

Introduction

DEFINING GENRE

Genre, we might say, is a set of conventional and highly organised constraints on the production and interpretation of meaning. In using the word “constraint” I don’t mean to say that genre is simply a restriction. Rather, its structuring effects are productive of meaning.... Generic structure both enables and restricts meaning, and is a basic condition for meaning to take place. I take it that genre theory is, or should be, about the ways in which different structures of meaning and truth are produced in and by the various kinds of writing, talking, painting, filming, and acting by which the universe of discourse is structured. That is why genre matters: it is central to human meaning-making and to the social struggle over meanings.

Genres are the frames that establish appropriate ways of reading or viewing or listening to texts. They are made up of material and formal features, a particular thematic structure, a situation of address which mobilises a set of rhetorical purposes, and a more general structure of implication.

John Frow, *Genre*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2015), 10, 31.

I take it that all texts are strongly shaped by their relation to one or more genres, which in turn they may modify. In certain areas of criticism it is assumed that genre is a term that applies to some texts and not to others: thus we speak of...genre fiction, meaning for the most part such popular genres as the detective story or science fiction. Genre in this sense indicates the formulaic and the conventional. Now, it is certainly the case that this usage points to real distinctions between different textual functions, different audience structures, and different patterns of reading. But...even the most complex and least formulaic of texts is shaped and organised by its relation to generic structures.

Ibid., 1–2.

STUDYING GENRE FICTION

Gravitating as a matter of course toward literary fiction, to the genre that likes to think of itself as non-generic, scholars of contemporary literature have generally been neglectful of this all-important organizing feature of literary life, and no wonder. When it comes down to it, works of literary fiction are more reliable providers of discussable interpretive problems than works of genre fiction, whose interest often spans into focus only at the level of the genre as a whole....But artistic complexity of the kind congenial to the classroom is not necessarily what readers of genre fiction require. Just as important, frequently enough, is the work's reliability as a competent new execution of a certain generic narrative program.

Mark McGurl, *Everything and Less: The Novel in the Age of Amazon* (London: Verso, 2021), xviii.

1. Formula stories affirm existing interests and attitudes by presenting an imaginary world that is aligned with these interests and attitudes....
2. Formulas resolve tensions and ambiguities resulting from the conflicting interests of different groups within the culture or from ambiguous attitudes toward particular values....
3. Formulas enable the audience to explore in fantasy the boundary between the permitted and the forbidden and to experience in a carefully controlled way the possibility of stepping across this boundary. This seems to be preeminently the function of villains in formulaic structures....
4. Finally, literary formulas assist in the process of assimilating changes in values to traditional imaginative constructs.

John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 35–36.

Our research recognizes the multiple dimensionality of popular genres: as ever-expanding collections of texts; as social complexes that gather around, produce, and value those texts; and as distinctive sets of industrial practices with various national and transnational orientations. We have found it helpful to imagine a genre world as three stacked layers that cannot be easily prized apart: the industrial, the social, and the textual.

Kim Wilkins, Beth Driscoll, and Lisa Fletcher, *Genre Worlds: Popular Fiction and Twenty-First-Century Book Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2022), 2.

A VERY SHORT HISTORY

categorization:	minimal	occasional/selective	systematic
1890s–1910s	trade books	cheap series	
1920s	most trade books	advanced book trade	some pulps
1930s	most trade books	some commercial book trade, book clubs	most pulps
1940s		hardbound books, “quality” paperbacks	paperbacks, fiction magazines
1950–		higher-status books	lower-status books

