



A COMPANION TO

THE ENGLISH  
*NOVEL*

EDITED BY  
STEPHEN ARATA, MADIGAN HALEY,  
J. PAUL HUNTER AND JENNIFER WICKE

WILEY Blackwell



A Companion to the  
English Novel

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*Editorial Offices*

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9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK

The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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## Notes on Contributors

**James Eli Adams**, Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, is the author of *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* (Cornell, 1995) and *A History of Victorian Literature* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), as well as the co-editor, with Andrew Miller, of *Sexualities in Victorian Britain* (Indiana, 1996).

**Jonathan Arac** is Mellon Professor of English and founding Director of the Humanities Center at the University of Pittsburgh. A longtime member of the *boundary 2* Editorial Collective, he also chaired from 2002 until 2012 the Advisory Committee of the Successful Societies Program of the Canadian Institute for Advanced Research. His most recent book is *Impure Worlds: The Institution of Literature in the Age of the Novel* (Fordham, 2010).

**Stephen Arata** is Professor of English at the University of Virginia. He is a General Editor of *The New Edinburgh Edition of the Works of Robert Louis Stevenson* (Edinburgh) and the author of *Fictions of Loss in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge, 1996, 2008) and the forthcoming *A History of the English Novel* (Wiley-Blackwell). He has edited William Morris's *News from Nowhere* and George Gissing's *New Grub Street* for Broadview and H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* for Norton Critical Editions.

**Nancy Armstrong** is Gilbert, Louis, and Edward Lehrman Professor of English at Duke University. Her books include *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (Oxford, 1987), (with Leonard Tennenhouse) *The Imaginary Puritan: Literature, Intellectual Labor, and the Origins of Personal Life* (California, 1992), *Fiction in the Age of Photography: The Legacy of British Realism* (Harvard, 1999), and *How Novels Think: The Limits of Individualism, 1719–1900* (Columbia, 2005). A book titled *The Conversion Effect: Early American Aspects of the Novel*, co-authored with Leonard Tennenhouse, is forthcoming from the University of Pennsylvania Press in 2015. She also edits the journal *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*.

**Chris Baldick** is Professor of English at Goldsmiths, University of London. His publications include *Literature of the 1920s* (Edinburgh, 2012), *The Modern Movement* (Oxford, 2004), *Criticism and Literary Theory, 1890 to the Present* (Longman, 1996), and *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (4th edition, Oxford, 2015).

**Mark Blackwell** is Professor of English and Associate Dean of the College of Arts & Sciences at the University of Hartford. His most recent scholarly project is an edition of object and animal tales entitled *British It-Narratives, 1750–1830* (Pickering & Chatto, 2012).

**Alison Booth** is Professor of English at the University of Virginia, specializing in narrative, feminist studies in nineteenth-century literature, and digital humanities. Her books include *Greatness Engendered: George Eliot and Virginia Woolf* (Cornell, 1992) and *How to Make It as a Woman: Collective Biographical History from Victoria to the Present* (Chicago, 2004), and she has completed a book on transatlantic literary tourism, house museums, and reception of authors. A Fellow of ACLS (Digital Innovation) and the Institute for Advanced Technology in the Humanities, she directs the Collective Biographies of Women project, <http://womensbios.lib.virginia.edu> and <http://cbw.iath.virginia.edu/public/women.php>.

**James Buzard** is Professor of Literature at MIT. He is the author of *The Beaten Track: European Tourism, Literature, and the Ways to "Culture," 1800–1918* (Oxford, 1993) and *Disorienting Fiction: The Autoethnographic Work of Nineteenth-Century British Novels* (Princeton, 2005), as well as of numerous articles in journals and books. He is also a contributing editor of *Victorian Prism: Refractions of the Crystal Palace* (Virginia 2007).

**Janice Carlisle** is Professor of English at Yale University. In addition to many essays in journals and books, her publications include *The Sense of an Audience: Dickens, Thackeray, and George Eliot at Mid-Century* (Georgia, 1981), *John Stuart Mill and the Writing of Character* (Georgia, 1991), *Common Scents: Comparative Encounters in High Victorian Fiction* (Oxford, 2004), and *Picturing Reform in Victorian Britain* (Cambridge, 2012).

