The Rise and Fall of the Novel
Tentative Description and Syllabus

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1. Description

This is a firehose of a course, or, maybe better, a careening trip down a raging white-water river. Its purpose is to see why, for nearly three hundred years, the novel was a dominant art form of the modern age: the device by which, more than any other, we tried to explain ourselves to ourselves.

And then to see why it has fallen from that place in recent times — why, though good readers still read and good writers still write, we have lost much of the cultural agreement that novels *matter*, fundamentally shaping public discourse and the social imagination.

The first outcome expected from this survey course is that students will arrive at the end with a sense of the successes and failures of the modern age: modernity as a historically fascinating social and spiritual project, both praised and disparaged by its art.

And the second outcome is that students will take away a general outline of the novel as an art form (especially in English), its history and its genres — an organizing set of cubbyholes into which works encountered later in life can be placed in recognition.

By recent standards, this is a reading-intensive course, requiring the reading of at least seven novels and small portions of five more — along with several excerpts from critical literature, the research necessary for brief presentations, Zoom visits from contemporary writers, and suggested readings. (For the amount of reading professors once thought they could demand, see the 6,000 pages that W.H. Auden assigned while a visiting professor at the University of Michigan in 1941, or the three-dozen books Lionel Trilling describes assigning in the 1961 "On the Teaching of Modern Literature" for a survey course at Columbia.) Students are welcome to buy the books mentioned, but links will be given to free downloadable ebooks for all texts out of copyright (i.e., pre-1930). Guest Zoom appearances will be made by contemporary novelists and scholars. [Names TBD after course approval.]

Students are expected to be ahead in the readings and to participate in class discussions. Five-minute reports on various genres of novel will be presented in class and submitted as papers with citation of sources and declarations of AI used (*Boo!*). Grades to be based on: Class preparation and participation 20%; Brief presentations 30%; One-on-one review meeting with instructor (in lieu of midterm) 25%; Final essay-question exam 25%. [The "brief presentations" (5 minutes ≈ 500 words) are to be based on research into the topic of the genre and do not necessarily require reading the entire book mentioned as an example of that genre.]

2. Schedule

Week 1: Introduction

1. Definition of the Novel

Proto-novels: Chinese, Japanese, Ancient Greek, and Latin; Courtly Love romances

2. The Birth of the Modern

3. Overview of General Theories of the Novel as a Modern Art Form
Moral, aesthetic, technological, economic, sociological, psychological, historical, etc.

Week 2–3: The Modern Novel Is Born

1. *Brief professor or student presentations of (some of) the parents of the modern novel:*
Renaissance:
Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron* (1313–1375)
Thomas Malory, *Le Morte d'Arthur* (c. 1470)
François Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (c. 1532–c. 1564)
Early modern:
Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote* (1605–1615)
Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko* (1640–1689)
Madame de La Fayette, *The Princess of Clèves* (1678)
John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678)
3. *Classroom discussion of the firstborn of the modern English novel:*
Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719)
Henry Fielding, *Tom Jones* (1749)
Samuel Richardson, *Clarissa* (1748)
Laurence Sterne, *Tristram Shandy* (1759–1766)

Required Reading for these weeks: Chapter 1 of *Robinson Crusoe*, Chapter 2 of *Tom Jones*, Letter 1 of *Clarissa*, and Chapter 1–3 of *Tristram Shandy*

Suggested Reading: selection from Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (1957); selection from Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (1965); [Oliver Goldsmith, *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766)?]

