

**STUDIES IN  
POPULAR  
CULTURE**

# Heroes and happy endings

Class, gender, and nation in popular  
film and fiction in interwar Britain

CHRISTINE GRANDY



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and fiction in interwar Britain

**CHRISTINE GRANDY**

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## STUDIES IN POPULAR CULTURE

There has in recent years been an explosion of interest in culture and cultural studies. The impetus has come from two directions and out of two different traditions. On the one hand, cultural history has grown out of social history to become a distinct and identifiable school of historical investigation. On the other

hand, cultural studies has grown out of English literature and has concerned itself to a large extent with contemporary issues. Nevertheless, there is a shared project, its aim, to elucidate the meanings and values implicit and explicit in the art, literature, learning, institutions and everyday behaviour within a given society.

Both the cultural historian and the cultural studies scholar seek to explore the ways in which a culture is imagined, represented and received, how it interacts with social processes, how it contributes to individual and collective identities and world-views, to stability and change, to social, political and economic activities and programmes. This series aims to provide an arena for the cross-fertilisation of the discipline, so that the work of the cultural historian can take advantage of the most useful and illuminating of the theoretical developments and the cultural studies scholars can extend the purely historical underpinnings of their investigations. The ultimate objective of the series is to provide a range of books which will explain in a readable and accessible way **where we are** now socially and culturally and how we got to where we are. This should enable people to be better informed, promote an interdisciplinary approach to cultural issues and encourage deeper thought about the issues, attitudes and institutions of popular culture.

*Jeffrey Richards*

For Ron Grandy and Janet McLaughlin, with love

# General editor's introduction

Bestselling books and hit films have much to tell us about the preoccupations, values and preferred role models of society in any given period. In this thoughtful and detailed study, Christine Grandy explores bestselling novels and cinematic hits, both British and American, to assess the extent of their engagement with contemporary concerns about the economy, gender and the nation in inter-war Britain in the aftermath of the traumatic upheaval of World War I.

Rightly rejecting the idea that such popular works are purely escapist, she argues powerfully that the main thrust of the culture was to endorse the worth of a capitalist democratic society with defined traditional heterosexual male and female gender roles. She focuses on the depiction of heroes and heroines (whom she significantly dubs 'the love-interest'), villains and villainesses. In books and films like *Sorrell and Son*, she sees the culture working to re-establish pre-war masculine role models as patriotic soldier, breadwinner and *pater familias*. The male villain is the polar opposite of this value set and among the ranks of inter-war villains in for instance the *Bulldog Drummond* books and films are regularly to be found figures concerned with profit and the undermining of the national economy and social well-being – profiteering businessmen, arms dealers – the so-called 'merchants of death', sinister foreigners (Oriental masterminds, rebel Indian princes, Russian Bolsheviks) and renegade Establishment figures.

For women, who had achieved a degree of emancipation by gaining the vote and experiencing wartime employment and wage-earning, popular culture prescribed a feminine preoccupation with love and finding and serving Mr Right, so films show women giving up their careers for love, as in *A Star Is Born*, and forsaking wealth and power for love, as in *Queen Christina*. Villainesses by contrast seek wealth, status and power at all costs.



Grandy also examines the role of the censors in underpinning the value systems enshrined in popular culture, particularly the Home Office with its bans on novels promoting deviant sexuality and the British Board of Film Censors seeking to eliminate from films anything likely to upset the status quo political, social and moral. Grandy's book, with its focus on the national picture, can usefully be read alongside Robert James's *Popular Culture and Working-Class Taste in Britain, 1930–39* (2010), which establishes a comparative local study of Portsmouth, Derby and South Wales. Together they enrich our understanding of the nature and operation of popular culture in the inter-war period.

Jeffrey Richards

# Acknowledgements

This monograph will, at the very least, make it clear that I have read a lot of terrible novels and watched some slightly less terrible movies. A number of unfortunate souls have conspired in my obsession with mass culture and the following is only a small acknowledgement of their support. My supervisor at York University, Stephen Brooke, has mentored me for more years than either of us would likely care to admit and has been a tremendous influence in ways that are difficult to acknowledge. He is an inspiring lecturer, a kind and supportive supervisor and friend, and I hope to gain in my career just a fraction of the good will he fosters among colleagues. Marc Stein substantially improved this project as he pushed me to clarify concepts and claims, all while applying his steely editing eye. Kate McPherson also provided encouragement and coffee at key moments in the completion of this project. Jim Martens from Red Deer College made me think early on about history as something I would actually like to study, while the Ontario Graduate Scholarship made my studies financially feasible. I would also like to thank Jeffrey Richards for his early enthusiasm and Manchester University Press.

