

# Literary Genres

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There's an anecdote about a board meeting at Desilu Studios in Hollywood, circa 1964, where Lucille Ball presided over the TV production empire she had set up with one-time husband Desi Arnaz. According to Desilu vice-president Herbert F. Solow, Lucy seldom said much during meetings. But one day, as Solow was about to update the board on series in development, network deals and the like, Lucy said suddenly: 'Herb, what's happening with that South Seas series?' Solow was perplexed. There was no South Seas series. Lucy said, 'You know, Herb, that South Seas series you mentioned last time'. Solow, Lucy insisted, was producing a show about USO performers entertaining the troops in the South Seas during the war. Solow did not know what she was talking about. He said he had never mentioned a USO show. 'Oh yes you did,' cried Lucy. 'Oh, yes, you did, Herb. You called it *Star Trek!*' (Solow and Justman 1996: 21–2).

What had happened? When writers pitch ideas for film, television, even books, it is often thought a good idea to describe the proposed work in terms of another. A film, for example, might be *Moby-Dick* meets *The Terminator*, or *Macbeth* among the gangs of East LA. *Star Trek* creator Gene Roddenberry had pitched the series to Desilu as 'Wagon Train to the stars' – after a Western series, top-rated in its day, in which a party of pioneers travel intrepidly, and interminably, across the not-quite final frontier of the Old West (Solow and Justman 1996: 15). Lucy, evidently, was thinking about a wagon train of the stars. What could a show called *Star Trek* be about, after all, but stars on a trek? The USO business was her own invention. What Lucy had failed to grasp was the *genre* of the show. The anecdote not only answers the much-debated conundrum, 'What was Lucy's contribution to *Star Trek*?', it also illustrates that we understand stories and story-ideas on the basis of our previous assumptions. Give us just a little, and we take a lot. We never begin with a blank slate.

This is what genre is all about. In this chapter, we will look at what genre means, in practical terms; at how genres develop, using the novel as an example; at the notion of 'literary' versus 'genre' fiction; and at ways in which we, as writers, may work with genre – or, to put it another way, with our awareness of the past, of everything that has already been written, and not by us.

## Genre, form and mode

To define genre is not as simple as it looks. At a basic level, it's easy. A French word denoting 'kind', related etymologically both to 'gender' and 'genus', 'genre' has been used

in English since at least the early nineteenth century to refer to a form, a type, a variety of literature or art. But how specific a kind?

Old-style English exams often carried rubrics warning, ‘Students must show competence in the three main genres’ – in other words, answer on poetry, drama and fiction. By these lights, a literary genre is defined by whether it is written in verse, dramatic form, or narrative prose. This is a simplified, modern version of an older three-way definition, dating back to classical times. Aristotle and Horace weren’t much concerned with prose versus poetry. Literature *was* poetry, but there were three types of it: lyric, where the poet speaks to us directly; drama, where the characters do the talking; and epic, where the poet appears as narrator, and the characters speak as well (Wellek and Warren 1976: 227–8).

It may seem contrary to common usage to talk about poetry or drama or fiction as a ‘genre’. A better word perhaps is ‘form’, or ‘medium’, suggesting the essential containers in which writing comes, irrespective of subject matter or style. But things are not immediately clear if we assume that genre is only concerned with these finer distinctions.

Take tragedy. In classical terms, a tragedy is a work written in dramatic form and encompassing a specific action: the noble protagonist, the tragic flaw, the catastrophic fall. Tragedy emerges in ancient Greece, and Aristotle’s *Poetics* (fourth century BC) is its how-to-write manual. Famously, Aristotle insists on the primacy of plot, on the point-by-point structuring of events and revelations to achieve the maximum emotional impact on the audience: the celebrated *catharsis*, or purging of pity and fear. It’s not a question of shocks and surprises. Greek audiences didn’t want to be told a story they’d never heard before. Everybody knew already what happened to Oedipus: Sophocles’ skill lay in how he put the story across. But even if we don’t know the story of a tragedy, we know what kind of story to expect – and what kind of ending. Drama has its origins in ritual. This is a key insight not only in the understanding of drama, but of the whole concept of genre. Genre is, in a real sense, the enactment of ritual.

