Introduction

Fact, Fiction, and Pleasure

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Abstract and Keywords

As gateway to the book’s arguments, this chapter broadly explores the shadowy history of the roman à clef and its intersection with the collection of narrative innovations we now call modernism. Because the roman à clef depends upon an unstable mixture of fact and fiction, it presents a unique set of critical, aesthetic, ethical, and epistemological challenges. This has often led readers and scholars to dismiss it as mere ephemera, but this chapter argues that modernist writers drew on its unstable structures in order to launch their own thoroughgoing critique of literary realism. Understanding modernism thus requires us to take the roman à clef seriously and this chapter develops a pragmatic, social theory of genre criticism to locate it squarely within a larger history of narrative. Doing so, however, reveals that the roman à clef has an uncanny agency of its own and thus cannot be easily constrained either by the authors who invoke it or the critics who attempt to understand its complex workings.

Keywords: modernism, libel, roman à clef, genre, novel, ethics, law, narrative, realism
Introduction

Be warned: this book commits one of literary criticism’s deadliest sins by treating seemingly fictional works from the early twentieth century as if they contained real facts about real people and events. Those professional readers who write and teach literature within the university strenuously insist that their students first learn to separate fiction from biography and thus treat the text as an enclosed and self-authorizing aesthetic object. Even the most innovative reading strategies, whether rooted in post-structuralism, neo-pragmatism, the new aestheticism, or cultural studies, all tend to share this fundamental assumption about the autonomy of fiction. The modernist text, in particular, enshrines what Richard Poirier calls “a world elsewhere,” freed by language and style from the dreary “environment already accredited by history and society.”¹ As Brett Bourbon elegantly puts it in *Finding a Replacement for the Soul*, “We accept that we cannot infer from a fiction the beliefs of the author in the way we might if he or she were speaking in his or her own voice. We naturally speak of characters and events in fiction as distinct from persons and events outside fiction. Fictions, unlike nonfictions, do not make specific claims about the world.”² The “we” in this sentence, however, is troublingly imperial, for what if one does not read or speak about fiction in this way? Who, after all, has not paused in the midst of a novel or story to wonder if the author has experienced the events described in the text? Or if some particularly villainous character is not, in fact, based on a real person?
Surely such questions, along with the kind of readerly pleasures they generate, are not unnatural; after all, they come easily to most anyone who picks up a novel. (p.4) The “intentional fallacy,” that sturdy foundation stone of the modern critical enterprise upon which the author and his or her intentions have been ritually sacrificed, has long proven a reliable bulwark against such reading strategies, insisting as it does on a firm divide between fiction and nonfiction, between the worlds inside and outside the text. Far from a natural practice, however, this mode of reading has to be regularly drummed into literature students. James Joyce is no more Stephen Dedalus, we confidently assure them, than Ernest Hemingway is Jake Barnes or Virginia Woolf is Clarissa Dalloway. That this principle is taught rather than simply intuited, however, suggests that it is not a natural way to read, that it is a disciplined intellectual skill rather than some natural aesthetic instinct.
In a 1976 interview with *Playboy*, Truman Capote pithily makes this same point, taking a jab at professors and critics by cattily assuring the magazine’s readers that “all literature is gossip.” Rather than an autonomous object of critical contemplation, Capote suggests that even the most difficult novels can be all too easily read as titillating memoirs or even private diaries in which authors make private scandals into public commodities. In a roughly contemporary piece, “Novelists as Inspired Gossips,” Margaret Drabble similarly insists that fiction cannot be so easily quarantined behind the intentional fallacy since it so often “speculates on little evidence, inventing elaborate and artistic explanations of little incidents and overheard remarks that often leave the evidence far behind.” Readers commonly proceed in this forensic sort of way, working backward from such “explanations” in hope of finding the singular detail that might reveal some rousing fact about the author and those who have passed through his or her life. This is certainly true of such openly scandalous (and wildly popular) books as *The Nanny Diaries* or *The Devil Wears Prada*, both of which generate a voyeuristic frisson by allowing us a covert yet very public glimpse into their exclusive social circles. In 2004, the *New York Times* Sunday Styles section noted with some chagrin the developing vogue for this kind of writing (one that has only been further spurred by the release of major studio films based on both these works): “In the last two years, the publishing industry has embraced a genre that might be described as ‘gossip lit,’ turning out a flotilla of best-selling novels that rely less on the craft of literature than on the recycling of rumor and on their author’s well-positioned perches.” In the eyes of this reviewer, herself so clearly steeped in a modernist aesthetic of imaginative supremacy, merely “recycling” one’s experience is degrading; and because the author hides her malice behind the flimsiest veil of fiction, such works lack even the presumably more honest authority of a journal or memoir. Such complaints about the allegedly thinning boundary between fact and fiction are hardly new. Following the publication of books like *The Company* and *The Washington Fringe (p.5) Benefit* in 1976, *Time Magazine* loudly lamented its own “Age of Psst!” in which the private scandals of the Nixon era were artlessly hidden in public works.
Far from the distinctive product of the late 1970s or the opening years of the twenty-first century, this mode of reading and writing contains its own distinctive array of creative energies that spark productively across the gaps between fact and fiction, between “a world elsewhere” and our own. This book seeks to energize these networks by tracing the strange career of the roman à clef, a counter-form to the novel that emerged in the 1890s and helped constitute the legal, aesthetic, and ethical challenges we associate with some of the early twentieth century’s most monumental literary productions. After all, Joyce scholars have been involved in a now decades-long debate about the precise relationship between Stephen Dedalus and his author, arguing often fiercely over where precisely to draw the boundary between fiction and autobiography. In Oscar Wilde’s first criminal trial for gross indecency in 1895, his novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* was introduced as a piece of evidence against him, the jurors invited to see in its pages a lurid autobiographical description of the author’s own homosexual affairs. The judge ordered that the book be disregarded since “the question of literature is … entirely different” than the question of guilt, but the mere fact that such a legal opinion had to be registered at all indicates that jurors might naturally conflate fiction and fact in their deliberations.
The demand that fiction’s autonomy be preserved from fact’s crude intrusions, however, issues exclusively neither from critics nor from the bench, but from a surprising array of early-twentieth-century writers often surprised by the very energies they had released. “Cannot those who criticize books and write about books,” H. G. Wells asks in the preface to The World of William Clissold, “cease to pander to that favorite amusement of vulgar, half-educated, curious, but ill-informed people, the hunt for the ‘imaginary’ originals of every fictitious character?”

