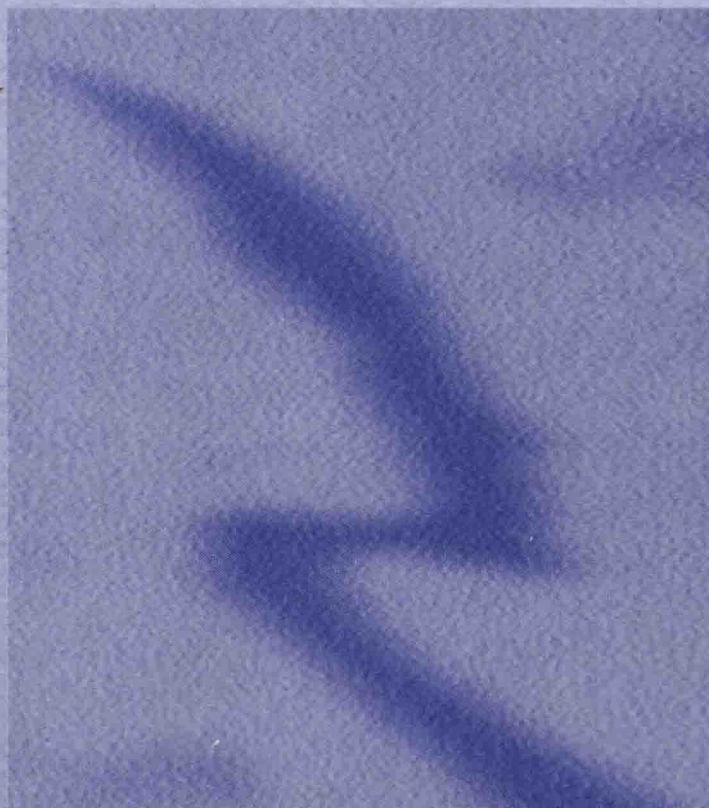


# Popular Fiction

The logics and practices  
of a literary field

Ken Gelder

 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group



# **Popular Fiction**

The logics and practices of  
a literary field

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# Popular Fiction

With a deceptive ease, Gelder breaks new ground in treating popular fiction as a distinctive cultural field with its own logic. The result is a rare combination of clarity and accessibility and challenging insight.

*Tony Bennett, Open University*

Moving from a theoretically sophisticated overview, Gelder engages – closely, uncondescendingly and entertainingly – with a stimulating range of samples. This is a book which other explorations into this vast and largely uncharted territory will build on. Most importantly, it's enjoyable.

*John Sutherland, University College London*

In this important book, Ken Gelder offers a lively, progressive and comprehensive account of popular fiction as a distinctive literary field. Drawing on a wide range of popular novelists, from Sir Walter Scott and Marie Corelli to Ian Fleming, J.K. Rowling and Stephen King, the book describes for the first time how this field works and what its unique features are. In addition, Gelder provides a critical history of three primary genres – romance, crime fiction and science fiction – and looks at the role of bookshops, fanzines and prozines in the distribution and evaluation of popular fiction. Finally, he examines five bestselling popular novelists in detail – John Grisham, Michael Crichton, Anne Rice, Jackie Collins and J.R.R. Tolkien – to see how popular fiction is used, discussed and identified in contemporary culture.

This book is a groundbreaking study of a dynamic and prolific literary field, essential reading for those interested in the way popular fiction works as a literary, cultural and industrial practice.

**Ken Gelder** is a Reader in English at the University of Melbourne, Australia. His books include *Reading the Vampire* (Routledge 1994) and, with Jane M. Jacobs, *Uncanny Australia: Sacredness and Identity in a Postcolonial Nation* (Melbourne University Press, 1998). He is co-editor of *The Subcultures Reader* (1997) and editor of *The Horror Reader* (2000), both published by Routledge.