Both tragedy and comedy are basic literary ‘kinds’ which can be associated with specific structural features and methods of presentation. They also represent deeper, more fundamental literary impulses. Northrop Frye’s schema in the influential study *Anatomy of Criticism* (1957) sets forth four archetypal literary kinds – comedy, romance, tragedy, satire – which persist across human history and correspond to the four seasons: respectively, spring, summer, autumn, winter. Another classic critical study, William Empson’s *Some Versions of Pastoral* (1935), takes what might have been thought a distinct, easy-to-recognise genre, and expands its meaning. Originally, pastoral was a form of poetry – the *Idylls* of Theocritus, the *Eclogues* of Virgil – in which the city-dwelling poet longs for an idealised notion of simple, rural life. To Empson, ‘pastoral’ is any work which, even implicitly, contrasts simple and complicated ways of life, favouring the former; his ‘versions of pastoral’ therefore include Shakespeare’s Sonnet 94 (‘They that have power to hurt, and will do none’), ‘The Garden’ by Andrew Marvell, John Gay’s eighteenth-century satirical play *The Beggar’s Opera*, and Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*. We could add more: A. E. Housman’s poem-sequence *A Shropshire Lad*, *The Waltons* and *Little House on the Prairie*, *The Lord of the Rings*, ‘Rocky Mountain High’ by John Denver. If genre is to mean anything, it has to mean something more specific than this.

In Frye’s archetypes and Empson’s ‘versions’, we are dealing not with genres, as commonly understood, but ‘modes’. Satire is a mode, and can appear in many forms: Pope’s mock-epic poem *The Rape of the Lock* (1714), Voltaire’s scathing parable *Candide* (1759), Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), Kubrick’s film *Dr*

*Strangelove* (1963). All are satires; all, in the classical definition, ‘expose folly and vice’; but the means by which this is done, and the form, tone and style employed is different in each case. A mode, therefore, is a way of approaching material. Where it gets complicated is when a mode is also, in a more limited sense, a genre. Often what begins as a genre – tragedy, pastoral – expands over time into a mode. Conversely, a mode or other broad literary effect – fantasy, suspense – may come to characterise a genre.

What most people mean by genre – as applied to literature, film and the like – is a particular type of subject matter. A Western is a Western whether it is a novel by Zane Grey or a film starring John Wayne. *Rebecca* (1938), the novel by Daphne du Maurier, and *Rebecca* (1940), Alfred Hitchcock’s film version of the book, are both romantic suspense stories. But it isn’t always so easy. Is the sonnet a genre? It is certainly also a form in any sense of the word, defined by the number of lines and the rhyme scheme, as opposed to what it is about. The ode, on the other hand, is an ode because of its subject (serious) *and* its style (elevated) *and* its form (elaborately arranged stanzas).

Our distinctions can seldom be hard and fast. If ‘genre’ means a fundamental, essentially permanent type of writing – say, comedy – it has also come to suggest a rapid, more or less ephemeral succession of styles: bodice-rippers, sex-and-shopping novels, cyberpunk. Taxonomic critics such as Wellek and Warren in their *Theory of Literature* worry about this. Are we to have an endless line of genres, based solely upon subject matter? ‘Our conception of genre should lean to the formalistic side’, they sternly advise (Wellek and Warren 1976: 233). Biology might be helpful: if poetry is the genus, the sonnet is the species. Alastair Fowler in *Kinds of Literature* (1982) analyses genre theory in exhaustive detail, but in the end offers no simple system to make all clear. It cannot be: genre is not a precise business, and any attempt to divide genres definitively from sub-genres, or to keep them distinct from form and mode, is doomed to failure.