To read novels as gossip is cast here as a dangerously vacuous pursuit, characteristic of crass and undisciplined readers who cannot even make the most basic distinctions between fact and fiction. Sewell Stokes, an infamous society columnist in the 1920s and ’30s, found such claims disingenuous, waspishly insisting in the preface to his Pilloried! that gossip and fiction cannot be so easily disentangled: “In fiction, the more realistic an author makes his characters the more he is praised.... Yet when the same critic is confronted by a realistic (but not always complimentary) fact about a living personality, he does not like it. Most novelists, however, take characters for their stories from among their friends and acquaintances, ‘writing them up’ until the only fictitious thing left about them is their name. H. G. Wells, Arnold Bennett, Michael Arlen, Osbert Sitwell, and ‘Elizabeth,’ are only a few examples of authors (p.6) who constantly do this.”

Stokes claims that he is really not much different than a novelist and that “the personality in the pillory is more naturally exposed than the one in a picture-frame.” This abruptly reduces the generic distinction between fiction and gossip to a question of manners: Stokes boldly risks telling the truth about prominent figures from Dorothy Gish to Rebecca West, while the timorous novelist hides his or her assaults behind the thin façade of fiction in which only the names are changed to protect the guilty. Even Wells, in the midst of his screed, admits as much, decrying the attempt to decipher the origins of seemingly fictitious characters not because it is impossible or errant, but because it is simply rude.

After all, the very book in which this lament appears contains devastating and widely recognized portraits of Winston Churchill and Margot Asquith, a fact that prompted D. H. Lawrence to argue in a review that this kind of coy and gossip writing “is simply not good enough to be called a novel.”
H. M. Paull, whose widely read *Literary Ethics: A Study in the Growth of Literary Conscience* ran through multiple editions in the first few decades of the twentieth century, treats such reading and writing practices not simply as a question of manners, but of morals. In a section of her work headed “Literary Misdemeanors,” she devotes an entire chapter to “Actual Persons in Fiction in Drama” and warns aspiring writers to resist the allure of turning a profit on private scandals, condemning “the malicious writer” who “is often tempted to use his opportunities of gratifying his malice by a caricature which he can deny was intended for the individual generally recognized.”

Portraiture in general, she counsels, must be avoided by any novelist who recognizes that “his business is to create a character” and that “a copy cannot claim to be a creation.”

To confuse literature with gossip is cast as unethical and also unprofessional because it undermines the romantic ideal of the writer as a purely creative being able to draw characters and events from out of his or her imagination. The fact that Paull has to issue such advice at all again suggests that this was by no means a commonly shared view of the novelist’s vocation, and, like Wells, she hastens to condemn “the readiness with which many people jump to the conclusion that they can recognize the originals of the author’s characters.”