**Nicholas Daly** is Professor of Modern English and American Literature at University College Dublin. His publications include *Modernism, Romance, and the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge, 1999), *Literature, Technology, and Modernity* (Cambridge, 2004), *Sensation and Modernity in the 1860s* (Cambridge, 2009), and *The Demographic Imagination and the Nineteenth-Century City: Paris, London, New York* (forthcoming). He is currently working on a collaborative study of Ruritanian narratives, from *The Prisoner of Zenda* to *The Princess Diaries*.

**Deirdre David** has published several books dealing with the nineteenth-century novel, women writers, and British imperialism. She is the editor of *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel* (2nd edition, 2013) and the co-editor (with Eileen Gillooly) of *Contemporary Dickens* (Ohio State, 2009). Her most recent publications, as a biographer, are *Fanny Kemble: A Performed Life* (Pennsylvania, 2007) and *Olivia Manning: A Woman at War* (Oxford, 2013). She is now at work on a biography of Pamela Hansford Johnson (under contract to Oxford).

**Ashley Dawson** is Professor of English at the City University of New York's Graduate Center and at the College of Staten Island/CUNY. He is the author of the *Routledge Concise History of Twentieth-Century British Literature* (2013) and *Mongrel Nation: Diasporic Culture and the Making of Postcolonial Britain* (Michigan, 2007), and co-editor of three essay collections: *Democracy, the State, and the Struggle for Global Justice* (Routledge, 2009), *Dangerous Professors: Academic Freedom and the National Security Campus* (Michigan, 2009), and *Exceptional State: Contemporary U.S. Culture and the New Imperialism* (Duke, 2007).

**Andrew Elfenbein** is Professor of English at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. He has published *Byron and the Victorians* (Cambridge, 1995, winner of the *Choice* Outstanding Academic Books award), *Romantic Genius: The Prehistory of a Homosexual Role* (Columbia, 1999), and *Romanticism and the Rise of English* (Stanford 2009, winner of the *Choice* Outstanding Academic Book award). For Longman Cultural Editions, he has edited Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*. His forthcoming book is *The Gist of Reading*.

**Lynn Festa** is Associate Professor of English at Rutgers University. She is the author of *Sentimental Figures of Empire in Eighteenth-Century Britain and France* (Johns Hopkins, 2006) and co-editor, with Daniel Carey, of *The Postcolonial Enlightenment: Eighteenth-Century Colonialism and Postcolonial Theory* (Oxford, 2009).

**Kate Flint** is Provost Professor of English and Art History at the University of Southern California. She has published *The Woman Reader, 1837–1914* (Oxford, 1993), *The Victorians and The Visual Imagination* (Cambridge, 2000), and *The Transatlantic Indian 1776–1930* (Princeton, 2008), and edited the *Cambridge History of Victorian Literature* (2012). She is completing a book entitled *Flash! Photography, Writing, and Surprising Illumination*, and has a new project on cultural manifestations of the ordinary and the overlooked.

**Jonathan Freedman** is the Marvin Felheim Collegiate Professor of English at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. He has also taught (in various capacities) at Yale, Caltech, Oxford, Williams College, and the Bread Loaf School of English. He has published books on Henry James and aestheticism, Jews and the making of high culture in Anglo-America, and the relation between Jewish and other ethnic American cultural formations.

**Christopher GoGwilt** is Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Fordham University. His book *The Passage of Literature: Genealogies of Modernism in Conrad, Rhys, and Pramoedya* (Oxford, 2011) won the Modernist Studies Association book prize for 2012. He is also the author of *The Invention of the West: Joseph Conrad and the Double-Mapping of Europe and Empire* (Stanford, 1995) and *The Fiction of Geopolitics: Afterimages of Culture from Wilkie Collins to Alfred Hitchcock* (Stanford, 2000).