I simply would not have finished the dissertation that this book is based on without the deadlines and valuable advice offered by members of the following reading groups: the Southern Ontario Modern British Seminar, the Masculinities Reading Group, York University's Women's History Reading Group, and the British History Writing Group. Mark Abraham, Kristine Alexander, Sarah Glasford, Laura Godsoe, Ian Hesketh, Sean Kheraj, Bethany Lander, Suzanne Carlsen, Monique MacLeod, Ian Mosby, and Laural Raine offered support, advice, beer, and so much more throughout this. Ben Lander read the majority of my chapters and his sense of humour and grounded perspective has been constant in the face of an occasionally irrational person. Michelle Firestone-Cruz, a star in her own field, took an early and active interest in the mystifying

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Finally they say that one's doctoral work is really about one's self, a comment perhaps dubious in its claim, but one which has nevertheless remained with me. In my case, this dissertation is indeed about me to some extent, but more accurately it is about and for my parents, Ron Grandy and Janet McLaughlin, who inculcated in me an early love of reading and action films. They are written on every page and their love and support, even when they have not entirely understood what I have been doing for so many years, has been constant. I dedicate this to them in small acknowledgement of all they have contributed to me and therefore to it.

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# Introduction: the role of popular culture between the wars

'Everybody wants to forget it', said Bertram, with a touch of passion in his voice. 'The Profiteers, the Old Men who ordered the massacre, the politicians who spoilt the Peace, the painted flappers. I'm damned if I'm going to let them!'

Philip Gibbs, *The Middle of the Road* (1923)

Philip Gibbs published *The Middle of the Road*, his bestselling novel about a disillusioned ex-soldier, five years after World War I ended. In those five years, initial celebrations quickly gave way to dismay by soldiers and civilians as they faced the social, economic, and political upheavals unleashed by a relatively new type of twentieth-century warfare. Britain was left to grapple with the loss of over 700,000 men at the fighting front and the return of soldiers traumatised by the mechanised warfare they had just experienced. Disillusionment with the initial ideals of the war and with notions of honour, sacrifice, and national strength was further exacerbated by the failures of a post-war economy that could not easily absorb the four million demobilised men expecting to return to their jobs, some which had been temporarily filled by women. Adding further insult to injury was the prominent post-war role of 'the Profiteers, the Old Men who ordered the massacre, the politicians who spoilt the Peace', who demonstrated that the modern warfare ushered in by World War I could in fact be profitable to some. These developments were accompanied by rapidly rising prices of goods and a general shift in the economy away from traditional forms of manufacturing and towards types of light industry that depended more heavily upon unskilled labour. Britain's victory seemed hollow in such circumstances and 'depression' became a familiar term as unemployment figures reached unprecedented heights in the winter of 1920, when two million men were out of work. After that winter the number of unemployed men rarely fell below one million, and reached a

staggering three million men in 1932.<sup>1</sup> Alongside this economic instability was international political uncertainty as the conditions of the Versailles Treaty crumbled, fascism reared its head in Europe, and the prospect of another war to end all wars loomed.

Yet as historian John Stevenson has noted, interwar developments were nothing if not contradictory. Economic stagnation in the old manufacturing areas of the north was matched by economic recovery and growth in the south-east, south-west, Midlands, and London. Those that had work retained far more of their wages to spend on non-staple items. It was at this time of economic uncertainty that a dynamic mass consumer culture emerged. While many suffered economic hardships, others were able to purchase radios, cheap novels, and ready-made clothing, and many, including the unemployed, went to the 'pictures'. Popular culture became a crucial aspect of the rising consumer society. Cinemas were steadily built throughout the 1920s and 1930s and were accompanied by a vibrant trade in film magazines, which advised readers how to dress like their favourite stars and featured photographs to that same effect.<sup>2</sup> Affordable and condensed novels like *The Middle of the Road* (1923), in comparison to the expensive three volumes of the nineteenth century, were produced and sold in numbers that justified the common use of the new term 'bestseller'. Gibbs's novel, for example, appeared in twenty-two editions within two years of its initial printing.<sup>3</sup> Libraries and booksellers set up book-lending systems so that readers could get their hands on the latest and greatest books by their favourite authors. Newspapers also experienced unprecedented sales and marvelled at their popularity, with the accessible paper the *Daily Express* reaching a circulation of two million in the period. Such a brisk trade in a consumer culture that promised constant renewal and offered up images of other and better worlds seemed to fly in the face of the economic, social, and political upheaval in Britain between the wars.

