

General Editor's Preface

UNLIKE poetry and drama, the novel belongs entirely within the sphere of recorded history. Novels, like historical records, are written texts superseding the worlds of myth, of epic poetry, and oral storytelling. Typically they are commercial products taking advantage of the technology of printing, the availability of leisure time among potential readers, and the circulation of books. The growth of the novel as an art-form would have been unthinkable without the habit of silent, private reading, which was a comparatively late development in the history of European literacy. While novels are not always read silently and in private, they are felt to belong in the domestic sphere rather than in the public arenas associated with music, drama, and the other performance arts. The need for separate histories of the novel form has long been recognized, since the distinctiveness of fictional prose narrative is quickly lost sight of in more general accounts of literary history.

The *Oxford History of the Novel in English* is a multi-volume series offering a comprehensive, worldwide history of English-language prose fiction, drawing on the knowledge of a large, international team of scholars. Our history spans more than six centuries, firmly rejecting the simplified view that the novel in English began with Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* in 1719. Fifteenth- and sixteenth-century prose fiction has, in fact, been surveyed by many earlier historians, including Ernest A. Baker whose *History of the English Novel* appeared in ten volumes between 1924 and 1939. Unlike Baker's strictly chronological account, the *Oxford History* broadens out as it approaches the present, recognizing the spread of the English language across the globe from the seventeenth century onwards. The 'English' (or British) novel becomes the novel in English. While we aim to offer a comprehensive account of the novel in English, our coverage cannot of course be exhaustive; that is a task for the bibliographer rather than the literary historian. All history has a commemorative function, but cultural memory is unavoidably selective. Selection, in the case of books, is the task of literary criticism, and criticism enters literary history the moment that we speak of 'the novel' rather than, simply, of the multitude of individual novels. Nevertheless, this *Oxford History* adopts a broader definition of 'the novel' than has been customary in earlier histories. Thus we neither focus exclusively on the so-called literary novel, nor on the published texts of fiction at the expense of the processes of production, distribution, and reception. Every volume in this series will

contain sections on relevant aspects of book history and the history of criticism, together with sections on popular fiction and the fictional sub-genres, in addition to the sequence of chapters outlining the work of major novelists, movements, traditions, and tendencies. Novellas and short stories are regarded for our purposes (we would stress 'for our purposes') both as sub-genres of the novel and as aspects of its material history.

Our aim throughout these volumes is to present the detailed history of the novel in a way that is both useful to students and specialists, and accessible to a wide and varied readership. We hope to have conveyed our understanding of the distinctiveness, the continuity, and the social and cultural resonance of prose fiction at different times and places. The novel, moreover, is still changing. Reports of its death – and there have been quite a few – are, as Mark Twain might have said, an exaggeration. At a time when new technologies are seen to be challenging the dominance of the printed book and when the novel's 'great tradition' is sometimes said to have foundered, we would present these volumes as a record of the extraordinary adaptability and resilience of the novel in English, its protean character, and its constant ability to surprise.

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