

The Study of Popular Fiction

A Source Book

Bob Ashley



Pinter Publishers, London

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Preface

This collection grows out of the experience of several years of teaching popular fiction to undergraduates on several degree courses in the humanities and communication studies. The reading to support this work has been continually expanding and widely dispersed—frequently in periodicals or isolated in corners of books primarily about something else—and to make it available to students has involved an annual test of commitment, dogged persistence and sometimes ingenuity for tutors, students and librarians alike. The absence of a suitable introductory textbook has been increasingly felt. I hope this book will go some way at least towards filling the gap.

The principle of selection reflects the modest aim and is essentially pragmatic; I have reprinted those materials which students have seemed to gain most from. The result is a collection of considerable diversity which commends no particular approach above the rest and which encourages the reader to sharpen his/her* critical approach to popular texts by drawing as appropriate on the perspectives represented. The readings will not of course be uniformly interesting, and it is probable that the reader will gain most from the more recent 'post-structuralist' extracts. It should be stressed, however, that no principle of *negative selection* has operated; though critical engagement is anticipated throughout, none of the readings is offered *simply* for rejection. A further point should be made about the sectionalising of the readings. The headings may raise expectations of a primer in literary theory: they shouldn't. The three introductory essays indicate some of the most obvious ways in which certain influential tendencies may contribute to the reading of popular texts. They are starting points only; the reader requiring detailed explication of literary theory is referred to the bibliography.

*from here on editorial contributions will employ alternately masculine/feminine forms.

My thanks are due to the individual contributors who permitted me to edit (sometimes substantially) their work. Though some of the richness of some of the arguments has inevitably been lost, I trust there have been no fundamental distortions. I am further indebted to Viv Chadder and Judith Skeels who recognised before I did the usefulness of many of the readings; to Jo Willerton and Freda Sketchley for typing the manuscript; and to Vanessa Couchman whose enthusiasm launched the project and encouraged its completion. Also, and especially, to Christine, Oleg and Trevor.

Bob Ashley
Nottingham

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1 Introduction: the reading of popular texts: some initial problems

- 1 K. Worpole, *Reading by Numbers: Contemporary Publishing and Popular Fiction* (1984), Chapter 2
- 2 L.A. Fielder, 'Towards a Definition of Popular Literature' (1975)
- 3 R.B. Rollin, 'Against Evaluation: The Role of the Critic of Popular Culture' (1975)
- 4 P. O'Flinn, 'Production and reproduction: The Case of *Frankenstein*' (1983)

The study of popular fiction is the serious examination of material widely dismissed as trivial and there is a tendency to assume that such study is in some way 'easy'. At a frivolous level, easy because the fiction is short and undemanding. More seriously, easy because popular texts are 'accessible' and students allegedly respond in terms of their own experience far more readily and vividly than they would respond, say, to a novel of 'substance' by George Eliot or D.H. Lawrence. Valid as this may be of individual responses to particular texts, as a statement about popular forms in general it will not do. It envisages the popular as an undifferentiated, composite construct in which consumers are uniformly immersed. Experience suggests otherwise: that there are real distinctions to be drawn between, for example, popular musical or televisual forms and fictional forms such as detective novels or westerns. There is no necessary correlation between the latter forms and the leisure experience of those who seek to study them and the obstacles are, in fact, numerous, complex and formidable. It is a premise of this collection that life as a student of popular fiction is far from easy. The introduction will explore some of the problems.

The student who confesses an interest in popular fiction may encounter a varied but predictable range of uncomprehending responses, from the genuinely incredulous parent—'do they *really* study that kind of thing in the colleges these days?'—to the aggressively

utilitarian—‘reading Shakespeare’s bad enough, but I think it’s a disgrace people are getting state money for reading this trash’. Some students even have to cope with the misgivings of tutors on other, more traditional courses whose vision still identifies courses in popular fiction as ‘soft options’. And all this is to assume that the student has no lingering doubts of his own as to the validity of the topic.