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# Introduction

This book provides a comprehensive introduction to what I call ‘the field of popular fiction’, a phrase I shall account for in Chapter 1, although its meaning is fairly self-evident. The following chapters describe how that field works and how we can make sense of it, attending to its various logics and practices and detailing aspects of the way in which it behaves as a distinctive but heterogeneous body of writing. Two key words for understanding popular fiction are *industry* and *entertainment*, and they work firmly to distinguish popular fiction from the logics and practices of what I regard as its ‘opposite’, namely, literary fiction or Literature. Literary fiction is ambivalent at best about its industrial connections and likes to see itself as something more than ‘just entertainment’, but popular fiction generally speaking has no such reservations, as Chapter 1 will demonstrate. It draws together the industrial and entertainment – the latter being a particular form of culture, of cultural production – so much so that they can often be indistinguishable. The field of popular fiction is therefore quite literally a ‘culture industry’. This term was invested with negative connotations back in the 1940s by two influential, highbrow cultural critics, Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer. For them, the term gave expression to the ‘manufactured’ and commodified nature of mass cultural forms in modern capitalism which, as they saw it, deceived consumers and standardized or rationalized production (Adorno and Horkheimer 1979; Adorno 1991). It may be difficult even now to give the term ‘culture industry’ a positive spin. But we can at least try to begin to use it here – in relation to popular fiction – a little more sympathetically. It will mean amongst other things turning an eye to the actual diversity of the field (formulaic as some aspects of it may be), as well as its cheerful affirmation of features that certain other forms of cultural production (like Literature) might either repress or envy, or both.

Another key word that is crucial to the field of popular fiction is *genre*. Popular fiction is, essentially, genre fiction. Whereas genre is less overtly important to literary fiction, the field of popular fiction simply cannot live

without it, both culturally *and* industrially, as I shall show in Chapter 2. After all, popular fiction is not just a matter of texts-in-themselves, but of an entire apparatus of production, distribution (including promotion and advertising) and consumption – or what I call, more broadly, processing. Generic identities flow through these realms in all kinds of ways: determining not just what is inside the actual novel, but who publishes it, how and through what venues it is marketed, who consumes and evaluates it, and how this is done. Chapter 3 looks closely at this latter aspect of popular fiction, turning to genre bookshops and fanzines and prozines (professional or industry fanzines) and various genre-based organizations to see how aspects of this field of writing are ‘fashioned’ and arranged. These various ‘processing venues’ are indispensable to popular fiction, producing archives, organizing genres and a mass of writers in some sort of comprehensible way, providing information, and evaluating a field that, in terms of sheer numbers of books, can seem overwhelming to an outside observer – or even an inside *aficionado*. Genre is a matter of knowledge, which some people have (e.g. those writers who produce genre fiction and those readers who make their way through it) and other people don’t. It is impossible not just to write, but to market and sell and to review or read, a crime novel (for example) without a good understanding of the history of the genre and the various ways in which it has worked. Genre, in other words, has no time for naivety or ignorance.

The size of the entire field of popular fiction is something close to sublime – a single writer might produce well over 100 novels during his or her lifetime – and no commentator can ever hope to capture the whole of it. Those avid and dedicated readers who contribute to genre fanzines and e-zines, like *The Romantic Times* or the science fiction and fantasy prozine *Locus*, know this perfectly well: their expertise is usually genre-based, or even subgeneric (providing specialized information on the historical romance, for example, or on sword and sorcery fantasy). This generally means that, at the very least, they know what they’re talking about: genre, as I’ve already suggested, is all about knowledge and competence. Academics attempting to account for the *entire* field, however, may be more precariously positioned. Over recent years, the two best academic commentators on popular fiction have been John Sutherland, who also writes expertly on popular fiction for the UK newspaper, the *Guardian*, and Clive Bloom. My own book is indebted to their pioneering work, which has also tried to move outside of the novels themselves to look at the wider apparatus of publishing and sales: to look at the field itself. Clive Bloom’s *Bestsellers: Popular Fiction since 1900* (2002) and John Sutherland’s *Reading the Decades: Fifty Years of the Nation’s Bestselling Books* (2002) provide a wealth of information about the field at large, recovering many now-forgotten writers as they register the historical



range and variety of popular fiction. These books work primarily by listing a large number of writers of popular fiction one after the other, and in each case saying a few things about their work and the kinds of sales they've enjoyed. Perhaps a broad-based academic book on popular fiction can do little more than this. In my own book, however, I have tried to give the field itself a much clearer definition. I prefer the term 'popular fiction' to 'best-seller' precisely for this reason, because it lends the field its distinction. Authors of literary fiction can have bestsellers, too, and conversely, not every work of popular fiction sells successfully. Some popular novels (e.g. some science fiction or horror) actually have quite small readerships. Bloom's book lists Salman Rushdie and Joseph Heller amongst his many examples of popular novelists, but this seems to me simply to confuse the nature of the field by putting authors of literary fiction (popular as they may be) amongst *bona fide* writers of popular fiction. John Sutherland's book also notes a number of literary novels that have sold in high numbers, and features on its cover a picture of a man surreptitiously reading a copy of D.H. Lawrence's erotic classic, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* – a work of Literature, not popular fiction, even though it became a bestseller after its unexpurgated publication in 1959 primarily because of publicity over its language and subject matter. My own book, however, is about popular fiction as a singular and definitive category, preferring this term to the more porous and generally open-to-definition notion of a bestseller.

