
Reading Popular Fiction

**GENDER,
GENRE AND
NARRATIVE
PLEASURE**

Reading Popular Fiction

GENDER, GENRE AND NARRATIVE PLEASURE

Edited by
DEREK LONGHURST

London
UNWIN HYMAN
Boston Sydney Wellington

© Derek Longhurst and contributors, 1989

This book is copyright under the Berne Convention. No reproduction without permission. All rights reserved.

Published by the Academic Division of
Unwin Hyman Ltd
15/17 Broadwick Street, London W1V 1FP, UK

Unwin Hyman Inc.,
8 Winchester Place, Winchester, Mass. 01890, USA

Allen & Unwin (Australia) Ltd,
8 Napier Street, North Sydney, NSW 2060, Australia

Allen & Unwin (New Zealand) Ltd, in association with the
Port Nicholson Press Ltd,
60 Cambridge Terrace, Wellington, New Zealand

First published in 1989

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Gender, genre and narrative pleasure. —
(Popular fiction and social relations).

1. Popular fiction in English. Socio-cultural aspects

I. Longhurst, Derek II. Series

306'.488

ISBN 0-04-445008-7

ISBN 0-04-445009-5 Pbk

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Library data applied for.

Typeset in 10/11 point Plantin
and printed in Great Britain by
Billing and Son, London and Worcester

**GENDER,
GENRE AND
NARRATIVE
PLEASURE**

Reading Popular Fiction

Titles in preparation:

IN THE FRAME: DETECTIVE FICTION
AND THE POLICING OF PLEASURE

by Barry Taylor

NARRATIVES OF POWER 1939-89

by Derek Longhurst

Series editor:

DEREK LONGHURST

Contributors

ROGER BROMLEY is Director of the School of Literatures and Cultural Study at the College of St Paul and St Mary, Cheltenham. He taught at Portsmouth Polytechnic from 1966 to 1987. He has published extensively on popular literature, including his recent book *Lost Narratives* on popular cultural forms and contemporary politics.

TONY DAVIES is a lecturer in the Department of English Language and Literature, University of Birmingham. He is co-author of *Re-Writing English* and has also published influential articles on the ideology of literary studies. He has been a member of the literature group working in the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies.

DAVID GLOVER was Senior Lecturer in Sociology at Sunderland Polytechnic until 1988. He has written widely on popular culture and mass communications and is the author of *The Sociology of the Mass Media* (1984) and *The Sociology of Knowledge* (1985, with Sheelagh Strawbridge). Together with Cora Kaplan he is currently writing *Mastering Mystery: the Sexual Politics of Crime Fiction*.

PETER HUMM is Head of Literary and Cultural Studies in the School of Humanities at Thames Polytechnic. He is co-editor of *Popular Fictions: Essays in Literature and History* and has also co-edited *Dialogue and Difference: English Now and for the Nineties*.

E. ANN KAPLAN taught film and literature at Rutgers University and is now Director of the Humanities Program at Stonybrook, New York. She has published extensively in such journals as *Wide Angle*, *Millennium Film Journal* and *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*; her books include *Women in Film Noir*, *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* and *Rocking Around the Clock*.

SARAH LEFANU's publications include *In the Chinks of the World Machine: Feminism and Science Fiction* (1988) and *Despatches*

from the *Frontiers of the Female Mind* (co-editor, 1985). She works as an editor at The Women's Press. She has three children and lives in Bristol.

DEREK LONGHURST is Principal Lecturer in Communication Studies at Sunderland Polytechnic. His publications include chapters in *Re-Reading English*, *An Introduction to Contemporary Cultural Studies* and *The Shakespeare Myth* as well as articles in *Red Letters*, *Critical Inquiry* and the *Australian Journal of Cultural Studies*. He is currently writing *Narratives of Power 1939-89*.

VERENA WRIGHT LOVETT has three children, teaches part-time in higher and adult education, and is currently researching bodily symbolism in fiction at the University of Sussex.

PAUL STIGANT is Head of School of Humanities at Thames Polytechnic. He has published numerous articles in *Literature and History* of which he is a founding editor.

BARRY TAYLOR teaches English at the Polytechnic of North London. He is currently preparing a book on twentieth-century English and American detective fiction for the *Reading Popular Fiction* series.

JANE TOMPKINS teaches in the English department at Duke University in North Carolina. She works on American Literature, popular culture and feminist theory. She is the author of *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction 1790-1860*, and is currently writing a book on Western novels and movies.