Week 4–5: The Novel Hits Its Stride

1. *Brief student genre presentations of (some of):*
Alain-René Le Sage, *Gil Blas* (1715) and the picaresque novel
Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Julie; or the New Heloise* (1761) and the novel of sentiment
Tobias Smollett, *The History and Adventures of an Atom* (1769) and the "It-narrative" novel
Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1795–1796) and the *bildungsroman*
2. *Brief professor presentations of (some of):*
Voltaire, *Candide* (1759) and satire
Fanny Burney, *Evelina* (1778) and social comedy
Matthew Gregory Lewis, *The Monk* (1796) and the Gothic novel
Maria Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent* (1800) and the novel of place
3. *Classroom discussion of:*
Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813)
Walter Scott, *Waverley* (1814)

Required Reading for these weeks: EITHER [Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (1813) and Lionel Trilling, "Manners, Morals and the Novel" (1948)] OR [Walter Scott, *Waverley* (1814) and Georg Lukács, selection from *The Historical Novel* (1937)].

Suggested Readings: The other pair.

Week 6–7: The Novel Explodes

1. *Brief student genre presentations of (some of):*
    Charlotte Yonge, *The Heir of Redclyffe* (1853) and the religious novel
    Mrs. Gaskell, *North and South* (1854–1855) and the industrial novel
    Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone* (1868) and the mystery novel
2. *Brief professor presentations of (some of):*
    William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (1847–1848)
    Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (1847)
    Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (1847)
    Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (1850); Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick* (1851); and the foundational American novels
    Anthony Trollope, *The Warden* (1855)
3. *Classroom discussion of:*
    Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* (1850)

Required Reading for these weeks: Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* (1850); Joseph Bottum, free-handout selection from *The Decline of the Novel* (2022)

Suggested Reading: TK

Week 8–9: The Novel Climbs the Peak

1. *Brief student genre presentations of (some of):*
    Stendhal, *The Red and the Black* (1830) and literary realism
    Émile Zola, *Nana* (1880) and the social-condition novel
    Mrs. Gaskell, *Cranford* (1853) and the household novel
    Olive Schreiner, *The Story of an African Farm* (1883) and the feminist novel
    Jerome K. Jerome, *Three Men in a Boat* (1889) and the comic novel
    Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) and psychological horror
2. *Brief professor presentations of (some of):*
    Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment* (1866)
    George Eliot, *Middlemarch* (1871–1872)
    Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891)
    Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881)
    Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1899)
3. *Classroom discussion of:*
    Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary* (1857)

Required Reading for these weeks: Gustave Flaubert, *Madame Bovary;* René Girard, selection from *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1961)

Suggested Reading: Henry James, preface to *The Golden Bowl* (1909).

Week 10–11: The Gaslight Age of Popular Character Creation

1. *Brief student and professor presentations and classroom discussion of (some of) the gaslight-era creations:*

Jules Verne, *Around the World in 80 Days* (1872)
Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876)
Robert Louis Stevenson, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886)
Oscar Wilde, *Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890)
Arthur Conan Doyle, Sherlock Holmes (1887–1927)
H. Rider Haggard, *Allan Quatermain* (1887)
Anthony Hope, *The Prisoner of Zenda* (1894)
Marie Corelli, *The Sorrows of Satan* (1895)
H.G. Wells, *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896)
Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (1897)
E.W. Hornung, Raffles (1898–1909)
Rudyard Kipling, *Kim* (1901)
William Henry Hudson, *Green Mansions* (1904)
Baroness Orczy, *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1905)
Maurice Leblanc, Arsène Lupin (1905–1923)
G.K. Chesterton, Father Brown (1910–1936)
Edgar Rice Burroughs, *Tarzan of the Apes* (1912)

Lingering Effect:

Victor Appleton, Tom Swift (1910–1941)
P.G. Wodehouse, Jeeves and Wooster (1915–1974)
H.P. Lovecraft, Cthulhu (1928–1936)
Lord Dunsany, Joseph Jorkens (1931–1957)
Agatha Christie, Miss Marple (1927–1976)
Robert E. Howard, Conan (1932–1936)
Erle Stanley Gardner, Perry Mason (1933–1973)

Required Reading for these weeks: One of the above texts
Suggested Reading: TK [Michael Dirda chapter?]

