skills, we could create presentational assignments that provide students freedom to create BookTok-like videos in French that may in turn feel more familiar and possibly “useful” to them. Reexamining and changing the books we assign is only the first step in our quest to change students’ views and appreciation for reading foreign language literature as we strive to hear more and more of them ask us, “Vous en avez d’autres comme celui-ci”?

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Appendix

Links to in-class slide decks:

[Day 1](#)
[Day 2](#)
[Day 3](#)
[Day 4](#)

Links to homework assignments:

[First day: collaborative Google Document](#)
[Second day: individually assigned Relationship Triangles activity](#)
[Third day: collaborative Google Document](#)
[Fourth day: collaborative Google Document](#)

Link to FigmaBoard:

[Bonjour tristesse: Femme fatale](#)

Link to Literary Figures Padlet:

<https://padlet.com/devereuxherbeck/les-figures-de-style-vv1ljdmyf95p2jj>