Well aware that texts can take on peculiar and sometimes anarchic social lives of their own, Paull apportions the blame for such degraded practices evenly between writers who fail their professional obligation and readers who seek to indulge their appetite for gossip and scandal. She reassures us that any attempt to cross the boundary between fiction and nonfiction is a “misdemeanor,” an ethical failure to be firmly yet easily corrected. This is precisely the role literary criticism has come to play, training generations of readers to believe it weirdly “unnatural” to treat fictional characters and events as if they were real.
Our good literary manners, however, have too often led to us to obscure, abandon, or simply mischaracterize a wide array of the most innovative writing from the early twentieth century that openly conceals fact within fiction in order mischievously to muddle the distinction between them. In the process, sadly, we have dampened some of reading’s very real pleasures while simultaneously suppressing the ways in which readers themselves have helped constitute the limits and usefulness of fiction as an aesthetic and pragmatic category. The novel itself, after all, emerged from a fascination with gossip, and once it attained a recognizably distinct status as a proper aesthetic object, the scandalous modes of reading and writing that helped to shape it quietly dissipated behind a haze of fussy propriety and emergent professionalism. But in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this consensus collapsed as writers and readers alike revived an earlier and much more chaotic narrative form that sought to engage a collapsing public sphere\(^\text{16}\) by using “gossip lit” to break down the separation between fact and fiction. Paull, in fact, closes her chapter on the ethics of literary portraiture by lamenting the return to prominence of this most despised and unprofessional of genres: “The roman-a-clef is a form of art which many would like to see abandoned, and I must confess that I am one of their number.”\(^\text{17}\) Yet this mode of writing nonetheless played a generative albeit unexamined role in the twentieth-century renovation of the novel, providing passage beyond Victorian realism and into a far murkier field where fact and fiction pleasurable—and sometimes dangerously—intertwine.
From the French for “novel with a key,” the roman à clef is a reviled and disruptive literary form, thriving as it does on duplicity and an appetite for scandal. Almost always published and marketed as works of pure fiction, such narratives actually encode salacious gossip about a particular clique or coterie. To unlock these delicious secrets, a key is required, one that matches the names of characters to the real-life figures upon whom they are based. These keys are complex and often obscure objects: they might be circulated privately by the author among a circle of intimates; excavated decades later by scholars studying the notes scribbled in the pages of an author’s drafts (see figure 1.1); or simply invented by readers themselves. In the seventeenth century, they were regularly published as separate documents that could then be bound together with the original text. In the twentieth century, however, the mechanisms of mass culture and celebrity often helped circulate a more informal kind of key. Book reviewers, gossip columnists, journalists, and even dust jacket blurbs, for example, might unlock a roman à clef, inviting the reader to probe more deeply in searching out historical analogues for allegedly fictional characters. Uncovering the secret that Octavia Lee is really Rosalind Brooks in Compton Mackenzie’s best-selling *Extraordinary Women* may require (p.8)
an insider’s knowledge, for example, while the secrets of *Ulysses* or *Vile Bodies* are more or less hidden in plain sight. Even more troubling, the keys capable of unlocking a roman à clef (and thereby transmuting fiction into fact) might themselves be elaborate but erroneous inventions, the accidental products of readers (p.9) seeking to turn a novel into a veiled autobiography or memoir. Indeed, such contingencies often lead directly to courtroom confrontations where an increasingly complex body of libel laws struggles to maintain a firm boundary not only between fact and fiction, but between proper and improper modes of reading and interpretation.