Theory gets us only so far. History is more instructive.

### Genre in the novel: a case study

What is a novel? The word has come to suggest any fictional narrative, on any subject, so long as it is written in prose (usually) and is of some length – say, 40,000 words at a minimum.

The definition was once stricter. Prose fiction can be found far back in history, and all around the world. In a remarkable book, *The True Story of the Novel* (1997), Margaret Anne Doody argues for a ‘history of the novel’ spanning numerous cultures and thousands of years; but this, perhaps, is to stretch to breaking point the notion of ‘the novel’. When we talk about the novel, we usually mean a form of fiction that developed in Europe. Familiar literary history goes like this: once, the dominant form of narrative fiction was ‘romance’ (a word originally meaning ‘in the Roman language’). Written in prose from the fifteenth century onwards, romances in the original sense were elaborate tales of chivalric deeds, courtly love, and pastoral enchantments, flagrantly ‘unrealistic’, frequently invoking magic. In English, Sir Philip Sidney’s *Arcadia* (1581–93) is the dominant example of the form; Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* (c.1600) is an adaptation of a once-celebrated prose romance, Thomas Lodge’s *Rosalynde* (1590).

Already, Boccaccio’s *Decameron* (1349–51) in prose and Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (c.1387) in verse had suggested the possibilities of realism. The sixteenth century brought the Spanish ‘picaresque’ – episodic, low-life comic stories about a *pícaro*, a rogue or trickster – exemplified in the anonymous *Lazarillo de Tormes* (1554). The same realistic, comic

impulse infuses Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1604–14), which subjects the romance to the withering barbs of parody. Driven mad by the reading of romances, Quixote sets out on a life of adventure, not realising that, far from being a valiant knight on a noble steed, he is really just a silly old man on a broken-down nag. In exploring illusion, reality, and the gap between them, Cervantes discovers the quintessential theme of the classic novel, one we can trace through works as diverse as Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Dickens' *Great Expectations* (1860–1), Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866), and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925).

In eighteenth-century England, realistic narratives come dramatically into vogue. At first, such books purported not to be fictional at all. Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) was apparently the autobiography of a real shipwrecked sailor. Richardson's *Pamela* (1741) was presented as an authentic collection of letters from an unusually literate servant girl, telling how she married her master after first fending off his attempts on her 'virtue'. The pretence of authenticity didn't last long: the point was, the story *could* have been real, happening in the real world to believable characters. Books of this sort came to be called 'novels' because the stories they told were *new*. As Ian Watt remarks in *The Rise of the Novel*, 'Defoe and Richardson are the first great writers in our literature who did not take their plots from mythology, history, legend or previous literature. In this they differ from Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare and Milton' (Watt 1963: 14).

In contrast to Defoe's mock-autobiographies or Richardson's collections of letters, Fielding's bawdy comic adventure story *Tom Jones* (1749) is delivered to us in elaborately artful third-person narrative, complete with direct addresses to the reader. But all the time, Fielding makes his claim on truth. Watt usefully distinguishes 'realism of presentation', the novel's illusion of reality, and 'realism of assessment', its depiction of the realities of human nature (Watt 1963: 300–1). It is because of its truthfulness, Fielding declares, that the novel is superior to the romance: 'Truth distinguishes our writings from those idle romances which are filled with monsters, the productions, not of nature, but of distempered brains' (Fielding 1966: 151).

