
ENGL 3214 - 001: Eighteenth-Century British Literature “The Prehistory of Popular Fiction”

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| Instructor. | Dr. Darryl P. Domingo | Office Hrs. | Mon. / Wed. 10:40-11:40am |
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| Office. | Patterson Hall 407 | Session. | Jan. 20 – May 7, 2026 |

Course Description. In the twenty-first century, the book market is dominated by so-called “popular fiction”—narrative works of mystery and crime, sci-fi and horror, fantasy and romance that routinely appear on best-seller lists, enjoy wide circulation at public libraries, and appear atop Amazon rankings. Yet such works are rarely included on the syllabi for English courses, which tend to prioritize classics and so-called “literary fiction.” Indeed, literature professors often denigrate works of popular fiction, even while acknowledging that the perceived lack of “literary” quality in these works might be redeemed by their entertainment value and readability. This section of ENGL 3214 will interrogate the conventional distinction between popular and literary fiction by reading a series of canonical novels *as* works of pop fiction. The course will locate the origins of pop fiction in England during the “long” eighteenth century—the historical period associated with the emergence of “the novel” as a legitimate literary genre. In an attempt to determine whether popular fiction has a prehistory, we will discuss page-turners by Aphra Behn, Daniel Defoe, Eliza Haywood, Samuel Richardson, Henry Fielding, Frances Burney, and Mary Shelley. How do these authors theorize the early novel and conceptualize the tension between the popular and the literary? In what ways do they gratify a reading public increasingly avid for gossip and scandal, fake news, sex, spectacle, superstition, and low-brow entertainment? Through what narrative devices do they engage interest and, most importantly, keep easily distracted readers reading?

Required Reading.

Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko and Other Writings*, ed. Paul Salzman (Oxford, 2009 / 9780199538768); Daniel Defoe, *Moll Flanders*, ed. Albert J. Rivero (Norton, 2003 / 9780393978629); Eliza Haywood, *Fantomina and other Works*, eds. Alexander Petit *et al.* (Broadview, 2004 / 9781551115245); Samuel Richardson, *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded*, eds. Thomas Keymer and Alice Wakely (Oxford, 2001 / 9780199536498); Henry Fielding, *Joseph Andrews and Shamela*, ed. Douglas Brooks-Davies, Martin C. Battestin, and Thomas Keymer (Oxford, 2008 / 9780199536986); Frances Burney, *Evelina, or, A Young Lady's Entrance into the World*, ed. Susan Kubica Howard (Broadview, 2000 / 9781551112374); and Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein*, ed. Maurice Hindle (Penguin, 2003 / 9780141439471).