*Fig. 1.1* From a custom-bound edition of Compton Mackenzie’s 1928 roman à clef, *Vestal Fire*. Here and throughout the book the author’s wife cropped photographs of friends and pasted them onto pages facing the initial appearance of their veiled textual doubles. The fictional names appear in heavy blank ink, the real ones in a light silver. From the Compton Mackenzie Collection, HRHRC.
Dismissed by Henry James as a mere “tissue of personalities,” the roman à clef profoundly troubles any easy attempt at categorization since it must be defined, in part, by its duplicity. On the one hand, it can strategically employ the conventions of the novel—including an almost obsessive focus on detailed description—to pass itself off as fiction. For those who possess (or imagine themselves to possess) a key, on the other hand, these very same textual elements are transmuted from realistic simulacra into genuine facts about real people. Furthermore, unlike the memoir or the journal, the roman à clef ultimately depends for definition on the conditions of its reception and circulation. Able to pass as a novel, it becomes a roman à clef only through the introduction of a key that lies beyond the diegesis itself. Such elusiveness, in fact, constitutes part of its appeal, for those in possession of the key (indeed, even those who only imagine themselves to possess a key) derive a snobbish pleasure from knowing a privileged secret and being part of an exclusive group able to share in the text’s gossipy delights. To learn the key is to encounter a different text, one in which matters of form, character, and symbol give way to questions about motive, veracity, and revenge. Neither quite fiction nor nonfiction, it tests the self-sufficiency of these categories and thereby undermines the modernist novel’s ability to construct “a world elsewhere.” Able to masquerade variously as both a novel and a history, the genre deeply troubles our most basic assumptions about the aesthetics of fiction and the ethics of reading. Is it any wonder that craftsmen like Paull and James simply wished it would go away?
Far from an aberration, however, the roman à clef has shadowed the novel from the very moment of its invention and played a crucial role in the new genre’s founding attempt to distinguish itself from both romance and history. Having served such a catalytic role in the rise of the novel, however, the once vibrant roman à clef was quickly transformed into the garbage bin of literary history and used to dispose of those writers and readers unable to grant fictional texts the full autonomy of proper aesthetic objects. By the end of the eighteenth century, treating the novel as a history or biography had become a crude and vulgar act, despite the fact that this very mode of interpretation contributed so crucially to its rise. The novel thus came into its own by repressing any sense of potential ambiguity about the relation between fact and fiction. Yet it remains unable to free itself entirely from the suspicion that it is nothing more than a glorified memoir, an anxiety that has been (p.10) periodically heightened thanks to the scandals stirred up by books as various as Lady Caroline Lamb’s *Glenarvon*, Evelyn Waugh’s *Vile Bodies*, and Saul Bellow’s *Ravelstein*. Regularly denounced by critics as romans à clef, these works are the novel’s bad conscience, abject sites excluded from the more prestigious genre in order to cement its own claims to authority and autonomy. The wide popularity and stubborn persistence of the roman à clef, however, suggests that, far from being a sclerotic literary form, it continues to energize the imagination of readers and writers unable or unwilling to accept the novel’s isolation from the world of fact. Despite its disruptive powers, the roman à clef nevertheless remains surprisingly difficult to define, since it takes shape through acts of both creation and reception. It is thus a pragmatic rather than purely analytic category, its provisional status dependent less upon clear generic criteria than upon complex networks of circulation and reception. Returning, as Michael North urges we do, to “the scene of the modern” thus enables us to begin elaborating this complex alchemy of reading and writing that has been obscured by the myth of modernist genius. Yet this historical return requires not just a greater elaboration of cultural context, but a carefully nuanced and ultimately pragmatic theory of genre.19
Claudio Guillén, in *Literature as System: Essays toward the Theory of Literary History*, defines a genre as “a problem-solving model on the level of form.” This basic theoretical concept has deeply shaped our histories and theories of the novel by providing a particularly flexible and widely adaptable way of thinking beyond the singularity of aesthetic production. It has allowed us to cast the novel as a mechanism for mediating between the public and private spheres; for creating the materials of modern subjectivity; for internalizing and disciplining emotion; and for instructing readers in codes of class, taste, and distinction. The works of the great novelists, from Fielding, Austen, and Richardson to Dickens, the Brontës, and Eliot, have all been powerfully interpreted in this mode, revealing the social, political, and psychic work they have performed. What, however, of the roman à clef? What kind of work does it do? What problems does its form attempt to solve? And why has it proven so stubbornly persistent, despite a centuries-long attempt to remove it from the bounds of propriety? Such questions are more than the mere arcana of literary history, for the roman à clef reemerges in the late-nineteenth century with resounding success, its tentacles entwining the bestseller markets, while also reaching into even the most highbrow texts.
As I argue at greater length in chapter 2, Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* illustrates both the difficulty of defining this genre and the importance of reviving it as a crucial stimulus of modernist innovation. No single key directly unlocks its secrets, but the intertwining of Wilde’s public persona with his fictional characters transformed the book retroactively into a roman à clef as readers and critics sought clues that might expose the secrets of London’s gay subculture and its social elites. Its author certainly disavowed such readings, but he was nevertheless eventually called to the stand and asked to confess Dorian’s crimes as his own. Understanding how this could happen means thinking about genre as an essentially pragmatic rather than positivistic category, as a particular relationship of both production and consumption fully delimited by neither authorial intention nor ideological function. Wilde may not have intended to write a roman à clef and the book itself can be read more easily and comfortably as a novel. Nevertheless, its initial reception and retroactive transformation into a record of its author’s life helped unleash a flood of derivative works, including E. F. Benson’s *Dodo*, Robert Hichens’s *The Green Carnation*, Elizabeth von Arnim’s *Elizabeth and Her German Garden*, and later Michael Arlen’s wildly popular work, *The Green Hat*. Now largely forgotten or dismissed as frivolously indulgent, these were all international bestsellers that transformed their authors into celebrities who were themselves often then parodied or ridiculed in an ever-expanding web of romans à clef.
The public’s apparent appetite for scandal and its fascination with the lives of the wealthy in Mayfair and Manhattan bred, in turn, an interest in the equally captivating artistic coteries of Paris, London, Berlin, and Capri. One of the most vibrant literary markets of the early twentieth century, in fact, was for works that offered glimpses into such bohemian affairs. Journalists and gossip columnists regularly reported on these groups, mixing the taint of scandal with a healthy dose of moral indignation. Such a position, however, always meant that they were outsiders, cultural tourists who could never fully penetrate the group to extract its most alluring secrets. Instead, it was the members of the coteries themselves who offered up this gossip through the genre of the roman à clef. Aldous Huxley notoriously made a career for himself in precisely this fashion, penning caustic accounts of Ottoline Morrell’s coterie in not one but three separate books. D. H. Lawrence too seized upon this opportunity, creating such a callous portrait of Morrell in *Women in Love* that the book was nearly suppressed. Just as Oscar Wilde offered a glimpse into the homoeroticism of London’s West End, so too Radclyff Hall and Compton MacKenzie used the roman à clef to expose—in one case tragically and in the other comically—the still furtive lesbian communities of the 1920s. Somerset Maugham, Jean Rhys, Ford Madox Ford, Osbert Sitwell, Evelyn Waugh, and Wyndham Lewis, along with scores of other writers both within and beyond the canonical bounds of literary modernism, also experimented with this genre, publishing books they consistently claimed were entirely imaginative but that aggressively exploited the roman à clef’s illicit pleasures.
(p.12) Despite the variety and popularity of such works, however, critics and historians alike have largely ignored them, erasing the scandalous appeal of a few in order to recuperate them for the canon while dismissing the rest as mere ephemera. Even genre criticism has largely ignored the modernist obsession with the roman à clef, inventing often torturous or bizarre terms to distance various experiments in the novel from its disreputable yet persistent double. Thus, Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*, for example, as well as similarly monumental works like Proust’s *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Butler’s *The Way of All Flesh*, and Woolf’s *Orlando*, are typically sorted into less frivolous-sounding generic categories such as the Bildungsroman or the entirely oxymoronic “autobiographical fiction.” This latter term, in fact, is an official subject heading used to catalog works in the Library of Congress, but “roman à clef” is not. Nevertheless, the latter most accurately describes a significant array of early-twentieth-century prose writing.
The reasons for this suppression are complex and will be explored at greater length in subsequent chapters, but it is not difficult to make some initial suppositions about the neglect of this vital genre. Surely part of the problem is that even so methodical a critic as Northrop Frye could not find a way to fit the roman à clef’s structural ambiguity into his typologies. In *The Anatomy of Criticism* he constructs what remains one of the best taxonomic systems for sorting various kinds of prose writing and the relationships between them. Acknowledging the often unstable boundary between fact and fiction, he contends that “autobiography ... merges with the novel by a series of insensible gradations” and that their point of intersection is the “fictional autobiography,” which he deems “introverted” and “intellectual.” By this, he means that such writing is interested in ideas rather than relationships and in the ways in which a singular consciousness processes them. Though an apt description of the journal and the memoir, this simply does not fit the roman à clef—a genre that here is largely ignored. Using the example of Aldous Huxley’s *Point Counter Point* (a widely recognized roman à clef), Frye instead associates it with the “extroverted” category of “Menippean satire,” which “resembles the confession in its ability to handle abstract ideas and theories, and differs from the novel in its characterization, which is stylized rather than naturalistic, and presents people as mouthpieces of the ideas they represent.”