The distinction between novel and romance soon became commonplace. In her critical study *The Progress of Romance* (1785), Clara Reeve puts it like this:

The Romance is an heroic fable, which treats of fabulous persons and things. – The Novel is a picture of real life and manners, and of the time in which it is written. The Romance in lofty and elevated language, describes what never happened nor is likely to happen. – The Novel gives a familiar relation of such things, as pass every day before our eyes, such as may happen to our friend, or to ourselves; and the perfection of it, is to represent every scene, in so easy and natural a manner, and to make them appear so probable, as to deceive us into a persuasion (at least while we are reading) that all is real, until we are affected by the joys or distresses, of the persons in the story, as if they were our own. (cited in Allott 1959: 47)

As it happened, Reeve was also the author of a book called *The Old English Baron* (1778), an early example of the 'gothic' vogue which established itself in the wake of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). Walpole's absurd ghost story is a famously bad piece of writing, and its historical significance is far in excess of its merits. Almost as soon as the realistic novel had established itself, the romance, in effect, broke back through, with its 'fabulous persons and things'. But it was not a simple reversion: in the preface to the second edition, Walpole claimed that his book 'was an attempt to blend the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern' – the old romance, in other words, and the novel.

The limitations of the novel were clear: 'the great resources of fancy have been dammed up, by a strict adherence to common life'. Invoking Shakespeare as his model, Walpole claimed that he wrote about realistic characters, but placed them in 'realms of invention' (Walpole 1969: 7). The stage was set for the first great flowering of the 'gothic novel', which peaked in Ann Radcliffe's curiously hypnotic saga of a girl imprisoned in a mysterious castle, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794). Not the least aspect of Radcliffe's importance is her unprecedented development of descriptive writing. Previous novelists had spent little time showing what the world of their characters looked like; Radcliffe, eager to arouse wonder and awe, immerses her reader in a rapturous dream-world of exotic, wild scenery.

The gothic marks the first great schism in the English novel. Walpole used the term 'romance' as a catch-all for 'prose fiction' ('the two kinds of romance, the ancient and the modern'), but later commentators increasingly used 'novel' as the default term, the novel being the form of which 'romance' was a genre. Often it was a dubious one. 'Romance' suggested something less serious than the novel proper, an unlikely adventure story, perhaps a book for children: Dumas' *The Three Musketeers* (1844–5), Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* (1857), Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1886), Baroness Orczy's *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1905). Only in the twentieth century did 'romance' come to mean simply a love story.

Today's major varieties of popular fiction can all be traced back to the gothic. In 1794, anarchist philosopher William Godwin publishes *Caleb Williams*, a tale of flight and pursuit about a man unjustly accused of a crime, struggling vainly to evade capture. The story is set in the England of Godwin's day. There are no castles, no clanking chains; there is evil, crime, darkness, but no ghosts, no demons. In *Caleb Williams*, the crime thriller is born.

When Edgar Allan Poe writes the short stories 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue' (1841) and 'The Purloined Letter' (1845), the gothic obsession with crime and darkness turns into one of its most productive pathways: the detective story. Poe, like Matthew Lewis in *The Monk* (1796), a festering tale of depravity that allegedly shocked even the famously dissolute Lord Byron, also pushes the gothic towards its most intense form – horror – in stories such as 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839). Later American literature offers further permutations of gothic, in the nineteenth-century novel of symbolism and psychological allegory – Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) – and the twentieth-century 'Southern gothic' of novels such as Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). Meanwhile, Jane Austen's celebrated satire of gothic, *Northanger Abbey* (1818), does for Radcliffe and her imitators much the same as Cervantes had done for the old romance.

Sir Walter Scott draws on the gothic in a different way. Radcliffe had presented a world of the mysterious past, steeped in an atmosphere of stagy medievalism. Scott shared Radcliffe's feeling for history, adopting her elaborate, evocative scene-setting, but drawing on an altogether more credible past. *Waverley* (1814) lays out the classic formula for the historical novel. In Edward Waverley, Scott presents a fictional hero caught up in real-life events – in this case, the Jacobite rising of 1745 – with historical figures in supporting roles. Shakespeare's history plays had concentrated on the main players: Julius Caesar, Henry V. In writing *Waverley*, rather than, say, *Bonnie Prince Charlie*, Scott achieves greater imaginative flexibility in terms of plot, and allows the reader a more compelling sense of identification through the device of the ordinary person caught up in extraordinary events.