General Editor's Preface

IT IS now widely recognized that the study of popular fiction plays an important part in cultural analysis. No longer is reading popular fiction generally considered to be an activity akin to a secret vice to which one should admit shamefacedly. Nor can popular narrative be adequately understood as merely narcotic and its readers as unenlightened junkies. Thankfully, the field of critical study is now typified by provocative and stimulating debates rooted in cross-disciplinary inquiry and addressing key questions concerning social groups and their relation to the culture which they inhabit. For instance, how do the institutions and processes involved in the production of popular fictions shape the ways in which texts and genres, meanings and ideological values are distributed and circulated? How does British popular culture interact with other cultures, especially American? How do popular fictions 'address' their readership in terms of class, race, gender, age, regionalism, national identities? Under what material conditions does reading as a social practice take place? What do readers draw upon in order to *make sense* of a popular narrative? And so on.

This series is designed to provide a context for such debates and as a resource for readers, students and teachers fascinated by the pleasures of popular fiction in all their ambivalence, tension and contradiction. Drawing in an accessible way upon contemporary critical theory, the series will investigate production contexts, genres in their historical diversity and fluid boundaries, texts and the formation of identities or subjectivities, readerships and the historical conditions which shape the production and reproduction of re-readings. Clearly, too, it will be necessary to offer accounts of how the various media of publishing, cinema, radio and television, each with its own determinants and specificities, also interact in complementary and contrasting modes.

Consequently the series is committed to investigate the terrain of the production, reproduction and reception of popular fiction as a matter of historical, cultural and political concern. The tired, old dichotomy of 'high' vs 'low' literature can no longer provide (if

it ever could!) an adequate basis upon which to build satisfactory accounts of how narratives impinge upon the lives and experiences of their readers, interacting with widespread social meaning systems. Certainly this is not a matter of constructing an alternative 'canon' but of confronting the negotiations between popular fictions, social discourses and the desires and fantasies, aspirations and identities of heterogeneous readerships.

A large project, indeed, but one that is profoundly worthwhile.

Derek Longhurst

Acknowledgements

I WOULD like to thank Wolfson College, Oxford, for the award of the Charter Fellowship in English Language and Literature. This was encouraging support from a number of points of view and it enabled me to complete the editorial work on this book.

I would also like to acknowledge the commitment and constant support this project has received from Jane Harris Matthews of Unwin Hyman. It has been a genuine pleasure to work with her.

Finally, I must pay public tribute to the enthusiasm and interest of Dee Dine. Without her, the thick and thin of public sector education in Britain in the 1980s would have been even more difficult to endure.

Contents

| | |
|---|------|
| Contributors | ix |
| General Editor's Preface | xi |
| Acknowledgements | xiii |
| Introduction: Reading Popular Fiction <i>Derek Longhurst</i> | 1 |
| 1 West of everything <i>Jane Tompkins</i> | 10 |
| 2 The political unconscious in the maternal melodrama: Ellen Wood's <i>East Lynne</i> (1861) <i>E. Ann Kaplan</i> | 31 |
| 3 Sherlock Holmes: Adventures of an English gentleman 1887-1894 <i>Derek Longhurst</i> | 51 |
| 4 The stuff that dreams are made of: Masculinity, femininity and the thriller <i>David Glover</i> | 67 |
| 5 The masculine fiction of William McIlvanney <i>Peter Humm and Paul Stigant</i> | 84 |
| 6 Rewriting the masculine script: The novels of Joseph Hansen <i>Roger Bromley</i> | 102 |
| 7 The divided gaze: Reflections on the political thriller <i>Tony Davies</i> | 118 |
| 8 <i>Gorky Park</i> : American dreams in Siberia <i>Barry Taylor</i> | 136 |

| | | |
|----|--|-----|
| 9 | Bodily symbolism and the fiction of Stephen King <i>Verena Lovett</i> | 157 |
| 10 | Popular writing and feminist intervention in science fiction <i>Sarah Lefanu</i> | 177 |
| 11 | Science fiction: The dreams of men <i>Derek Longhurst</i> | 192 |
| | Index | 213 |