This is somewhat more useful; as we will see, authors accused of writing romans à clef inevitably fall back on the defense that they have merely satirized a general type rather than a genuine person. The fact is, however, that even if these characters may appear as types, they are nevertheless derived in the roman à clef from very real people and are thus far less “intellectual” and abstract than Frye’s analysis allows. Indeed, for those authors seeking to trade on their relationship to these often well-known figures as well as for audiences seeking access to their private scandals, it is the actual person rather than the satirical type that is the compelling, albeit concealed, center of the book.
Neither memoir nor autobiography, the roman à clef also remains distinct from the two other fictional forms Frye identifies: the satire and novel. It typically lacks the often highly stylized characterization of the former, yet resists, through its sly pursuit of extradiegetic aims, the latter’s tendency “to dissolve all theory into personal relationships.” Instead, it occupies an ambiguous critical space by seeming to insist on itself as fiction while encoding scandalous and often disturbing facts about real people and events. The problem, of course, is that even those in possession of a key have no idea where precisely to redraw the line between fact and fiction, discovering in such texts not what Frye calls the “integrated pattern” of autobiography, but a chaotic array of claims that cannot be easily sorted. Consider again the case of *Ulysses*. We may know, for example, that Buck Mulligan is really Oliver St. John Gogarty, who did indeed briefly share a Martello Tower with James Joyce on Dublin’s Sandymount Strand. But we also know that this actually occurred some months before the events described on June 16, leaving us uncertain about whether or not the two friends discussed the death of Stephen’s mother or shared a conspiratorial desire to exploit the imperial romanticism of the Englishman who lived with them. This curious and often frustrating doubleness has delighted generations of Joyce scholars who never tire of drawing ever-shifting lines in the sand between the facts and the fictions of the text, but it is by no means unique to *Ulysses*. Such ambiguity is instead the very essence of the roman à clef and is therefore the quality of a widely recognized genre rather than the unique aesthetic experiment of a singular author. The often probing theoretical questions we pose about the relationship between fiction and fact in *Ulysses*, in other words, are the same ones any reader poses to books with similarly open secrets.
In “Language, Narrative, and Anti-Narrative,” Robert Scholes, himself an astute critic of genre, maintains that narratology must recognize a basic generic distinction between history and fiction. The former, he contends, “is a narrative discourse with different rules than those that govern fiction. The producer of a historical text affirms that the events entextualized did indeed occur prior to entextualization. Thus it is quite proper to bring extratextual information to bear on those events when interpreting and evaluating a historical narrative.”

We thus recognize historical narrative primarily by a shared assumption that it is always a secondary description of events that preceded its narration. Even the historical novel shares this sense of temporal priority, insisting that certain events—say the fall of Rome or the French Revolution—exist outside the text, even if the characters (p.14) experiencing them do not. Fiction, however, is “certainly otherwise, for in fiction the events may be said to be created by and with the text. They have no prior temporal existence, even though they are presented as if they did.”

The roman à clef’s tantalizing ambiguity, however, prevents us from making even this most basic distinction, particularly since—unlike the historical novel—it tends to focus less on epic events than on intimate relationships. It is not that those who possess a key gain access to a publicly authenticated history preceding entextualization. Instead, they paradoxically find themselves locked inside a labyrinthine text, finding that though in possession of a key, they cannot be certain which doors open onto fact and which onto fancy.
The roman à clef thus straddles a critical gap in our narratological taxonomies, one that yawns even wider when we realize the ambiguous relationship between fact and fiction it generates is not alone sufficient to define the genre. After all, for some readers such works are simply fictions: not a mystery to be unlocked with a closely guarded key, but novels in the most traditional vein. It is, in fact, tempting to cast the roman à clef as a deconstructive principle of contamination and reversal rather than a distinct genre. Its unstable oscillations between fact and fiction reveal the interdependence of these two categories, allowing it to collapse Frye’s analytic categories. Through its distinctively doubled operation as a mode of writing about the world, it renders novels into facts, histories into fictions. As Derrida argues in “The Law of Genre,” “as soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly, or monstrosity.” The roman à clef thus reveals the artificial, indeed monstrous quality of all genres. Yet reducing it to this sort of abstract post-structural principle obscures the social functions of the genre—the pressing and quite particular historical conditions of its rise and fall as well as its eventual resurgence at the heart of modernism. The attempt to define the roman à clef, in other words, requires us to ask about the ways it was self-consciously used not only by writers but, even more importantly, by readers as well. As Wai Chee Dimock argues in her reassessment of genre theory more generally, such a pragmatic approach can move us productively away from modernism’s fetish for originality by “giving pride of place instead to the art of receiving, and affirm it as an art: crafty, experimental, and even risk-taking.” Although not explicitly a book about genre theory, *The Art of Scandal* nevertheless contributes to this resurgent field by pursuing what John Frow calls the “social life of forms” in their densely articulated historical context. It thus integrates close readings of individual texts—some familiar and others much less so—with biography, legal history, and the sociology of reading in order to articulate the various uses to which the roman à clef was put in the twentieth century’s opening decades. Simply stated, I am more interested in the often improvisational ways a variety of producers and consumers deployed the genre than in its deep ideological structures or its epistemological status.
This pragmatic approach to genre nevertheless requires its own admittedly provisional taxonomy: an initial attempt to define those elements producers and consumers might bring to bear in creating a roman à clef. First, the genre is distinguished by what Gérard Genette calls “conditional fictionality,” meaning that the narrative that for some readers is true for others is pure fiction. Spanning the gap between history and the novel, it can theoretically be reduced to neither fact nor fiction yet can be mistaken for both. Second, in its pages plot matters less than the most subtly nuanced details. For the astute reader, after all, it is often the telling description of an individual’s idiosyncrasies—a characteristic laugh, for example, or a unique turn of phrase—that reveals the real person concealed in the text. Such details may appear to be novelistic in helping to build up a richly described world within the book, but they actually point beyond fiction to the density of reality itself. As we will see, libel suits often focus on exactly such details and are regularly avoided by making almost imperceptible changes to textual descriptions. Finally, unlike other genres, the roman à clef is infectious and threatens unremittingly to transform any fictional text into a narrative of fact. Its claims to historical accuracy and thus an uncanny social agency can remain latent until energized by its passage through networks of reading and reception. Attending to the “social life” of this form thus means seeking out the particular communal structures that activate this latent content and thus (sometimes even retroactively) constitute the genre itself. The addition of a brief preface, for example, the release of private letters, and even a wily public denial that a particular character is based on a real person can be enough to unleash this viral quality. And once exposed, the genre can mutate in unexpected ways, undermining even the most vehement assertions of authorial intention or critical rectitude. This is precisely why writers like James and Wells so despised the genre: once released, it has the ability to the taint all their work, potentially transforming powerful aesthetic objects into what they consider mere glib entertainments. The proliferation of mass media at the end of the nineteenth century, and the congruent development of widely distributed celebrity cultures, further multiplied the channels through which this kind of infection might spread to a reading public eager to revel in the public exposure of private scandal. Some of the most innovative writers of the modernist period, I
contend, helped released this infection—and later found themselves often overwhelmed by its toxic effects.