The field of popular fiction is so immense that even those commentators who try to account for the whole of it inevitably reveal only the tip of the iceberg. About half of Clive Bloom's book provides a list of writers of bestsellers arranged chronologically from 1900 to the present day. But even though he draws attention to a number of now-forgotten popular novelists, the 156 writers he accounts for over this period of time really amount to little more than a drop in the ocean (if I can partially mix my metaphors) – an average excavation of about one and a half novelists per year. He omits Kathleen Winsor, for example, who wrote the bestselling historical 'bodice-ripper' romance, *Forever Amber* (1944), as well as contemporary romance novelists such as Nora Roberts and Johanna Lindsey, two of the biggest sellers in the world (Roberts has mass market paperback first print runs of over two million). The prolific US horror and science fiction writer Dan Simmons isn't there, nor is the SF novelist-turned-fantasy writer Orson Scott Card, or Frank Herbert, who wrote the original *Dune* novels, or the bestselling fantasy novelists Tad Williams and Stephen R. Donaldson. Fantasy and science fiction writers are especially under-represented in Bloom's list, but arguably so is every other genre. He omits famous crime fiction writers such as 'Ellery Queen', certainly a bestseller, as well as – to name just six out of many contemporary crime novelists not in his book – Elizabeth George,

Robert Crais, James Lee Burke, Dennis Lehane, Michael Connelly and Jonathan Kellerman. The enormously popular Dorothy Dunnett, who wrote historical popular novels as well as modern mysteries about an American secret agent (and who died in 2001), also isn't there. All of these, except for Winsor, Herbert and Kellerman, are also missing from John Sutherland's book. On the other hand, Bloom does mention James Michener, whose bestsellers spanned four decades (until the 1980s), and Jean Auel, whose 'prehistoric romances' have sold over 35 million copies worldwide and go straight to the top of the bestseller lists upon release – while Sutherland leaves these two out. I say all this not to criticize these two important commentators, not least because their keyword 'best-seller' may rule out some of the writers I have just listed anyway (depending on how it is defined).<sup>1</sup> Rather, I simply want to show the sheer impossibility of accounting for everything produced under the heading of 'popular fiction'. No academic, nor anyone else for that matter, can hope to do it. To give an idea of the scale of popular fictional production, there are probably well over 100 writers currently producing Regency Romance alone, just one subgenre amongst many others of romance fiction. Between about 6 and 12 Regency Romance novels are now published every month. Around 50 writers have written, or are still writing, detective fiction set in the Middle Ages: again, just one small and highly specialized subgenre of crime fiction amongst many others (Amos 2001: 3). Over 2000 romance novels and between around 600 and 800 original fantasy, science fiction and horror novels are now published each year. Somewhere between around 70 and 120 new crime novels are published every month. To try to account for every writer across *all* the popular genres from over the last 100 years would be enough to daunt even the most intrepid chronicler and would probably clear several forests in the process.

My book will mention its fair share of popular novelists, but always in the context of particular kinds of discussion: about genre, for instance. Although I can certainly see the point of listing writers one by one and providing – as Bloom does – some brief comments about them as well as citing a few better-known examples from their complete works, this way of presenting the field can frustrate as much as it can illuminate. Both Bloom and John Sutherland arrange their studies chronologically, and this can give popular fiction some much-needed historical depth as well as provide a sense of some changing trends. But it also means that listing – one writer after another – is about the only way such a book can unfold. One consequence of this is that the field of popular fiction itself isn't given any clear sort of definition. Another is that discussions of genres are dispersed and even subsumed under the identities of particular writers, something which then heavily dilutes the major defining feature of this field. There is no