Week 12–13: The Novel and the Twentieth Century

1. *Brief student genre presentation of (some of):*

Sarah Orne Jewett, *The Country of the Pointed Firs* (1896) and the local colorists
Beatrix Potter, *The Tale of Two Bad Mice* (1904) and the children's book
Upton Sinclair, *The Jungle* (1906) and the muckraking novel
Sigrid Undset, *Kristin Lavransdatter* (1920–1922) and the Catholic novel
Yury Krymov, *The Tanker Derbent* (1938) and the Socialist Realism novel
Joseph Heller, *Catch-22* (1953) and the anti-war novel
William Golding, *Lord of the Flies* (1954) and the Robinsonade
Pauline Réage, *Story of O* (1954) and the pornographic novel
J.R.R. Tolkien, *Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955) and the fantasy novel
Frank Herbert, *Dune* (1965) and the sci-fi novel
Charles Portis, *True Grit* (1968) and the Western novel
Michael Crichton, *The Andromeda Strain* (1969) and the science novel
Laura Buchanan (Florence King), *Barbarian Princess* (1978) and bodice-ripper romance

2. *Brief professor presentations of (some of):*

E.M. Forster, *A Room with a View* (1908)

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby* (1925); Willa Cather, *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927); Theodore Dreiser, *An American Tragedy* (1925); and the novel of America
Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926)

3. *Analysis of styles of modernism:*
James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1920)
Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (1927)
William Faulkner, *The Sound and the Fury* (1929)
Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus* (1947)
Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (1952)

Required Reading for these weeks: James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1920), Episode Fourteen: "Oxen of the Sun"; Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (1927)

Suggested Reading: TK [selection from Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis* (1946)?]

Week 14–15: The Novel Turns Against Itself

1. *Brief student presentation of (some of):*
Albert Camus, *The Stranger* (1942) and the existentialist novel
Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (1957) and the beat novel
Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and post-colonial fiction
Jorge Amado, *Home is the Sailor* (1961) and magic realism

2. *Brief professor presentations of (some of):*
William S. Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* (1959)
Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire* (1962)
William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (1984)
Cormac McCarthy, *Blood Meridian* (1985)
Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (1988)

3. *Classroom analysis of*
Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965)

Required Reading for these weeks: Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965); Tom Wolfe, "Stalking the Billion Footed Beast" (1989)

Week 16: The Novel These Days

1. *No student presentations*
2. *Professor discussion of (some of):*
David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest* (1996)
Philip Roth, *American Pastoral* (1997)
Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections* (2001)
Mark Haddon, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003)
Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (2004)
David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas* (2004)
Hilary Mantel, *Wolf Hall* (2009)
3. *Conclusions about the rise and fall of the novel*
And what it tells us about the modern age

Required reading for these weeks: John Gardner, "On Moral Fiction" (1978)

Professor Bio:

Joseph Bottum is the Visiting Scholar of Conservative Thought and Policy at the University of Colorado's Benson Center. His criticism has appeared in scholarly journals from *Nineteenth-Century Literature* to the *Wilson Quarterly* and popular publications from the *Atlantic* to the *Wall Street Journal*. His publications include four volumes of his own poetry and *The Decline of the Novel*, a 2019 book of literary criticism, with his short stories appearing in his latest book, the 2024 *Frankincense, Gold, and Myrrh*.

Dr. Bottum has served as poetry editor of the *New York Sun* and *First Things*, literary editor of the *Weekly Standard*, and columnist for the London *Spectator*, *Crisis*, and the *Free Beacon*. In the winter of 2024 he co-founded *Poems Ancient and Modern*, which has become Substack's fastest-growing daily newsletter about classic poetry. In 2022, he delivered the commissioned Phi Beta Kappa poem at Princeton University's graduation ceremonies, while his verses received the 2019 Christopher Award for best children's book of the year.

Dr. Bottum has been profiled in *Le Figaro* (Paris), *Il Foglio* (Rome), the *New York Times*, and many other publications, while appearing on television programs from *Meet the Press* to the *PBS NewsHour*, and radio networks from NPR to the BBC.