Literary professionalism and the accompanying ideal of aesthetic autonomy have nevertheless proven effective prophylactics against the roman à clef, even (p.16) for those writers who experimented with the form. Gustave Flaubert, whose own uncompromising professionalism has helped to single him out as one of the modern novel’s most compelling godfathers, famously wrote to Louise Colet of his desire to write “a book about nothing, a book dependent on nothing external, which would be held together by the strength of its style.” This dream of transforming the novel into a fully autonomous aesthetic object is still deeply resonant and continues to shape our understanding of modernism as that “world elsewhere.” “I refuse,” Flaubert would later write, “to consider Art a drain-pipe for passion, a kind of chamber pot, a slightly more elegant substitute for gossip and confidences.”

The Art of Scandal seeks to wake us from Flaubert’s beautiful dream by recovering the ways in which modernist writers and readers used the roman à clef to sift the contents of such literary chamber pots. Deliberately duplicitous in its masquerade, this genre both offers and disavows the promise of a social utility for art that law courts and literary critics have often sought to keep in check. Taking the roman à clef seriously therefore means challenging some of our most basic assumptions about both the sanctioned and illicit pleasures of reading modernist texts, and about the authority and autonomy of the fictional world itself.
This is not a matter of just recovering a few neglected texts, though the argument I make tacks between highly canonical works such as Joyce’s *Ulysses* and others, like Aldous Huxley’s *Those Barren Leaves*, which require us to draw what Ann Ardis calls “a much more detailed and nuanced topographical mapping of the period than modernism’s classic narratives of rupture have ever provided.” This imaginative cartography allows us to survey more accurately the ways early-twentieth-century writers sought to test the boundaries of the literary field by examining the constitutive exclusions shaping their aesthetic enterprise. “To utter in public the true nature of the field and its mechanisms,” Pierre Bourdieu argues in *The Field of Cultural Production*, “is sacrilege par excellence, the unforgivable sin which all the censorships constituting the field seek to repress. These are things that can only be said in such a way that they are not said.” This description of the constitutive secret at the heart of the literary field aptly defines as well the roman à clef’s own “conditional fictionality,” its riddling strategy for saying things in such a way that they are not really said. To ask about the secrets behind the roman à clef, I shall argue, is to ask questions about the contingent practices, pleasures, and aesthetics it at once exploits and disavows. In rereading modern literature through the prism of the roman à clef, therefore, this book simultaneously reveals the open secrets and illicit pleasures of modern critical practice as well. From television programs “ripped from the headlines” to best-selling novels, the roman à clef remains stubbornly with us, still shadowing our fictions with the suspicion that they have (p.17) concealed within their pages a scandalous kernel of history or biography to be either pleasurably extracted or haughtily dismissed.
The Art of Scandal is not a bibliography of the roman à clef in the early twentieth century, nor does it even pretend to touch on every major work in the period that might fall under this category. Indeed, the genre becomes so pervasive—and so infectious—that any such survey becomes essentially encyclopedic. This book instead offers a theory of the roman à clef that functions simultaneously as a counter-theory of the novel. It weaves together the threads of literary criticism, sociology, legal theory, and intellectual history. Chapter 2 picks up the first of these strands, following it through the genre’s original seventeenth- and eighteenth-century contexts where it at once contested and facilitated the emergent novel’s claim to moral authority and aesthetic autonomy. Both the roman à clef and the novel developed unique yet interrelated strategies for negotiating the expanding divide between history and fiction. The latter’s eventual rise, in fact, came to depend precisely on its ability to suppress and eventually supplant the far more disruptive—and even innovative—energies of the roman à clef. Throughout the eighteenth century, the two genres remained deeply intertwined with one another as even seminal texts like Moll Flanders and Clarissa continued to shade productively, if often dangerously, into the skillfully concealed facts of the roman à clef. The novel eventually succeeded as brilliantly as it did in the early nineteenth century only by covertly incorporating its shadowy double, which was, in turn, roundly denigrated and repressed as inartistic and insipid. The earlier genre did not disappear entirely, however, but continued to stalk the novel in works like Dickens’s Bleak House and Disraeli’s Coningsby. Such books stand out precisely because they seem so exceptional, the troubling remnants of an earlier organization of the literary field that did not pit fact so starkly against fiction.
By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the novel’s mode of organizing social, historical, and aesthetic knowledge came under increasing pressure as the roman à clef abruptly emerged from the historical margins, amidst a rapidly expanding, mass-mediated celebrity culture. Chapter 3 examines two key figures—Sigmund Freud and Oscar Wilde—who mark the onset of modernism, in part, by turning toward this long neglected genre, only to find that it possessed social and narrative powers well beyond their control. Unlike most of his predecessors, Freud regularly adopted the conventions of the roman à clef for his case studies, using this device as a way to mask (and sometimes mutilate) the identities of his patients while nevertheless revealing the most intimate details of their private sexual and psychic lives. In his 1901 study, *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hystheria*, this generic experimentation becomes essential, helping to organize one of the founding texts (p.18) of psychoanalysis around the ambiguous, indeed neurotic, tension between history and fiction. Wilde too exploits these same ambiguities throughout his work. Like Freud, he attempts to cultivate and to exploit a central, organizing secret in his work that articulates the provisional identities and social practices hovering imprecisely between history and the novel.