sustained discussion of romance in either Bloom or Sutherland's books, for example, the most prolific and bestselling popular genre of all. Just as importantly, neither commentator says very much about the ways in which popular fiction is marketed and processed or consumed. Both Bloom and Sutherland have a lot to say about the relations between popular fiction writers and publishers, although even here some key publishing imprints of genre fiction are simply not mentioned (Avon, Bantam, Arrow, Tor, Voyager, Pocket, etc.). They cover changes in publishing formats, the rise of the paperback, and so on: all of this is wonderfully useful. But other aspects of the industrial apparatus of popular fiction remain in the background. My book wants to suggest that an understanding of the ways in which popular fiction is advertised and distributed, reviewed and evaluated, and *read* is crucial to an overall understanding of the logics and practices of the field. In fact, everything in the field of popular fiction is evaluated one way or another – sometimes defensively, sometimes derisively, sometimes intelligently, sometimes by way of unadulterated celebration. The very act of reading popular fiction involves and provokes evaluation, as those of us who have sat on a train or in an airport with a fantasy novel or a romance novel in our hands – conscious, perhaps, of being assessed and judged by other commuters as they move around us – will know only too well. Students of literary fiction at schools, colleges and universities will have been taught to read slowly and carefully, 'seriously' and 'deeply'. But readers of popular fiction may find themselves doing quite the opposite: reading fast, reading at leisure, reading to 'escape', as one might do with one of Ian Fleming's James Bond novels or an historical romance. As we shall see with the Harry Potter novels in Chapter 1, questions of reader literacy are sometimes at stake here and all sorts of evaluations consequently come into play, including in this case educational ones. Some are worth attending to and others will merely reflect the prejudices of the people who utter them. But evaluation happens nonetheless as a matter of course, by outsiders who know very little about popular fiction (which, it must be said, includes a great many literary academics) and by insiders who may seem, from an outsider's point of view, to know far too much to be good for them. This latter group, who read popular fiction avidly – and seriously enough, under their own terms – will have their own views about all this. As the one of the compilers of the important US library resource, *Genreflecting: A Guide to Reading Interests in Genre Fiction* (first published in 1982), Betty Rosenberg, defiantly proclaims on her website to those who already *know* about popular genres: 'Never apologize for your reading taste' (*Genreflecting* homepage: <http://www.genreflecting.com/index2.html>).

Much like Sutherland's and Bloom's, this book will omit a vast amount of popular novelists even as it accounts for the field of writing in which they

operate: this is a feature I probably *should* apologize for right at the beginning. Even so, this book will range widely across the field, and may from time to time mention novelists that very few readers will have heard of. The resources for the excavation of popular writers, of course, are better than ever: for researchers in the field, there is no longer an excuse to forget any popular novelist, no matter how long dead and obscure. Some of these resources will be noted through the course of this book, but let me make special mention here of the often-derided value of the internet for popular fictional research. Mega-bookselling online sites such as *Amazon.com* provide a wealth of information about popular fiction, and most publishers as well as bookshops now have their own homepages. Bestseller lists are available from *New York Times* online (<http://www.nytimes.com/pages/books/bestseller/>) as well as the indispensable internet site, *Publishersweekly.com*, which is full of industry information and news about popular fiction. There are now websites that promote and organize genres and detail relevant authors and their publications. For example, the *Romance Writers of America* (<http://www.rwanational.org/>), which claims 8,400 'aspiring and published romance-writer members', provides online information about the genre, lists of monthly releases, links to a huge range of writers and their publishers, and news about relevant forthcoming events amongst many other things for genre enthusiasts, librarians and any other interested passers-by. The *Crime Writers Association of Great Britain* (<http://www.thecwa.co.uk/>), founded in 1953 and now online with 400 members, offers equally useful genre and writer information. It would be difficult to research science fiction without visiting the impressive Ottawa-based *SF Site: the homepage for science fiction and fantasy* (<http://www.sfsite.com/home.htm>) which processes a huge amount of new writing and provides links to almost everything online in the genre. There are also archival websites which recover long-forgotten popular novelists, and collectors' sites which chart – for example – the fascinating histories of cover designs of popular novels, such as Bryan Krofchok's remarkable *Bondian.com*, which also has an excellent archival database of articles on Bond and Ian Fleming. Many fanzines and prozines, such as *Locus*, are now fully or in part online and anyone who wishes to keep in touch with all the events (conferences, publications, interviews, reviews, industry news and so on) connected to a genre of popular fiction needs to be aware of these. Writers also usually have their own websites, some of which can be quite spectacular. Some are self-managed, some are overseen by their publishers, and some are put together unofficially; but most of them are informative, usually comprehensively so. There is also a huge number of fan sites online which pay tribute to writers of popular fiction and process their genres, sometimes amateuristically but usually with a surprising amount of knowledge and critical skill.