Scott was by far the most influential British novelist of the nineteenth century. Both Hugo's *Les Misérables* (1862) and Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1863–9), are working, if more brilliantly, in Scott's vein, as are twentieth-century popular novels such as Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind* (1936) or Herman Wouk's Second World War saga *The*

*Winds of War* (1971). Not until Robert Graves' *I, Claudius* (1934), purportedly the memoirs of the Roman emperor, did a rival conception of the historical novel come to the fore. It remains less widely imitated.

The most celebrated take on the gothic is Mary Shelley's. The story behind the writing of *Frankenstein* (1818) is legendary: the ghost-story competition one wet summer on Lake Geneva where the young Mary and Percy Bysshe Shelley were staying with Byron, inspiring a dream from which Mary woke in terror. Mary Shelley was William Godwin's daughter, and her novel partakes of the claustrophobic atmosphere of her father's *Caleb Williams*, complete with elaborate details of flight and pursuit. Where it differs is in its treatment of the monstrous. In *Caleb Williams*, the monster is a metaphor: the novel is a story of human beings, and the monsters they make of themselves through pride, envy, and lust for vengeance. In *Frankenstein*, metaphor is reality. But what is most important is the reason why: Frankenstein's creature is not the product of magic, but of science. As Brian W. Aldiss argues in *Billion Year Spree* (1973), *Frankenstein* – more than any rival precursor – marks the beginnings of science fiction.

### How genre works

In the movement from romance to novel, to gothic novel and beyond, we see that genres develop not through one process but several. The predominance of one type of work (romance) calls forth another (realism) that seems quite unlike it, as if to illustrate the law that for every action there's an equal and opposite reaction. But it's not quite the tug-of-war it seems. Richardson's *Pamela* purports to be a realistic novel. The setting is not Arcadia, but contemporary England; the heroine is a defiantly 'low' character, a servant-girl, not a princess or noble lady. But the story – rags to riches, basically – is just fantasy in another key. This is inevitable: all storytelling depends for its effect upon the creation for the reader of a desirable fantasy, and this is as true of Irvine Welsh's squalid story of drug addiction, *Trainspotting* (1993), as it is of C. S. Lewis's children's fantasies, *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950–6). The reader is invited to participate vicariously in a world that may or may not be attractive, but is – to the right reader – *exciting*, offering an imaginary but powerfully satisfying extension of experience.

New movements in literature and art frequently purport to be more realistic, closer to the truth of life, than what has come before. Wordsworth, announcing a poetic revolution in his preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), rejects the paraphernalia of eighteenth-century verse, with its elevated style, its classical allusions and forms. By contrast, he claims, he will write about 'ordinary life' in 'the language really spoken by men' (Wordsworth 1969: 164). Wordsworth's influence on nineteenth-century poetry was immense, but by the early twentieth century the mournful evocations of landscape, rural life, and the passing of time which followed in his wake had become the merest convention, and the language of poetry again seemed remote from the language of life. In 1913, the American poet Ezra Pound announced a new revolution. 'Imagism' would be a hard, unsentimental poetry with no superfluous words, no abstractions, no meaningless ornamentation. Poetry would evoke, not explain. And of course there would be none of the clutter of rhyme, scansion, and other features of traditional form (Pound 1972: 130–4).

We could put it like this: yesterday's realism is today's romance. The novels of Jane Austen are realism's response to the romances of Ann Radcliffe. But Austen herself is now read largely as a species of romance, and modern novels which draw on Austen are romantic, as in the 'Regency romances' of Georgette Heyer, such as *The Grand Sophy* (1950), or

the fantastical reconfiguration of Regency England in Susannah Clarke's fantasy *Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell* (2004). Realism and romance are the fundamental poles of literature, and the history of literature is of an oscillation between them. Literature wants both to escape and to confront reality. Realism is waking and romance is dream, and we desire both equally.