Wilde’s disastrous libel trial eventually revealed the limits of such ambiguity, as well the unpredictable agency of genre itself. Just as Freud did in his analysis of Dora, the courts firmly decided that the roman à clef’s constitutive secret could all too easily be transformed into the open secret of homosexual desire. As disruptive and even deconstructive as the genre might be, in other words, it could abruptly congeal in sometimes comic, sometimes tragic, and sometimes dangerous ways as historical fact. The debates over the meaning of Dorian Gray’s sin in the first libel trial opened the door to what would become an increasingly disruptive battle over the legal definition of fiction in the twentieth century and the curious agency of readers in creating and sustaining the roman à clef. Indeed, despite the often heroic narratives of modernism’s campaign against antiobscenity laws, writers in the period were much more likely to run afoul of libel suits sometimes brought successfully by plaintiffs entirely unknown to them. Chapter 4 thus surveys the surprisingly rich yet almost entirely unexplored intersection between literature and libel in the period. As writers increasingly experimented with the roman à clef’s “conditional fictionality,” judges, juries, and eventually legislators in Great Britain struggled to maintain a clear legal conception of fiction—and the consequences were broad and far-reaching. Publishers sometimes demanded vast changes to manuscripts, and the inherent conservatism of libel law became, in the words of one commentator, a “terror to authorship.” Following the particularly far-reaching case of E. Hulton and Co. v. Jones in 1909, the novel itself seemed to teeter on the edge of illegality as the courts proved almost incapable of meeting both the legal and aesthetic challenges posed by the roman à clef’s ability to broach the public sphere.
For writers of the period, this legal crisis was serious. Chapter 5 explores how James Joyce and Wyndham Lewis negotiated the consequences of their own deliberately provocative narrative experiments with so infectious a genre. Both drew heavily on their own lives—as well as those of nearly everyone they knew—to launch a deliberate critique of the fact–fiction divide, transforming it into a fundamental aspect of their high modernist aesthetics. The interpenetration of world and text in books like *The Apes of God* and *Ulysses*, however, also led both men into often grave legal trouble, putting their books in limbo and, in Lewis’s case, leading to a seemingly endless string of crippling libel suits. Far from purely extraliterary events, these legal entanglements are instead an organizing component of the works themselves: the core element of a largely forgotten modernism structured around social, aesthetic, and legal contests between fiction and reality. Forged and circulated in this complex field of force, these experimental texts not only exploit the ambiguities of libel law but are themselves inevitably constrained by its potent ability to adjudicate fact and thereby define the limits of fiction.
The history of critical and legal attempts to fix the unsettling ambiguities of the roman à clef provide the necessary background for the final chapter's study of the genre's reemergence within a highly segmented marketplace where elite culture became a site of both production and mass consumption. Many modernist romans à clef were often dismissed merely as the products of literary coteries, written for the pleasure of a few insiders and sometimes privately printed for their own consumption. The continuing expansion of the mass media in the twentieth century, however, and particularly the emergence of modern celebrity culture, meant that an ever-growing audience imagined they had access to even the most exclusive literary and cultural circles. Gossip columns—like those penned by Sewell Stokes—catered extensively to this fascination, making the private friendships of such figures as Lady Ottoline Morrell and Oscar Wilde into very public news. Uniquely positioned to exploit this fraught tension between the public and the private thanks to its own structural ambiguities, the roman à clef became an increasingly popular genre, catering to a market hungry for scandal and snobbery. Chapter 6 focuses narrowly on two such coteries, one in England and the other in Paris. The first organized itself around the imposing figure of Ottoline Morrell, a woman who shaped the lives and careers of many of Britain's most important modern writers and artists. Despite her generosity, however, she was the subject of brutal satires in at least nine romans à clef penned by, among others, D. H. Lawrence, Aldous Huxley, and W. J. Turner. Far from being simpleminded acts of brutality or revenge, these works instead deliberately exploit the genre's aesthetics of detail in order to cross the boundary between the hermetic aestheticism of highbrow modernism and the considerable rewards—both social and financial—of the wider literary marketplace. In the deep reaches of expatriate Paris, Jean Rhys deployed the roman à clef in similarly strategic ways, using the masochistic protagonist in a book like Quartet to attack Ford Madox Ford and the misogynistic culture of his bohemianism. Poised at the boundary between public and private, the roman à clef thus becomes a potent site of intersection and contradiction where gender, genre, modernism, and celebrity become densely entangled.
At its core, *The Art of Scandal* makes a simple claim with far-reaching consequences: writers throughout the early twentieth century revived the roman à clef (p.20) as part of a larger movement to renovate fiction by loosing it from the strictures of a conservative realism. In the process, the genre took on an uncanny agency of its own with far-reaching consequences for the legal, social, financial, and aesthetic structures of the novel. Within the crucible of modernism, as well as the celebrity cultures of modernity in which it was embedded, this genre’s volatile energies were rekindled. Yet the often chaotic and still resonant results of such experimentation have largely been ignored, repressed, or condemned as inartistic and inauthentic. By developing a distinctive art of scandal, however, writers and readers found a way to resist aesthetic autonomization by working at the complicated nexus of coterie culture, the mass market, cultural analysis, and the courts of law. To treat the roman à clef seriously, therefore, requires us to press at the very boundaries of intellectual propriety, to reveal in the ambiguities of its open secrets those things that we ourselves do not wish to confess about the structures and canons of the literary field. “The novelist,” H. M. Paull regretfully informs her readers, “must reckon with the readiness with which many people jump to the conclusion that they can recognize the originals of the author’s characters.”36 Rather than frowning upon such impropriety, this book instead indulges in it precisely because so many people do indeed read this way. In doing so, they activate the latent critical energies of the novel that were there at its very invention and that still command the power to alter fundamentally our bedrock assumptions—as readers, writers, and critics—about the aesthetics and the ethics of fiction.