Such doubts seldom bother the student of ‘traditional’ English literature. ‘The classics’ are, even today, widely respected, seen to be self-evidently important, ‘good things’ to study. And there’s not very much doubt *which* texts are to be studied. The literary canon—that is the authors and texts widely deemed important—is remarkably stable. Shakespeare, Chaucer and Milton, Austen, Hardy and Lawrence are among the dozen or so writers who appear time and again in the syllabuses of English courses at all levels. There may be space occasionally for lesser known authors, but any controversy is usually at the periphery: the centre remains unmoved. For the student there is no problem of definition of field of study: her task is simply to become skilled in writing about well-established texts. The student of popular fiction enjoys few such certainties. Indeed the very problem of defining the field of study is central, fundamental and demands the attention of anyone who thinks seriously about non-canonical texts.

What then is signified by the ‘popular’ of popular fiction? Most definitions would include ‘enjoyed (and probably purchased) by many readers’, and in differentiating popular from ‘serious’ fiction it is widely assumed that its readers, as well as being overwhelmingly numerous, possess little capacity for literary discrimination. The sources of this assumption will be returned to. As to the earlier, common-sense formulation, the identification of popular with commercial success and the enjoyment of many would seem straightforward enough and, within fairly obvious limits, it is. The popular–serious distinction, however, is a theoretical mine-field.

In 1961 the best-selling paperback here in the United Kingdom was Lawrence’s *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*. Sales totalled three million copies in the first three months after publication. It so happens that this figure is substantially higher than that achieved in any one year by any single one of Fleming’s James Bond novels, overwhelmingly the best-selling popular novels of the 1960s.¹ In quantitative terms, then, the popularity of *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* is inescapable. But what of our qualitative nuance? Clearly the suggestion that D.H. Lawrence is a second-rate novelist appealing to readers of depraved taste would be widely rejected. Are we, then, to conclude that the best-selling paperback of 1961 was not in fact *popular*? The problem is focused the more sharply if we cite the familiar examples of Dickens and Shakespeare (both popular in their day, subsequently designated serious). Clearly the categories are both

overlapping and historically variable. Paul O'Flinn's essay (4) on the shifting significance of *Frankenstein* demonstrates that there can be no transhistorical, immutable popularity. As for *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, in 1961 and for the years of its notoriety it was a popular novel. It did not simultaneously cease to be serious fiction. Texts do not behave as those seeking definitional precision might like: lines distinguishing popular and serious as mutually exclusive entities cannot be drawn.

And yet for all its refusal to keep still and be defined, it is necessary to place some limits on the usage of 'popular' if only to observe academic proprieties and define the terms of my title. I'd like to do so empirically rather than theoretically and it is here that I return to consider the sources of that tendency I referred to earlier to connect popular fiction with a mass, indiscriminating readership. For all the problems of definition there can be little doubt as to significance in our culture of this nuance, in shaping responses to popular forms. Its source is located ultimately in the practice of literary criticism and it is that negative usage which regards popular fiction as second-rate fiction (or worse), a kind of cultural detritus, left over after literature of permanent value has been identified. Thus 'good' literature is identified, 'canonised', and takes its place within high culture as serious art. What is left is part of popular culture and the best that can be said of it is that it provides harmless entertainment (many commentators, of course, have disputed 'harmless'). More likely it will be ignored. And this is the starting point of this collection: what is to be said about the left-overs? For the residuum is overwhelmingly substantial. It constitutes the principal, perhaps only, fictional reading of the majority of the population of modern industrialised societies; it is widely assumed to influence lives profoundly; and is surely of major significance in the understanding of those lives, particularly the processes by which meanings are constructed and exchanged.

It would be wrong to overstate the case here. The silence on popular fiction *has* been broken and the bulk of the material in this collection indicates the progress which has been made, slowly, since the 1960s, both within the practices of literary criticism and beyond via the influence of other academic disciplines. And yet my early premise stands: it is not easy to study popular fiction; much resistance persists, as do the old prejudices of the mass-culture debate. It is important to re-emphasise the intrusiveness of these prejudices. Such is the prestige and influence of the institution of Literature that its evaluations reverberate beyond its own disciplinary confines. This is why the very idea of the intensive study of popular romance or science fiction invariably provokes a response—no matter how non-literary the respondent. And this is why the student's difficulties are compounded.