But if genre develops through a process of rebellion, it also involves a tree-like branching. We see this in the case of the gothic, in which the implications of a style or subject are progressively explored, with different writers making different emphases. In the modern era, new genres are identified rapidly. This has not always been the case. When Aldiss calls Mary Shelley a science fiction writer, he is not using a term she would have recognised. H. G. Wells saw his novels such as *The Time Machine* (1895) or *The War of the Worlds* (1898) as 'scientific romances'. It was only with Hugo Gernsback's magazine *Amazing Stories*, launched in the US in 1926, that the world began to speak of 'science fiction' – and then only slowly: a 1928 Gernsback editorial boasts of 'The Rise of Scientifiction' (Frewin 1975: 56).

### Literary versus genre

In any gathering of science fiction writers, one theme soon emerges: the unending clash between 'genre' and 'mainstream' or 'literary' fiction. Science fiction writers are used to being dismissed by the literary establishment, and resent it.

The use of 'genre' as a term of disparagement is a recent phenomenon historically, reflecting the rise of branded 'category fiction' in the twentieth century. The delineation of genre in this sense is far more of a problem in literature than it is in cinema, where the Westerns of John Ford are considered classics, and Hitchcock's status as 'master of suspense' does not prevent him also being regarded as perhaps the finest of cinema's *auteurs*. But there is a paradox here: in so far as Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) is seen as a masterpiece, it is, of necessity, elevated above the merely generic. *Vertigo* is no ordinary crime thriller.

Used negatively, 'genre' suggests not the basic properties of a work in terms of content or form – a level on which, say, Dostoyevsky might be considered a crime writer – but an implication of formula, of joining the dots. Nor is the charge unjust: the strict guidelines issued by publishers of 'category romance', such as Harlequin or Mills and Boon, are notorious. Writers of ambition are repelled by such rules, which seem to militate against creativity itself, making blatant the writer's role not as self-directed creative person but mere servant of editors and marketing departments, dutifully fulfilling the apparent expectations of an audience pictured as inattentive, easily bored, and petulantly impatient with the unexpected or the difficult. 'Genre fiction' by definition is *like something else* – fiction that resembles other fiction. It is for this reason that 'serious' fiction is assumed to be non-generic, the product of a unique imaginative act.

It need hardly be said that this is seldom the case. A cursory analysis of literary or 'mainstream' fiction reveals a series of genres or sub-genres which are not branded as such: the novel of middle-class marriage, the sensitive study of adolescence, the upmarket romance, the upmarket historical, the literary fantasy or magical realist novel, the feminist novel, the multicultural or 'minority' novel, the experimental novel, the cultish youth novel. Literary fiction includes a great deal of genre fiction, more or less successfully disguised: for example, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005), in which cloned children are reared as organ donors in an alternative version of contemporary England, is a science fiction novel in all but name. A work like this is generally felt by critics to 'transcend' the genre it resembles.

One might say it transcends it in so far as it is published in a non-genre jacket. Yet this is not quite fair. Science fiction stories tend to fail artistically to the extent that the author is seriously interested in science or technology or predicting the future. Ishiguro cares about none of this, presenting his story as a metaphor of human destiny rather than as a commentary on biotechnology, to be praised or blamed for its success or failure as scientific extrapolation.

Genre transcendence is a real phenomenon. The 'revenge tragedy' was a recognised genre in Shakespeare's time. But when we have said that *Hamlet* (c.1601) is a revenge tragedy, we have not said much. A celebrated African-American novel, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), is a ghost story – a murdered child comes back from the dead. But to say this is to say nothing. In any literary work that aspires to art, basic features of content are never ends in themselves. They are a vehicle: in Morrison's case, for what she wants to say about motherhood, race, slavery, time and death.