**Lauren M. E. Goodlad** is the Kathryn Paul Professorial Scholar of English and Criticism & Interpretive Theory at the University of Illinois, Urbana. Her publications

include *The Victorian Geopolitical Aesthetic: Realism, Sovereignty, and Transnational Experience* (2015), *Victorian Literature and the Victorian State: Character and Governance in a Liberal Society* (2003) as well as essay collections including *Victorian Internationalisms* (a 2007 special issue of *RaVoN* co-edited with Julia Wright) and *The Ends of History* (a 2013 special issue of *Victorian Studies* co-edited with Andrew Sartori).

**Madigan Haley** is Postdoctoral Preceptor in the Department of English at the University of Virginia. He has published on the novel genre, geoculture, and world-scale analysis in *the minnesota review* and on the ethics of global fiction in *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*.

**J. Paul Hunter** is Emeritus Professor of English at the University of Virginia and the University of Chicago. His many publications include *The Reluctant Pilgrim: Defoe's Emblematic Method and Quest for Form in Robinson Crusoe* (Johns Hopkins, 1966), *Occasional Form: Henry Fielding and the Chains of Circumstance* (Johns Hopkins, 1975), and *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction* (Norton, 1990).

**Ivan Kreilkamp** is Associate Professor in the Department of English at Indiana University, where he is also co-editor of the journal *Victorian Studies*. The author of *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller* (Cambridge, 2005), he has published widely on both Victorian and contemporary literature and culture.

**Laurie Langbauer** is Professor of English at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. She is the author of *Women and Romance: The Consolations of Gender in the English Novel* (Cornell, 1990) and *Novels of Everyday Life: The Series in English Fiction, 1850–1930* (Cornell, 1999). In 2015, Oxford University Press will publish her book *The Juvenile Tradition: Young Writers and Prolepsis, 1750–1835*.

**Deidre Lynch** is Professor of English at Harvard University. Her books include *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (Chicago, 1998), which won the Modern Language Association Prize for a First Book, and *Loving Literature: A Cultural History* (Chicago, 2015).

**John Marx** is Professor of English and a member of the Humanities Innovation Lab at the University of California, Davis. He is also an Editor of the journal *Contemporary Literature*. He is at work on a solo book entitled *Mega: How Mass Media Make Contemporary Cities* and is collaborating with University of South Carolina film scholar and archivist Mark Garrett Cooper on a project called “Mass Media U” (instances of this work in progress can be found at <http://humanitiesafterhollywood.org/>). To date, his publications largely have been devoted to twentieth-century anglophone fiction, including his most recent book *Geopolitics and the Anglophone Novel, 1890–2011* (Cambridge, 2012).

**John Plotz**, Professor and Chair of English at Brandeis University, is the author of *The Crowd* (California, 2000) and *Portable Property* (Princeton, 2008), as well as a young-adult novel, *Time and the Tapestry: A William Morris Adventure* (Bunker Hill, 2014). His current project is “Semi-Detached: The Aesthetics of Partial Absorption.”

**John Richetti** is A. M. Rosenthal Professor (emeritus) of English at the University of Pennsylvania. His most recent book is *The Life of Daniel Defoe: A Critical Biography* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2005). He has also edited *The Cambridge History of English Literature: 1660–1780* (2005) and *The Cambridge Companion to Daniel Defoe* (2008), and with Toni Bowers he co-edited and abridged *Samuel Richardson's Clarissa* (Broadview, 2011). He is currently completing for Wiley-Blackwell *The History of Eighteenth-Century English Literature*. In 2010–2011 he received a Mellon Emeritus Fellowship.

**John Paul Riquelme**, Professor of English at Boston University and Co-chair of the Modernism Seminar at the Mahindra Humanities Center (Harvard), has published, in addition to his work on modernist writers from Joyce to Beckett, essays on *Frankenstein* and science fiction, *Dorian Gray* and aestheticism, and *Dracula's* stylistic excesses from a post-structural perspective. He has edited *Gothic & Modernism: Essaying Dark Literary Modernity* (Johns Hopkins, 2008) and *Dracula* (2nd edition, Bedford, 2015). He is currently at work on a study of the discursive modernity of Gothic narratives and a study of Oscar Wilde and literary modernism.