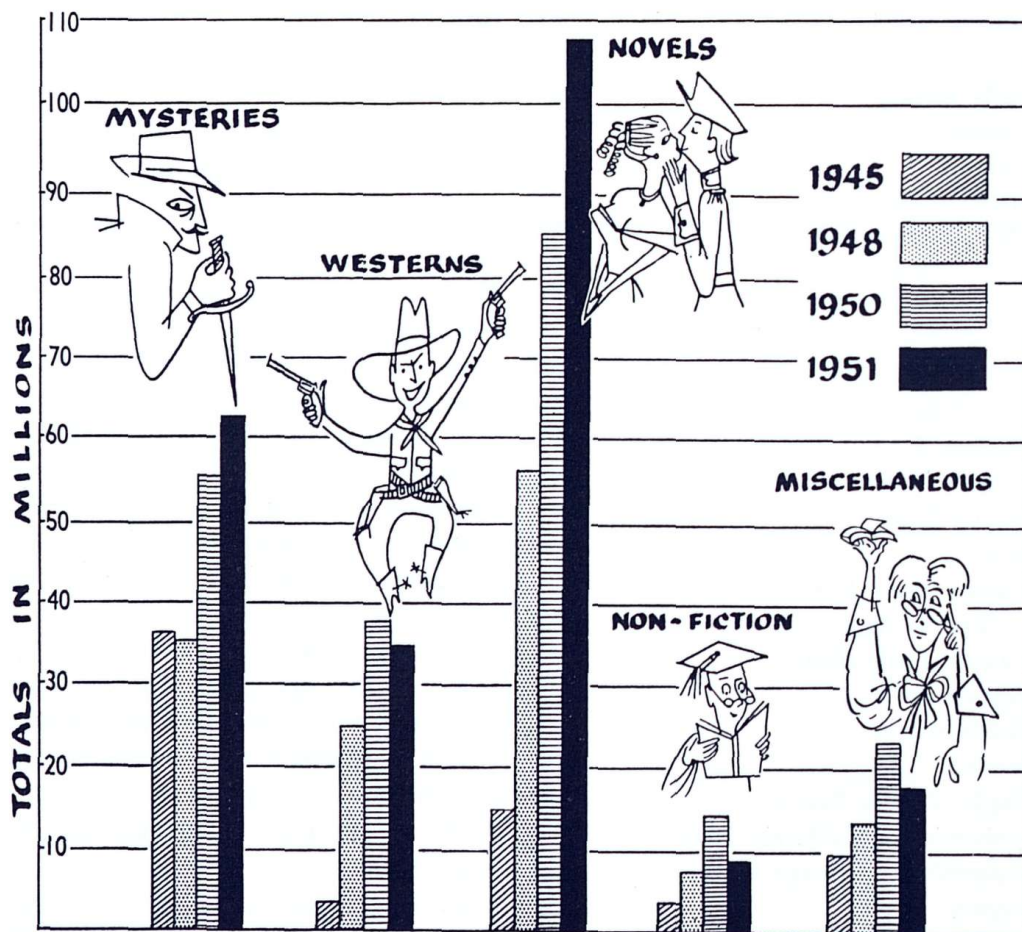


Detective Story 6, no. 1 (January 5, 1917), [Pulp Magazines Project](#); *Western Story* 18, no. 5 (July 16, 1921), [Galactic Central](#); *Love Story* 105, no. 5 (March 10, 1934), [Pulp Magazines Project](#).

PAPER-COVERED NEWSSTAND REPRINTS AND ORIGINALS BY CATEGORIES

(Distribution figures are given in millions, to the nearest million. Figures in parentheses show what percentage of the total sale for the year were accounted for by each category.)

CATEGORY	1945	1948	1950	1951
Mysteries	36(54.5)	35(25.9)	56(26.2)	62(26.8)
Westerns	2(3.0)	24(17.8)	38(17.7)	35(15.2)
Novels	15(22.7)	56(41.4)	85(39.7)	108(46.7)
Nonfiction	3(4.5)	7(5.2)	13(6.1)	9(3.9)
Miscellaneous	10(15.2)	13(9.7)	22(10.3)	17¼ (7.5)



Publishers' Weekly, January 19, 1952: 196, digitalarchives.publishersweekly.com.