



Convincing Fiction
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28 October 2020

Is this great literature?

"I emptied the ashtray, walked about, took the cups, put them in the sink, wetted the kitchen cloth, sprayed the table with detergent and was washing when Yngve came in with a carrier bag in each hand. He set them down and began to unpack. First, what we would have for lunch, which he laid out on the worktop, four vacuum-packed salmon steaks, a bag of potatoes stained dark with soil, a head of cauliflower and a packet of frozen beans, then all the other good, some of which he stowed in the fridge, some in the cupboard next to it. A 1.5 litre bottle of Sprite, a 1.5 litre bottle of CB beer, a bag of oranges, a carton of milk, a carton of orange juice, a loaf."

This is taken from a book whose addictive attention to detail and sheer convincing-ness has perplexed even the many critics who admire it. It is from *A Death in the Family*, the first volume of Karl Ove Knausgaard's six-part sequence of autobiographical novels, *Min Kam (My Struggle)*. Published in Norwegian in 2009, it was translated into English by Don Bartlett in 2012.

The passage is excessively circumstantial, pedantically particular, utterly inert. (Or does that 'stained dark with soil' look like an obstinately poetic detail?) Yet it seems to me an example of how novels have, for almost exactly three centuries, seized our attention and compelled our belief. These sentences exhibit some of 'the powers of the novel' – the overall title of my series of three lectures.

We know that the book from which this passage is taken is autobiographical from the fact that its narrator shares its author's name. We probably also know from much reported fury or distress of several of the family members or ex-partners who are characters in Knausgaard's story.

We know that frisson of revelation from accomplished examples of what has come to be called autofiction (a word whose earliest use the Oxford English Dictionary records from 1976, but which has only become common in the last couple of decades). Accomplished British examples include Edward St Aubyn's Patrick Melrose quintet, published between 1992 and 2012. Or Rachel Cusk's trilogy of novels *Outline* (2014), *Transit* (2017) and *Kudos* (2018), books that, in their detailed accounts of encounters at literary festivals or difficulties with builders improving your recently purchased London flat seem designed to prompt the thought – this *must* have happened to the author.

Knausgaard's six-book sequence *My Struggle*, is an important part of this development. The passage I have just shown you is taken from Part Two of *A Death in the Family*, where, having been told of his father's death, Karl Ove travels with his brother Yngve to Kristiansand, on the Southern tip of Norway, where his father has been living. He had become an un-rescue-able alcoholic, who had retreated from the world to the house of Karl Ove's grandmother. It was she who found him,

sitting in an armchair, dead. The book is about his death and the memories it stirs, but also the ghastly business of clearing up afterwards.

The two brothers find that the house, still inhabited by his skeletal, confused grandmother, is in a state of utter squalor. They set about to try to clean it up. We go through Karl Ove's clean-up with him. We are as close to the grot as he is. Here he is, starting on the bathroom and emptying out the wall cupboard.

"... Blades, safety razors, hairpins, several bars of soap, desiccated creams and ointments, a hair net, aftershave, deodorants, eyeliners, lipsticks, some small cracked powder puffs – not sure what they were used for, but it must have been something to do with make-up – and hairs, both short curly ones and longer straighter ones, nail scissors, a roll of plasters, dental floss and combs. Once the cupboard was empty, a yellow-brown thickish residue was left on the shelf that I decided to wash last of all. The wall tiles beside the toilet seat, on which the toilet roll holder was fixed, were covered with light brown stains and the floor beneath was sticky, and these seemed to me to be most in need of attention, so I squirted a line of Jif over the tiles and began to scrub them, methodically, from the ceiling right down to the floor, Firstly, the right-hand wall, then the mirror wall, then the bathtub wall and lastly around the door..."

Karl Ove Knausgaard, *A Death in the Family*

How do we know this narrative is fiction? That each volume of *My Struggle* is indeed a novel? That the whole is what we have been taught to call a *roman fleuve*? (The narrator unsurprisingly describes himself as addicted to Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu*).

One reviewer – a fellow novelist – complained about Knausgaard's 'merciless specificity'. And you can see what he means. But this merciless specificity is exactly what shows it to be fiction. The people are real, the story is true – but the detail has to be invented. What is most like fact in this book is what is just what is likeliest to be fictional. Of course, death makes this mere factuality dramatically expressive. Death requires the gruesome attention to detail – but also the numbness that gives the detail its voltage.

It is crucial to Knausgaard's method that his books do not have chapters. *A Death in the Family* is divided into Part One and Part Two, but otherwise the only divisions are the frequent but entirely irregular white spaces separating one sequence of events or thoughts from the next one. The rest of the books in the sequence – all five remaining volumes – are undivided. When I interviewed him in 2016 about the second volume in the series, *A Man in Love* as it is titled in English, he told me how important the undividedness of each book was - how, wherever and whenever he was in the narrative, it was always 'here and now'.

Let us turn to another entirely chapterless novel for a factuality that the Knausgaard *aficionado* might recognize.

"... I first got three of the Seamens Chests, which I had broken open and empty'd, and lower'd them down upon my Raft; the first of these I fill'd with Provision, viz. Bread, Rice, three Dutch Cheeses, five pieces of dry'd Goat's Flesh, which we liv'd much upon, and a little Remainder of European Corn which had been laid by for some Fowls which we brought to Sea with us, but the Fowls were kill'd; there had been some Barley and Wheat together, but, to my great Disappointment, I found afterwards that the Rats had eaten or spoil'd it all; as for Liquors, I found several, Cases of Bottles belonging to our Skipper, in which were some Cordial Waters, and

in all about five or six Gallons of Rack, these I stow'd by themselves, there being no need to put them into the Chest, nor any room for them."