The critic Harold Bloom has written compellingly of the 'strangeness' that marks out those writers we think of as great (Bloom 1995: 4). Writers are considered 'great' in the proportion to which we view them as original. The great writer is felt to be *sui generis* (one of a kind, unique – literally, outside of genre). We value Shakespeare to the extent that he is 'Shakespearean'; Dickens is 'Dickensian'. In the later eighteenth century, there was a vogue of 'Shandean' texts, inspired by Laurence Sterne's bizarrely digressive comic novel, or anti-novel, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* (1759–67). The sub-genre has sunk almost entirely into oblivion, and it is not difficult to see why. Sterne's eccentricity is the whole point: he cannot be systematised. The same is true of twentieth-century experimental writers such as James Joyce or Virginia Woolf. There are incidental features one can take from Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), but the performance as a whole is unrepeatable – indeed, there would be no point in doing it more than once.

We might feel that Joyce, like Sterne or Woolf, is an influence of far less immediate value to other writers than, say, Shakespeare or Austen or Hemingway, who, for all their individual brilliance, are *enabling* to other writers in a way that Joyce is not. The word 'experimental', as applied to art, is misleading, implying a scientific or technological notion of progress which can hardly describe the movement from Homer to Dante, from Shakespeare to Milton, from Dickens to Joyce to Stephen King. It is perhaps inevitable, however, that literary historians see a writer's supposed 'innovations' as the benchmark of literary value, akin to a scholar's contributions to scholarship – as if literature *were* a science and the duty of each writer were to carry out experiments that would bring it, in due course, to a final perfection. This is not how writing works. It is not a competition to get the right answer. Writing is a matrix of possibilities, a vast interconnected web, and *Ulysses* and *Pride and Prejudice*, *Superman* comics and the *Bhagavad-Gita* and the fairy tales collected by the Brothers Grimm, Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Tarzan of the Apes* (1914) and William Burroughs' *The Naked Lunch* (1959) are all part of that matrix. This awareness can help us as we consider how to work with genre.

### Working with genre

Genre is the most important decision a writer makes. It's not always an easy one. Beginning writers are often uncertain even about whether to write poetry or drama, fiction or screenplays. Of course we need not choose one form, and one only; but the writer who excels in multiple forms is rare. One of the most successful writers of the twentieth century, W. Somerset Maugham, triumphed first as a playwright, then as a novelist, a short story writer, and an essayist. George Bernard Shaw, by contrast, wrote five unsuccessful novels before



discovering his true calling as a dramatist. Most writers find themselves only through much trial and error. In the meantime, each work has to be written in one form or another, and the writer needs to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the given form.

What works in one form doesn't always work, or work well, in another. Moody, unresolved first-person introspection of the sort suitable in lyric poetry rapidly becomes tedious in prose fiction. Fiction is narrative: it has to *move*. Drama is characters interacting. Every creative writing teacher has read more than enough go-nowhere stories which are all description and memory, or screenplays drowned in narrative voice-over, with nothing happening on the screen. An opposite problem is the 'television novel' filled with thinly-described characters flitting back and forth in a succession of brief, insignificant scenes, or the 'blockbuster movie' novel stuffed with rapid-fire special effects which can hardly have the impact on the page that they will be presumed to have in the cinema.

But form is just the beginning of our problems with genre. Genre is about all that has gone before, the heritage of writing that lies behind us. And by now, this is a long heritage. Belatedness is our fate.

This is a burden, and it is pointless to deny it. In *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), Harold Bloom sets out a theory of poetic influence not as a matter of casual borrowings but of deathly struggles, in which the 'belated' poet must battle against the 'precursor' – the 'father' whose work must be distorted, deliberately 'misread', by the poetic 'son', in order that he may claim his own imaginative space. As Terry Eagleton observes, 'What Bloom does, in effect, is to rewrite literary history in terms of the Oedipus complex' (Eagleton 1983: 183). Bloom's theory remains controversial, but the 'anxiety of influence' is a felt reality to any writer who has looked at a previous writer's work and felt, despairingly, that it has all been done – and so much better than one could do it oneself. The 'postmodernism' associated with American writers such as John Barth, Donald Barthelme or Thomas Pynchon, built on the parody and subversion of previous literary forms, is one way of approaching belatedness. The self-conscious dialogue with the classics in novels such as Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) – the story of the 'mad wife' from Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) – or Geoff Ryman's *Was* (1992), a latterday take on L. Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* (1900), is another. John Barth expresses two views of contemporary literature in an illuminating pair of essays, 'The literature of exhaustion' (1967) and 'The literature of replenishment' (1980). The past, he suggests, is an opportunity as much as a burden.