And so, what is a student, perhaps, though not necessarily, fresh from 'A' level study in English Literature, going to make of the following passage? (The passage is from Mickey Spillane's novel *I The Jury* and records the hero Mike Hammer's encounter with a young woman who, he's been warned in advance, may be a nymphomaniac. The reader is urged to pause for a few minutes after reading it and note briefly his responses.)

Her eyes were blazing into mine. They were violet eyes, a wild blazing violet. Her mouth looked soft and wet and provocative. She was making no attempt to keep the negligee on. One shoulder had slipped down and her brown skin formed an interesting contrast with the pink. I wondered how she got her tan. There were no strap marks anywhere. She uncrossed her legs deliberately and squirmed like an overgrown cat, letting the light play with the ripply muscles in her naked thighs.

I was only human. I bent over her, taking her mouth on mine. She was straining in the divan to reach me, her arms tight around my neck. Her body was a hot flame; the tip of her tongue searched for mine. She quivered under my hands wherever I touched her. Now I knew why she hadn't married. One man could never satisfy her. My hand fastened on the hem of the negligee and with one motion flipped it open, leaving her body lean and bare. She let my eyes search every inch of her brown figure.

I grabbed my hat and jammed it on my head.

I have occasionally confronted new students of popular fiction with this extract in a seminar situation. Invariably it provokes laughter, though the laughter is usually uncomfortable and ambiguous, reflecting the reader's uncertainty as to how, in a serious academic context, to respond to material of this kind. Fundamentally the laughter proclaims the reader's distance: she clearly knows the difference between *good* writing and *this* writing. She further proclaims herself immune from its effects: she at least won't be depraved and corrupted by writing of this sort. Of course many readers don't get this far: an initial response of aversion or total indifference ensures silence on Spillane. Such silence, or uncertainty, reflects the responses of literary criticism to popular fiction and point what seems to me the only way forward. What is required is, effectively, a form of de-conditioning, a release from these culturally induced reflex rejections into a capacity to undertake, without embarrassment, the dispassionate analysis of Spillane.

The desired analysis, however, involves the exploration of a pleasure which the analyst frequently does not share, and this may raise further problems, especially for the politically sensitive student. The very right to analyse 'other people's pleasure' may be questioned as a kind of cultural trespass in which an élite privileged to partake of true culture

enters the territory of the uncultured. The exercise is seen as patronising. The argument has become circular and somewhat vicious: the student freed (perhaps miraculously) from the inhibiting influence of Literature nonetheless doubts his credentials as a privileged outsider to comment on life in the ghetto. At this point the position of students of other academic disciplines may seem enviable: not only does the sociologist have no expectation of pleasure in the study object *per se*; it is also an everyday part of the job to investigate the culture of subordinate social groups. Given that such departures within literary studies are, even today, occasional and peripheral, it should not surprise that they constitute politically sensitive areas.

There would seem to be two possible ways out of the impasse. Solution one would be to rid Literature of its hang-ups: a reconstituted criticism and a deconditioned student. Solution two would be to rid the study of popular fiction of Literature, to entrust the work to the social sciences and to regard, for example, an 'A' level qualification in English Literature as a negative qualification for academic study of popular texts. Solution two has its advocates and it represents arguably the easiest route to a dispassionate criticism of texts as cultural practices and whose focus is *meaning* as opposed to *value*. And yet a divorce with Literature entails the loss of so much more. Tony Bennett's article 'Marxism and Popular Fiction' (27) argues the failure of much early work on popular fiction to engage with specific texts. Close textual analysis is not of course the prerogative of those with literary backgrounds, but it is fairly clear that the technique has been nurtured within English Literature in such a way that a literary training significantly encourages the capacity for close, sensitive and sophisticated textual study. The productive study of popular texts does not then require a defection from Literature to Sociology but rather a creative synthesis in which detailed textual reading is reinforced by an objectivity and freedom from value judgements rooted in the social sciences. The object of this book is firstly to indicate some of the issues such a reconstituted criticism will address and secondly to provide examples of such critical practice in action.