Introduction

DEREK LONGHURST

RECENT years have witnessed important new initiatives in the study of popular fictional modes of writing. At one time the field could have been described with reasonable accuracy as fenced around by two traditions. On the one hand, deriving out of sociological investigation, there was some concern to analyse the production and distribution of popular fictions as commodities. A central problem here, however, was the tendency to *assume* that 'effects', commonly seen as escapist and (therefore?) ideological, followed on from the nature of what was, essentially, a capitalist enterprise, an assumption in other words that consumption could be predicated upon analysis of the modes of production and distribution. On the other hand, across the common room, the 'Eng. Lit.' corner was dominated by those who regarded popular fiction as the negative which offered high definition to the exposure of the positive which was, of course, the 'great' canonic literary tradition. (A few mildly eccentric figures emerged in the evenings from their concordances of *Beowulf* to engage in a little slumming with SF or detective fiction.) Generally, then, popular fictions were to be 'evaluated' according to the institutionalized norms which had been established as common sense practice around literary studies, a range of largely formalist strategies designed to demonstrate that unlike 'literature', popular fiction was standardized and formulaic, a debased coinage, of little 'moral' value, distorting the truths of 'lived experience', time-bound rather than addressing the transhistorical and universal territory of the 'human condition'.¹ Both academic traditions shared a tendency to base their analysis upon rescuing *other*, less enlightened readers from the predatory tentacles of the pleasures of popular fiction, either in the interests of demystifying false consciousness of the socio-economic power structures of capitalism or of preserving the liberal-humanist values fostered within elite culture as the only viable

bastion against the trivializing experiences of 'mass' culture. And, finally, it is worth noting that both traditions are ethnocentric in critical orientation (e.g. 'Englishness' as 'universal') and male-dominated. As such, this sheds an interesting perspective upon the tendency to stress the pleasures of rational cognition and the controlled expression of emotion in opposition to the pleasures of the body and the 'baser instincts' of mankind [*sic*].

The decade of the 1970s ushered in a bewildering range of theoretical debates which impinged very significantly upon literary studies in particular. Panic-stricken academics were heard to inquire in some desperation, 'What is structuralism?' This cultural disturbance in the corridors of Higher Education even made it on to the pages of the quality press (it wasn't quite salacious enough for the tabloids). Suddenly, the 'Eng. Lit.' corner found itself encircled and even invaded by voices discussing critical methodology, Marxism, semiotics, narratology, feminism, psychoanalysis, structuralism, post-structuralism and even popular film and television! One defensive response was crusty old boy dismissiveness – a load of 'jargon', certainly not for 'me' in comparison to the dark mysteries of the human soul (no jargon here, of course) plumbed in Lawrence's prose. Not totally unconnected was the institutional response of appropriation as, after all, no academic course would be entirely secure in the market terms of the 1980s without its token critical theorist (and/or feminist?).

Clearly there is *some* danger here of caricature and it can certainly be agreed that the processes, determinants and consequences of this 'sea change' in the Humanities disciplines were – and are – complex and manifold. For the study of popular fiction, however, the crucial gain in Britain was perhaps the establishment of interdisciplinary courses in communication, cultural and media studies providing a network of contexts within which serious analysis could evolve and progress. Much of this development has taken place within the public sector of Higher Education, through CNAA-validated² degree courses in the Polytechnics and Colleges rather than in the Universities, although it should be noted that research centres such as the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University or Leicester's Centre for Mass Communication Research were important influences and generated productive theoretical methodologies allied to empirical work.

The agendas which have been constructed gradually around the critical study of popular fiction are complex and varied but there were some rather simple starting points: the desire to challenge the literary canon as 'given' rather than as produced and reproduced in specific historical formations; dissatisfaction with critical practices which (a) endorsed the simplistic dichotomy of 'major' vs. 'minor' literature, (b) assumed as self-evident the category of 'literature', (c) constituted historical formations as mere 'background' to the literary text within which meanings were intrinsic rather than produced. All in all, the critical project needed to be redefined around a more dialectical relation between writing, history and ideology.

Initially, perhaps, the most influential theoretical model within literary studies was provided by the early work of Pierre Macherey whose analysis of Jules Verne³ suggested that a text could be defined by its 'absences' or silences, ideological contradictions which its author could not *consciously* confront but which the textual production of 'magical resolutions' to such conflicts cannot completely conceal. Thus, critical reading of a narrative can offer access into the ideological tensions and contradictions of a specific historical formation. There are a number of problems in such an approach and characteristically it constituted a highly authoritative critical practice. Once again the Marxist academic critic was located in the powerful position of unearthing history and ideology for other readers through his (usually) skill in reading the text and 'possession' of theory.