**Patricia Meyer Spacks** is Edgar F. Shannon Professor of English Emerita at the University of Virginia. Her most recent books are *On Rereading* (Harvard, 2011) and an annotated edition of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* (Harvard, 2013).

**Leonard Tennenhouse** is Professor of English at Duke University. In addition to a number of articles on the early American novel, he is the author of *The Importance of Feeling English: American Literature and the British Diaspora, 1750–1850* (Princeton, 2007) and, with Nancy Armstrong, of *The Imaginary Puritan: Literature, Intellectual Labor, and the Origins of Personal Life* (California, 1992).

**Cynthia Wall** is Professor of English at the University of Virginia. She is the author of *The Prose of Things: Transformations of Description in the Eighteenth Century* (Chicago, 2006; Honorable Mention, James Russell Lowell Prize 2007) and *The Literary and Cultural Spaces of Restoration London* (Cambridge, 1998), the editor of the *Concise Companion to the Restoration and Eighteenth Century* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2005), and has edited works by Bunyan, Defoe, and Pope.

**Jennifer Wicke**, Professor of English at the University of Virginia, is the author of *Advertising Fictions: Literature, Advertisement, and Social Reading* (Columbia, 1988) and the co-editor of *Feminism and Postmodernism* (Duke, 1994). The twentieth century editor for the first editions of the Longman Anthology of British Literature, she is a founding executive board member for the Society for Novel Studies; her book *Born to Shop: Modernism, Modernity, and The Global Work of Consumption* is forthcoming. She has published widely on nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature from a global anglophone perspective, as well as on film and other media.

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# Preface

This *Companion* is addressed to readers interested in the English novel and the many ways there are to think and write about it. Each of the twenty-nine essays presumes a basic familiarity with the tradition of the English novel and an appetite for learning more, but none presumes the possession of any specialized knowledge. Collectively, the essays are informed by a vast body of scholarly and critical work while remaining accessible, lively, and intellectually engaging. Readers will acquire a sharp sense of some of the main lines of inquiry that have shaped criticism of the novel over the course of its still relatively brief history, but the essays also vibrantly testify to the innovation and diversity that marks the field at the present moment – as is only fitting for the study of a genre that itself has always been marked by innovation and diversity.

As a glance at the table of contents reveals, the essays in this *Companion* are not arranged by chronology. Rather than thread essays along a time line, we have organized the volume topically in the belief that our contributors could cover more ground, pursue more original approaches, and cumulatively achieve a greater overall coherence if they were set loose from the requirements of a chronological survey. Without exception, the individual essays are informed by an awareness of history and chronology: arranging discrete events in meaningful sequences is one way novelists make sense of experience, and it is one way scholars make sense of the development of literary forms. But the volume's alternative structure makes it possible for our contributors to be rigorously historical yet not constrained by the demands of "coverage" or by the need to canvass particular periods or centuries. Individually and in aggregate, then, the chapters seek to address the pivotal dimensions of the English novel both in time and across time, including its aesthetic and formal properties and its embedding in a variety of social and cultural contexts.

Calling this a *Companion to the English Novel* raises the question of what is covered by the designation *English*. Until recently, "the English novel" was generally used by critics to refer to works written in English by British authors, thereby taking in Scottish, Irish, and Welsh writers while putting to one side the ever-expanding corpus of anglophone fiction originating elsewhere in the world – including North America.

Limitations of space prevent the present volume from doing full justice to the richness and variety of world anglophone literature, but readers will find throughout the following pages perspectives that are anything but parochial. From its beginnings, the “English” novel has been an international form, open to continental, transatlantic, and now global influences and energies. Our contributors are everywhere alive to those energies and to the many ways they have shaped, and continue to shape, the novel in English.