The purpose of this monograph is to examine the immensely popular film and book narratives that developed between the wars and to situate these narratives against the period's simultaneous social, economic, political, and gender crises. I demonstrate that far from being a means of escape from the pressures of the world, the films and novels most popular with British audiences, whether of British or American origins, engaged with concerns about economy, gender, and nation after the war. Contrary to the belief of Gibbs's hero, Bertram, in the epigraph, I contend that the war was not forgotten within the pictures and novels that audiences chose to consume. From overtly topical social issue novels like Philip Gibbs's *Middle of the Road* to the tropical *Mutiny on the*

*Bounty* (1935 [UK 1936]), which was Britain's second most popular film in 1936, the heroes, villains, and love-interests of these narratives mirrored the contemporary concerns of those turning the page or viewing the screen.<sup>4</sup> Variations of the old men and painted flappers that Gibbs references in his novel, as well as characters like the disillusioned but ultimately heroic ex-soldier, Bertram, can be found in novels such as H. C. McNeile's *Bulldog Drummond* (1920) as well as films like *Grand Hotel* (1932). The novels and films that the British chose to consume featured heroes, villains, and love-interests that not only reflected but moderated post-World War I concerns about class, gender, and nation.

By 'nation', I mean both the realms of citizenship and politics and popular rhetoric about 'Englishness', a concept of national belonging promoted by historians such as Robert Colls and Wendy Webster among others.<sup>5</sup> The interwar period, as Alison Light has argued, was a time when notions of a domestic and inward-looking 'little' England seemed to compete with the unsteady reality of Great Britain. The novels and films I examine here do speak, more often than not, to love of England in particular and were conspicuous in noting English might and English heroics. Yet, that explicit and notable discussion of Englishness was conducted around and regarding institutions foundational to Britain's growth as an empire and state. The British military had a particular role to play in this story, as we shall see. Consequently throughout this I discuss concepts of Englishness within Britain as a nod to the sometimes contradictory, yet ultimately coinciding, uses of these terms. I argue that the film and fiction that British audiences popularised between the wars were preoccupied with a defensive effort to rehabilitate and maintain men as both masculine breadwinners and soldiers for the nation.

This endeavour to buttress the breadwinner and soldier roles through characters like the hero, love-interest, and villain continually endorsed the worth of a capitalist democratic society in the 1920s and 1930s. Many of the features that defined these characters, such as differentiated and unequal gender roles for men and women as well as compulsory heterosexuality, were centred upon the respective position of that character within a capitalist economy. Heroes were distinguished by their fulfilment of the independent male breadwinner role, while the deviancy of the villain's character lay in his inability or unwillingness to work for his wealth. Female love-interests contributed to the modern industrial landscape of these narratives not as workers but as subservient supporters of the male heroes. Villainesses demonstrated the peril of abandoning this supportive role by showing that female wealth



and independence posed numerous problems to society and also made one ultimately unlovable. Consequently popular film and fiction became a potent means of conveying the absolute necessity of maintaining a capitalist economy and the breadwinner at its centre, by tying it to the heady and presumably timeless concepts of good, evil, and love. A study of the hero, villain, and love-interest that embodied these concepts will reveal the extent to which popular culture remained in constant dialogue with, and actively reinforced, a capitalist economy in a period when that economic system faced a substantial crisis.

This commitment to the breadwinner and soldiering ideal was not limited to just producers and consumers of mass culture, but was also endorsed by the state. I argue that the British Board of Film Censors (BBFC) and the Home Office encouraged the maintenance and production of this formula through their censorship of the hero, villain, and love-interest characters. By examining the films and novels that were passed by the censors in conjunction with those that were not, I show that the priorities of these censoring bodies were to maintain the role of the heroic soldier and the independent breadwinner. Narratives that produced images of the successful and independent breadwinner or soldier were easily approved by these organisations, while others that troubled this relationship were not. Thus the BBFC and the Home Office granted governmental sanction to what existed on the page and the screen and proved themselves active participants in the production of popular culture in Britain, even prior to the outbreak of World War II in 1939.

What results from my study is a social and cultural history that focuses explicitly on the ideology embodied in the novels and films that British audiences consumed between the wars and situates this ideology within the social, economic, and political climate of the day. The study illuminates the principles and beliefs at work in the popular films and novels that British audiences consumed in the early age of mass consumption. By looking at the ideology produced by popular culture in conjunction with other discourses about work, gender, and nation in Britain, we can see important sites of convergence between them which demonstrates that popular culture, even at its most outlandish and fantastical, was anything but entirely escapist.

### **The audience and popular culture**

The growth of a popular mass culture between the wars was, as Q. D. Leavis pointed out, noticeable, and to some such as her, alarming. Book publishing and film production industries had developed in a remarkably short period