A further theoretical problem remains. The very notion of a method for the study of popular fiction may be questioned. There may be anxiety lest one simply constructs an alternative tradition, even an 'alternative canon', separate and distinct from that of main-stream literature. Such a separation would appear to contradict the earlier insistence that the popular and the serious are shifting and overlapping categories. And it may further be argued that to remove work on popular texts to a separate terrain, with its own distinctive methodology, is to endorse its marginalisation, to legitimise Literature in its tendency to ignore. The problem is very real and is similar in essence to the dilemma of other interest groups relegated to the periphery of what 'matters' culturally —

feminists, blacks, working-class writers, for example. I must confess to a continuing uncertainty on this issue: it is *possible* that consolidated space on the margins now will lead to invisibility in the long term. What is *certain*, however, is that continuing silence will *not* lead to the doors of Literature being flung open and popular fiction welcomed in. What is also certain is that the terms in which the silence is broken should not imply a theoretical endorsement of the popular-serious division. It is manifestly true that the methods of traditional literary studies offer few useful insights into non-canonical texts. The corollary does not, however, apply. The reconstituted criticism I advocate should not be regarded as appropriate to popular texts *exclusively*. Structuralist narratology has much to say about Jane Austen's narratives as those of Barbara Cartland and it would be absurd to argue that Conrad's novels are in some sense 'above' the kind of ideological analysis entirely appropriate to those of Le Carré. The ideal to work towards is one in which analysis is directed at 'fiction' with no need of qualitative adjective. Short of that ideal as we are, the distinction, for all its theoretical absurdity, is empirically present and influential. It seems to me that a full recognition, both of its sources and nature, is a precondition of its being broken down.

Note

1. Sources for sales statistics: *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, supplied by Penguin Books Ltd.; for Fleming, see Bennett and Woollacott (1987), pp. 26–27. These figures do not, of course, reflect literary qualities alone: *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was the subject of an infamous (and unsuccessful) prosecution under the Obscene Publications Act in summer 1960, and from 1962 onwards Fleming's novels were adapted into a series of immensely successful feature films.

1 Ken Worpole, *Reading by Numbers: Contemporary Publishing and Popular Fiction*

The key ingredient in the success of popular literature is quantity, both in numbers of titles and numbers of sales. The market must continually be stimulated and satisfied. Economic literature is one of economies of scale, and as such requires writers of enormous output. Frank Richards, children's writer and creator of Billy Bunter, wrote up to 18,000 words a day, and in his lifetime is estimated to have written over 60 million words for publication. Dennis Wheatley wrote more than 60 books; Denise Robins more than 170 romantic novels; Ruby Ayres published 143 novels; Barbara Cartland more than 230, though these pale besides the

spectacular output of popular novelist Ursula Bloom, who has had 420 novels published to date and is still writing. Modern writers are less prolific but their sales are more spectacular. Dennis Wheatley's total sales of 37 million copies for 60 titles has, more recently, been eclipsed by Stephen King's 40 million sales with only four titles (and within less than one decade)! Modern popular fiction thus very easily attains sales figures far in excess of earlier record numbers, which suggests that the market is still expanding and that the book has by no means exhausted its possibilities as a cultural form.

.....