More significant in the domain of cultural studies was the influence of Gramsci and his delineation of the concept of hegemony and of the complex cultural processes by which the ruling class maintained its dominance not only through coercion but through the *consent* of the subordinate classes. Here, the most productive feature was Gramsci's sense of culture as a site of constant struggle and conflict, of *negotiation* between dominant culture and the 'resistances' within popular culture.⁴ Thus, for Gramsci there is always the potentiality for oppositional responses to dominant culture and this has led to considerable debate about the extent to which all cultural texts are open to a range of readings, negotiated between text and reader in relation to social experience.

Characteristically in the field of cultural studies emphasis was initially placed on the influence of class and social status upon readers

but empirical research into media audiences by David Morley and others suggested that such categories were too general and simplistic for delineating the range of potential meanings and readings which could be generated by a text.⁵ Consequently recent work has turned to discourse theory to provide a more open and flexible methodology. In cultural analysis, discourse means more than just language and must be distinguished from discourse analysis in linguistics; rather it refers to all of the processes of signification, to the production and *framing* of meanings around social experience and their circulation throughout a range of institutional power structures. Thus, a text is constituted around a discourse or even multiple discourses and readers *make sense* of it in relation to the discourses (of age, race, gender, class, region and so on) through which their consciousness makes sense of social reality and through which they are constituted as subjectivities. It will be seen that this theoretical field informs some of the contributions to this collection of essays.⁶

Finally, the most fundamental challenges and questions for cultural studies have been developed from within feminism. It does not seem overly polemical, however, to argue that, in the field of popular fiction, male critics have clearly felt more at ease ploughing their furrows with the sharp edges of contemporary Marxist paradigms while gender can be 'left to the women' preparing the picnic of romance over by the hedge. One primary objective of this collection is to undermine this dichotomy and to propose that all narrative and its reading are intrinsically inflected by sexual politics.

Such a bold statement is easy enough to make; how to address the problems it raises is quite a different matter, as the various approaches represented here will demonstrate. For one thing, confrontation of the gendered pleasures of reading draws us into territory which is frequently at the edges of cognitive security and definition, an exploration of the sources of fantasy and desire and power, the 'recognition' (and misrecognition) of tensions and contradictions between what we may regard as our consciously held beliefs and 'attitudes' on the one hand and deeply felt, less articulated aspirations and insecurities on the other. Obviously these are interactive in the social processes of reading – as in social experience more generally – and constitute a necessary factor in any debates about popular fiction and its attendant, socially-inscribed pleasures.

Following on from this, it is not the intention that the contributions by male writers to this collection should be seen as 'men doing feminist work'. Such a strategy is a contradiction in terms and one which frequently registers that characteristic masculine practice of appropriation and even in its more bizarre manifestations the most extraordinary arrogance of 'setting women right', 'correcting' the 'errors' of feminism. Rather, the objective is to begin to frame, describe and unearth the notion of 'men as readers' as a *project* rather than as the usual, unquestioned normative procedure. Clearly, this raises questions about self, sexuality and identity within specific social and historical formations. It should also be agreed that the readings and arguments set forth here are inflected by our generation (we are in the main of that generation who entered secondary and higher education in the 1960s) and by our ethnicity (all of the contributors are white English or American women and men).

Drawing eclectically upon Marxist, psychoanalytic and discourse theory – and influenced by an engagement, both personal and political, with feminism – the essays in this collection set out readings of popular texts and genres, not in the spirit of these being the *only* readings or of exhausting the potentiality of meanings generated by a text or group of texts but rather in the pursuit of engaging other readers of popular fiction in debates, some polemical, others more tentative and exploratory. The emphasis, then, is upon reading 'textuality' rather than upon the reading of self-contained texts.

One important feature of popular genres is that they are not rigidly self-contained categories (e.g. *Hill Street Blues*) but evolve interactively and in relation to specific historical formations. In the opening essay Jane Tompkins polemically challenges existing 'histories' of the Western, indicating how those masculine 'histories' share the assumptions of the genre they are claiming to describe. She argues that the Western '*answers the domestic novel*' and can also be seen as a response to women's participation in a range of *antebellum* reform activities. In the secular environment of the Western, man confronts death and nature in ways which marginalize and displace women as subjects, constructing a fictional world of masculine bonding or competition in which women are either distractions or objects to be rescued, reformed or won.