Paris at the turn of the twentieth century was a creative hub for writers and artists who were drawn to the city for the freedom of expression fostered there. There were many public spaces in modernist Paris where they gathered, such as the well-known cafés on the Boulevard Saint-Germain. But there were also public spaces in private settings – the famous salons conducted by women in their homes, such as those of Gertrude Stein and Natalie Barney. These modernist salons followed in the tradition established in seventeenth-century Paris in salons such as those held by Italian-born Catherine de Vivonne, Marquise de Rambouillet. For although the Marquise received her guests reclined on a lit de repos in the private sanctum of her bed-sitting room, the chambre bleue, the connections made and conversations had were on public matters both cultural and political. It was from these at once both public and private social gatherings that the literary genre of the roman à clef first developed. It was later taken up for its particular characteristics as a form of discursive fiction and lifewriting by the women who frequented early twentieth-century salons. The discrete – and discreet – circles of the modernist salons were a pivotal social space where non-conforming sexual subjectivities were enacted or performed, relationships formed and broken, artistic ideas proposed. When they wrote about their lives, the roman à clef and its coded conventions presented itself as the ideal genre.

In her autobiography A Backward Glance (1933) Edith Wharton recalls that books she read on Paris before she lived there suggested:

that the salon had vanished forever ... but before I had lived a year in Paris I had discovered that most of the old catchwords were still in circulation, most of the old rules still observed, and that the
ineradicable passion for good talk, and for seeing the same people
every day, was as strong at the opening of the twentieth century
as when the Précieuses met at the Hôtel de Rambouillet. (Quoted in
Bilski and Braun, 2005: 1)

As Wharton understood, the Parisian salon, typically presided over by
a charismatic salonnière committed to social life, had evolved since the
seventeenth century as a site of sociability, a paradigm for the concept
of a civil society. Individual identities were negotiated and moderated
through its mediating influences. While the salon could provide a forum
for ideas that ran counter to the hegemonies of Church and state, and
offered both social mobility and a degree of gender equality, this ‘bour-
geois public sphere’ (Habermas cited in Kale, 2002: 29) was nevertheless
governed by its own codes and conventions. An acknowledgement of
the power of language, both written and spoken, was central to its social
operations. The salonistes were obliged to conduct their conversations
according to the rules of ‘la politesse’ (Chesney, 2007: 100) and they
became known as the précieux. The rules of conduct of the salon, devel-
oped and overseen by the salonnière, created an environment which pre-
figures what Immanuel Kant later conceived as the ‘unsocial sociability’
of ‘man’ and his ‘propensity to enter into society, bound together with
a mutual opposition’ (Kant, 1963: 12). The term ‘coterie’, which had its
antecedents in the banding together of groups of French peasants to
contest their living conditions, became linked to the social formation
of the salon. In this setting, new ideas, political thinking and artistic
production were aired within the salon’s conventions of conversation to
produce what Kant discerned as a model of civility or sociability:

Women shaped the most buoyant stereotype of the French – civility.
In the words of Immanuel Kant, who recognized the ‘true humane-
ness’ of feminine sociability, ‘The French nation stands out among all
others by its taste for conversation, in which it is the model for the
rest.’ (Bilski and Braun, 2005: 5)

The salon as it evolved at this period has come to be perceived as the
central site of ‘egalitarian sociability’ (Bilski and Braun, 2005: 4). Salon
culture spread throughout Europe and the women who presided over
them cultivated an environment which challenged the social structures
of the court. The public/private presentation of the self through witty
and stylized conversation meant that merit, for men and women, could
overshadow birthright and rank. In the salon environment writing as