In the modern literary industry the sums of money changing hands for the basic product are high, and the successes and failures spectacular. One million dollars was paid as an advance by an American publisher for Shirley Conran's soft-porn novel *Lace*. (She hadn't written a novel before, but through her journalism was known to be an up-to-the-minute 'name'.) Spy-novelist Ken Follett, 'Britain's youngest author-millionaire', at the end of the 1970s signed a 'three-book, three-million dollar contract in the U.S., obviously where the market is strongest'.¹⁰ Mick Jagger's autobiography was sold in 1938 to Weidenfeld for £1.5 million. The U.K. rights to Martin Cruz Smith's intriguing thriller *Gorky Park* were sold for £150,000; the film rights were sold in America for 1 million dollars and his publishers have earned over 2.5 million dollars from book sales internationally.¹¹ Cruz Smith is in fact an interesting example of the modern writer of popular fiction. Between the ages of 24 and 39 he wrote over 60 novels for various paperback publishers in America:

'Editors knew I could turn out a better book in two weeks than many which had taken six months to write. That's not immodest. A helluva lot of bad books were being written in six months.'

Before the success of *Gorky Park* Smith had also made a name as a writer of genre fiction with the novel *Nightwing*, commissioned by his publishers 'when the film and publishing industries were in a state of post-*Jaws* euphoria, eager to lay out money on any property which featured biting animals'.¹²

Of such key sensitivities to popular moods and genres are fortunes made. American eye surgeon Robin Cook decided he wanted to write a best-seller, so he took a crash course in the writing of popular fiction, scrutinising the *New York Times* best-seller lists, and making a painstaking study of those novelists '... with sales of a million copies or over'.¹³ After reading 150 such novels in order to extricate the conventions, he wrote *Coma*, employing every trick of the suspense-thriller. Before publishing it he secured the sale of the film rights and in one day, 'Cook was able to sell hardback, paperback and movie rights and secure

the necessary exposure to make *Coma* a hit. The movie was a big success and the novel was a worldwide best-seller.' Cook has since gone on to write *Brain* and *Fever*.

The publishing industry has become one of the brightest jewels in the otherwise rather tarnished crown of entrepreneurial capitalism. It remains one of the few industries where fortunes can still be made overnight, and consequently the press and other media have become obsessed with the rags-to-riches stories of unknown authors who have become millionaires in a very short space of time. Thus we learn that Stephen King 'has a wife and three children, two houses, two Mercedes';¹⁴ that for Sheila Holland 'success has brought her a 20-room mansion, private schooling for her children, a Daimler—the Rolls is on order—and a passion for suites at the Ritz and jolly jaunts on Concorde';¹⁵ and that Roberta Leigh lives in 'a luxurious London penthouse filled with antique furniture, Henry Moore sculptures, even a Renoir. And she stopped counting her money years ago.' East London working class writer Lena Kennedy, having published three 'sexy, gritty novels', now has 'two homes and is feted around the world in five-star hotels'.¹⁶ Len Deighton is the son of a chauffeur with a cottage in Dundalk and a 'second home in California'; and Ken Follett has an 'Edwardian mansion in Surrey. Second home in New York. Wife, two children, one butler. Chauffeur-driven Mercedes'.¹⁷ On the back cover of *Woman's Weekly Fiction Omnibus*, we learn that author Sarah Parkes 'is interested in local history, particularly that of her own sixteenth-century house'.

It shouldn't be thought that such professional writers earn their money through occasional bouts of work triggered off by moments of sudden dramatic inspiration. Writing for them is a daily stint at the coalface of production. It has to be, if like Roberta Leigh you 'once hammered out 24 books in a year—every one a winner'.¹⁸ Sheila Holland 'can write 10,000 words a day'. When interviewed in *The Guardian* Len Deighton said he had been working for the past five weeks 'on his word processor for up to 14 hours a day'. The production of popular fiction is every bit as labour intensive as it was in the days of Gissing's New Grub Street. Today the rewards are much greater and the writers of mass production fiction no longer live in cheap lodging houses in Somerstown or in semi-detached houses in Islington, but work at home in stock-broker belt Surrey with one or two secretaries to answer the fan mail and deal with the accountant.

No longer does the writer type away at an original idea which becomes a novel submitted to the publisher; rather, the publisher, or agent, goes to the writer with the idea for the novel. In a recent interview, actress Angela Douglas talked of 'meeting with my publisher to discuss ideas for a novel he wants me to write'. It was seen earlier how literary agent Carol Smith actually wrote the plot outlines for an entire series of