36. Arnold Bennett, 'Is the Novel Decaying?', *Cassell's Weekly*

28 March 1923, 47

Arnold Bennett (1867–1931). Novelist.

Virginia Woolf's reply to this article is the next item (No. 37). For the background to the debate between Arnold Bennett and Virginia Woolf, see Introduction, p. 16.

If I have heard it once, I have heard fifty times during the past year the complaint that no young novelists with promise of first-rate importance are rising up to take the place of the important middle-aged. Upon this matter I have two lines of thought.

What makes a novel important enough to impress itself upon both the discriminating few and the less discriminating many? (For firstclass prestige is not obtained unless both sorts of readers are in the end impressed.) The first thing is that the novel should seem to be true. It cannot seem true if the characters do not seem to be real. Style counts; plot counts; invention counts; originality of outlook counts; wide information counts; wide sympathy counts. But none of these counts anything like so much as the convincingness of the characters. If the characters are real the novel will have a chance; if they are not oblivion will be its portion.

The Sherlock Holmes stories have still a certain slight prestige. Because of the ingenuity of the plots? No. Because of the convincingness of the principal character? No. The man is a conventional figure. The reason is in the convincingness of the ass Watson. Watson has real life. His authenticity convinces everyone, and the books in which he appears survive by reason of him. Why are *The Three Musketeers* and *Twenty Years After* the most celebrated of Dumas's thousand volumes? Many other novels of Dumas have very marvellous and brilliant plots. For instance, *Monte Cristo*. But the *Musketeer* volumes

outshine them easily because of the superior convincingness of the characters. Why is Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt* a better book than his *Main Street*? Because in the latter the chief character (heroine) is a sentimental stick, while in the former the chief character (Babbitt himself) is a genuine individual that all can recognise for reality.

To render secure the importance of a novel it is necessary, further, that the characters should clash one with another so as to produce strong emotion, first in the author himself and second in the reader. This strong emotion cannot be produced unless the characters are *kept* true throughout. You cannot get strength out of falsity. The moment the still small voice whispers to the reader about a character, 'He wouldn't have acted like that,' the book is imperilled. The reader may say: 'This is charming. This is amusing. This is original. This is clever. This is exciting.' But if he also has to say, 'It's not true', the success of the book cannot be permanent.

The foundation of good fiction is character creating, and nothing else. The characters must be so fully true that they possess even their own creator. Every deviation from truth, every omission of truth, necessarily impairs the emotional power and therefore weakens the interest.

I think that we have to-day a number of young novelists who display all manner of good qualities—originality of view, ingenuity of presentment, sound common sense, and even style. But they appear to me to be interested more in details than in the full creation of their individual characters. They are so busy with states of society as to half forget that any society consists of individuals, and they attach too much weight to cleverness, which is perhaps the lowest of all artistic qualities.

I have seldom read a cleverer book than Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room*, a novel which has made a great stir in a small world. It is packed and bursting with originality, and it is exquisitely written. But the characters do not vitally survive in the mind because the author has been obsessed by details of originality and cleverness. I regard this book as characteristic of the new novelists who have recently gained the attention of the alert and the curious, and I admit that for myself I cannot yet descry any coming big novelists.

But nevertheless—and here is my second line of thought—I am fairly sure that big novelists are sprouting up. Only we do not know where to look for them. Or we cannot recognize them when we see them. It is almost certain that the majority of the great names of 1950 are writing to-day without any general appreciation. They have not been spotted as

winners by the sporting prophets, and publicity paragraphs are not published about them. Few or none recognized the spring of greatness in the early Hardy, or in the early Butler, or in the early George Moore, or in the early Meredith. And there is scarcely a permanently great name in the whole history of fiction who was not when he first wrote overshadowed in the popular and even in the semi-expert esteem by much inferior novelists. The great did not at first abound in glitter and cleverness. As a rule they began by being rather clumsy, poor dears! Hence I am not pessimistic about the future of the novel.