The internet only underscores the sense that popular fiction is an immense field of activity, potentially overwhelming in its scale. Perhaps as a reaction against this sobering fact, I have also decided in this book to devote sustained attention to a small number of modern and contemporary popular novelists, just five of them. J.R.R. Tolkien, Jackie Collins, Michael Crichton, John Grisham and Anne Rice: these are all novelists whose careers and output can be examined closely in order to make more sense of the 'culture industry' that is popular fiction, as well as the kinds of evaluations that are routinely applied to the field. It seems to me just as important to look at case studies of popular fiction writers – to compile and evaluate 'profiles' of the writers or to look at the way a writer's work has itself been evaluated – as it is to move broadly through the field of popular fiction itself. The last chapter of this book (Chapter 7) is an account of the ways in which J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, first published during the 1950s, is put to use in contemporary political culture, in particular, in relation to anxieties about global terrorism. One might imagine that 'escapist' epic fantasies about Middle Earth couldn't be any more remote from reality. Yet New Zealand, where Tolkien's trilogy was filmed at the beginning of a new millennium under the direction of Peter Jackson, has been promoting itself globally as Middle Earth to tourists as part of its carefully developed reputation as a 'safe destination' in these terrorist-conscious times. As the world is taken up with discussions of who is 'evil' and who isn't, epic fantasy can come to seem more real and perhaps more relevant than ever before. Popular fiction is so often cast not just as escapist, but as ephemeral, transient, destined for almost immediate obscurity – which in many cases is true. But sometimes this field of writing can find itself, unexpectedly, hooked into culture more broadly speaking, and hung on to: made to speak, in this case, for urgent global realities some 50 years after publication. The second part of this book, then, gives me a chance to look more closely at what we might call the *predicaments* of popular fiction: some of which are predictable enough, and others of which may cause a little surprise.

## Note

- 1 The amount of novels sold to produce a top-seller – that is, the bestselling bestsellers – has increased substantially over the years. In the early 1800s – during Sir Walter Scott's time – sales of over 10,000 copies would have suggested real popularity (Terry 1983: 28). By the 1970s, records were broken with sales of around 300,000. By the 1990s, a top-selling novel meant sales of over one million. Indeed, first print runs for top-sellers can now be one million, or more: sometimes a lot more. Records are continually broken by top-selling fiction – as well as non-fiction. See Daisy Maryles, 'The Stakes Rise for Chart Toppers' (Maryles 2004: <http://www.publishersweekly.com>).



## **Part I**

# **Defining the field**





# 1 Popular fiction

## The opposite of Literature?

This chapter argues that popular fiction is best conceived as the opposite of Literature (to which I shall ascribe a capital L, distinguishing it from literature as a general field of writing). The reverse is also true and, in fact, it can often seem as if Literature and popular fiction exist in a constant state of mutual repulsion or repudiation. By Literature, I mean the kind of writing (and let us stay with prose fiction broadly speaking) produced by, for example, Jane Austen, George Elliot, Henry James, James Joyce, William Faulkner – although his novel *Sanctuary* (1931) has ‘many of the ingredients that belong in a thriller’ (Glover 2003: 143) – Saul Bellow, D.H. Lawrence, Flannery O’Connor, Vladimir Nabokov, Martin Amis – although he has tried his hand at genre fiction with the police procedural novel, *Night Train* (1998) – Toni Morrison, Michael Ondaatje, Salman Rushdie, Jonathan Franzen, Arundhati Roy, Don DeLillo, Tobias Wolff and so on. The work of some of these writers (e.g. Austen) has certainly been popular, in which case it could reasonably be identified as Popular Literature. Some of these writers may even have written what could be termed ‘best-sellers’, although this term is quantitatively open: a bestseller can mean sales of anything from around 20,000 copies to several million (after which, we might use the terms ‘super-seller’ or topseller), and some works of Literature, whether it happens over an extended period of time or immediately after publication, can indeed do well in the marketplace. Nevertheless, aside from one or two exceptions to the rule noted above (and there are others), none of these writers has actually produced popular fiction and nor would they wish anyone to imagine that they had. They identify, and are rightly identified in turn, as authors of Literature. Indeed, as we shall see, many of them spend a great deal of time and effort distinguishing themselves from popular fiction and everything it seems to stand for. This is not a criticism of Literature, of course, and it would be a blinkered reader who assumes that this book – even as it speaks up for the reputation of popular fiction – is somehow therefore taking a kind of ‘anti-Literature’ position. It is simply one way of noting that