We do not choose what we write as if from a smorgasbord of every available possibility. In the end, we write what we *can* write – to advance in writing is to become aware of limitations as much as of new horizons. As writers, it is the mission of each of us to find the material, the form and the style that best expresses our particular talents. Inevitably, this involves negotiation with literary history. Look at any work that is successful – in any sense – and what you find is the transfigured past. This is as true of T. S. Eliot's great poetic echo chamber of quotations and allusions, *The Waste Land* (1922), as it is of the Harry Potter books. J. K. Rowling's borrowings are obvious: *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* (1997) and its sequels combine the English boarding school story – a genre seemingly dead by the 1990s – with the 'magic portal' story of the *Narnia* kind, Enid Blyton's 'holiday adventures' such as the *Famous Five* series, and the weird grotesquerie of Roald Dahl. The US television series *Lost*, which premiered to much acclaim in 2005, is an inventive update of a very old standby, the 'Robinsonade', or story about being marooned on a desert island: *Lord of the Flies* meets *The Twilight Zone*, in this case.

Often there is a standard way in which a particular genre is treated. A productive approach is therefore to treat it differently. The reputation of Ray Bradbury rests largely

on his use of a poetic, 'literary' style to render the sort of material which had hitherto formed the basis of pulp science fiction. In a classic Bradbury story such as his vision of nuclear holocaust, 'And There Will Come Soft Rains', from *The Martian Chronicles* (1950), Bradbury brings out the poetry and mystery and sadness and longing which had always implicitly inhered in the science fiction genre. Stephen King transforms pulp fiction in a different way. His basic plots are standard horror-fantasy material, not remotely original. What King does is to develop this material in a context of domestic fiction, the novel of character and relationships. A traditional horror writer would have written *The Shining* (1977) as a short story and sold it to the magazine *Weird Tales*. In what is probably the finest twentieth-century novel of the supernatural, *Interview With the Vampire* (1976), Anne Rice took an obvious, indeed hackneyed theme, and turned it on its head, presenting the one-time villain as hero, and showing us the world from his point of view. Two much-admired American novels of the late twentieth century, Larry McMurtry's *Lonesome Dove* (1985) and Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses* (1992), are strikingly literary versions of another old pulp staple – the Western.

No literary property is inherently good or bad. Harriet Hawkins' critical study *Classics and Trash* (1990) is a good sourcebook for those wanting to see how elements of junk culture, so-called, circulate productively with high art – the hidden links between Shakespeare and Disney and George Eliot, Andrew Lloyd Webber and *Gone With the Wind*.

Screenwriting students are likely to be familiar with the 'hero's journey' laid out by Joseph Campbell in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1949). Campbell, not a literary critic but a folklorist, claimed to have found a master-story which underlies the classic stories of mythology, a deep structure applicable to stories of all kinds. Filmmaker George Lucas famously used Campbell's model in writing the original *Star Wars* (1977), and the approach has since been popularised in screenwriting handbooks such as Christopher Vogler's *The Writer's Journey* (1992). The point of the 'hero's journey' is that it is an archetypal pattern, and appeals – and keeps on appealing – because it addresses basic human needs. Genres are repeating patterns of the same kind. To work with genre, the writer must understand not only how a given genre is structured, but what it *means* – what desires and fears we confront and perhaps allay in contemplating this quest, this crime, this tale of the Old West, this satisfying completion of fourteen iambic lines. To consider this is the beginning of at least one kind – one genre – of writer's wisdom.

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