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Part I

# The Novel and Its Histories



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# 1

## The 1740s

*Patricia Meyer Spacks*

Exuberance marked British literary production in the 1740s. In prose and in poetry, the decade saw a vivid explosion of energy. Poetry ranged from Samuel Johnson's passionate *Vanity of Human Wishes* (1749), composed in heroic couplets and imitating a classical model, to William Collins's *Odes* (1747), innovative in form and content; from Alexander Pope's *Dunciad* (1743), a satiric anti-epic in couplets, to the final version of James Thomson's *The Seasons* (1744), a long blank verse poem with a rhapsodic view of the natural world. Prose fiction included moralized fable, social satire, imitation biography and autobiography, sentimental investigation, action narrative, erotic exploration, and various combinations. The many important published novels did not necessarily have much in common. *Clarissa* (1747–1748) bears little obvious resemblance to *Roderick Random* (1748). Eliza Haywood's *Anti-Pamela* (1741) and Henry Fielding's *Joseph Andrews* (1742) share almost nothing beyond their common satirical target of *Pamela* (1740). The efflorescence of fiction implied only a few widely held assumptions about what the novel is, does, or should do. Most of its manifestations, however, suggested a conviction that fiction, providing vicarious experience for its readers, should dramatize for them human experience in its common forms.

That rather obvious project carried significant weight in the 1740s. The notion that experience provides the only secure basis for knowledge was at the heart of philosophic empiricism, strongly articulated by the philosopher David Hume, whose *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–1740) insisted that we must content ourselves with experience as the stuff of knowledge and that experience provides sufficient basis for the conduct

of life. Hume elaborated the point in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) in terms suggesting the central principle of many novelistic plots:

There is no man so young and unexperienced, as not to have formed, from observation, many general and just maxims concerning human affairs and the conduct of life; but it must be confessed, that, when a man comes to put these in practice, he will be extremely liable to error, till time and farther experience both enlarge these maxims, and teach him their proper use and application ... Not to mention, that, to a young beginner, the general observations and maxims occur not always on the proper occasions, nor can be immediately applied with due calmness and distinction. (Hume 1998, 88)

The investigation of how a young man – or, often, a young woman – acquired and used experience provided a vibrant topos for the decade’s novels.

History, Hume believed, because factual, exerted great power over the human mind; but fiction, imitation history, could concern itself with ordinary individuals, whose version of experience might bear a closer relation to a reader’s than could happenings befalling princes or generals. Although novels throughout the decade explored many possibilities – as they would continue to do for the rest of the century – the pattern of following an imaginary young person’s acquisition of life experience persisted. Such narratives could provide vicarious experience, safer and less costly in emotional terms (particularly for women and young people) than direct experience of the world.

At the decade’s opening, terminology about fiction remained unstable, with *novel* and *romance* interchangeable labels for extended pieces of prose fiction. What we now call “romances,” fictions of a certain length that represent fanciful events, with no concern for probability, had long existed and were thought to have wide readership. Not many new ones, however, were being published. The Eighteenth-Century Short-Title Catalogue indicates that between 1700 and 1740, on average, ten or fewer new works of prose fiction in English emerged annually. “A brief but limited upsurge” developed between 1719, the year of *Robinson Crusoe* and Eliza Haywood’s *Love in Excess*, both hugely popular, and 1726. After *Pamela* appeared in 1740, however, to wide acclaim, the average enlarged to about 20 novels a year, doubling again by the century’s end (Downie 2000). As the 1740s concluded, multiple possibilities remained in play. The novel had begun to solidify its authority as a form, but no one had won the struggle over its ongoing direction.

When Richardson and Fielding began writing, in the early 1740s, the novel could hardly claim a form at all. Fiction, of course, had flourished since ancient times, but the notion of an extended prose work focused on nonaristocrats was recent. The moral and aesthetic status of such a composition remained uncertain; novelists of the 1740s had to justify their enterprise. They did so most often by invoking a classical rationale: literature instructs and pleases. The first of these purposes carried more weight than the second. The familiar claim to offer moral instruction persisted in the eighteenth century – especially in the works of such writers as Haywood, where it might seem dubious. Fielding, though, a great innovator of the 1740s, offered a new kind of teaching. In *Tom Jones* (1749), he purported to instruct his readers about that large, vague concept, human nature: to teach them, along with his hero, how human beings operate in the world and on what principles. The claim aligned him with Hume, whose *Treatise of Human Nature*, his first major work, had similar aspirations if different methods.