**Notes:**


(3) Truman Capote, *Playboy* (December 1976), 50.


(6) “Thanks to Ehrlichman and *The Company*, Truman Capote and *Answered Prayers*, and Elizabeth Ray and *The Washington Fringe Benefit*,” the reviewer writes, “the roman à clef may become not only the form the bestselling novel takes in 1976 but the symbol of a rather shoddy year that could just possibly go down in history as the Age of Psst!-Have-You-Heard?” (Melvin Maddocks, “Now for the Age of Psst!” *Time*, June 28, 1976).


(10) Ibid., 16.

(11) Wells was notorious for writing romans à clef, the most scandalous of which was the 1923 book, *Men Like Gods*, which contains a brutal portrait of Winston Churchill as Rupert Catterskill. This helped prompt both his disingenuous preface to the *World of William Clissold*, as well as the following note in the front matter: “If you are the sort of person who will not accept it as a novel, then Mr. Wells asks that you leave it alone. You are not getting sly peeps at something more real than the reality of art, and your attempts to squint through will only make you squint very unbecomingly.” Wells’s frustration may also have resulted from the fact that he was himself so regularly enfolded into other romans à clef, most famously as Hypo Wilson in Dorothy Richardson’s *Pilgrimage*, but also as Broadbent in G. B. Shaw’s *John Bull’s Other Island* and, later, as Max Town in Anthony West’s *Heritage*.

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(14) Ibid. *Making Shapely Fiction*

(15) Paull, 248.

(16) *The Art of Scandal* Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” in *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press), 110.

(17) Ibid., 250.

(18) The narrator in *Ravelstein* (New York: Viking, 2000), in a metafictional acknowledgment of Saul Bellow’s own *roman à clef* about Allan Bloom, thinks, “It was wonderful to be so public about the private” (31).

(19) In *Reading 1922: A Return to the Scene of the Modern* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), Michael North insists on an analytic shift “from the production to the reception of literary modernism” (30). Genre, of course can operate both as a set of deliberately created markers as well as pragmatic codes invoked in the act of reception. It thus serves as a link between creation and consumption, a way of attending to the way literary forms traffic between readers and authors. In *Literature as System: Essays toward the Theory of Literary History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1971), Claudio Guillén writes that “genre is an invitation to form,” but it is ultimately the reader as well as the writer who must answer it (121).

(20) Guillén, 120.


Ibid., 309.

Ibid., 308.


Ibid.


Ibid., 319.


(34) . Two such bibliographical studies have been published and I am indebted to the detective work evident in both: Earle Walbridge, *Literary Characters Drawn from Life: Romans à clef, Drames à Clef, Real People in Poetry* (New York: H. W. Wilson, 1936) and William Amos, *The Originals: An A–Z of Fiction’s Real-Life Characters* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1985). A select bibliography of romans à clef published in English between 1890 and 1940 can be found after the endnotes.

(35) . The most famous example of this within modernism is Djuna Barnes's 1928 *Ladies Almanack*. Only 1,050 copies were initially printed privately: fifty were hand-colored and distributed to members of Natalie Barney’s circle, while the rest were informally sold on the streets of Paris.

(36) . Paull, 248.