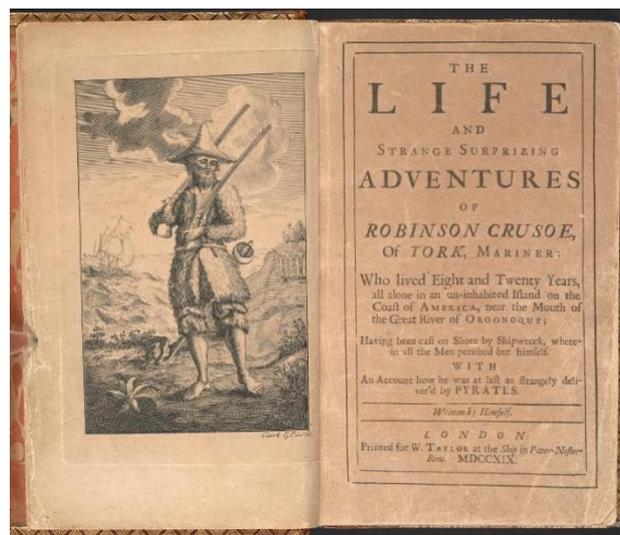
Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719)

Even those who have never read this might know what is going on. The shipwrecked Robinson Crusoe, the only survivor, is salvaging from the wreck of his ship everything that he might use to survive on his island.

You will notice that this seems a single sentence – in fact, it is only half the sentence! Like Knausgaard's narrator, Defoe's offers the list as the bare index of reality. And there is much more like this.

Chapter-less novels are a breed apart. Knausgaard shares his habit of declining to divide up his narratives with the leading pioneer of the nascent English novel, Daniel Defoe. Teaching a class on one of Defoe's novels is always a disrupted experience, as students try to find whatever passage is being discussed in their various different modern editions. The novelist has given them no landmarks. It is all the flow of his protagonist's recollections.

Here is the title page of the first edition of *Robinson Crusoe*



You will see, of course, that Defoe's name is absent and that we are presented with an account that purports to be RC's own memoir. In a short preface, a nameless editor tells us how instructive the book will be.

"The editor believes the thing to be a just History of Fact; neither is there any Appearance of Fiction in it"

For Defoe's hero, facts are consoling, but not only in and of themselves.

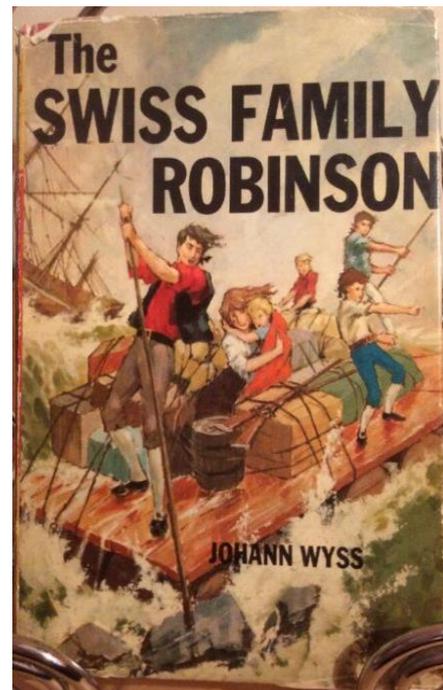
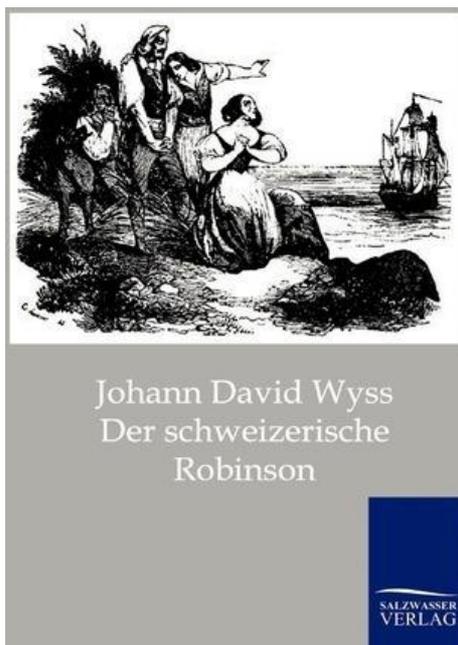
"I walk'd about on the Shore lifting up my Hands, and my whole Being, as I may say, wrapped up in a Contemplation of my Deliverance, making a Thousand Gestures and Motions which I cannot describe, reflecting upon all my Comerades that were drown'd, and that there should not be one Soul saved but myself; for, as for them, I never saw them afterwards, or any Sign of them, except three of their Hats, one Cap, and two Shoes that were not fellows."

Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (1719)

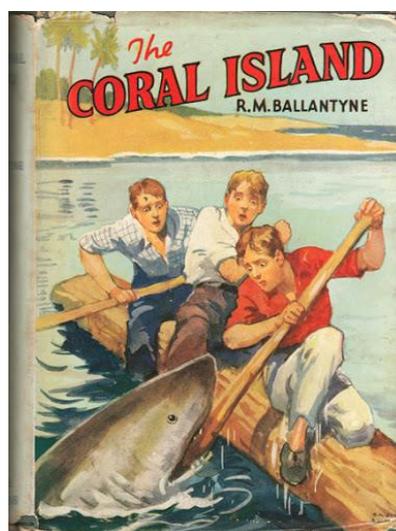
Crusoe remembers his confusion and tells us how he is inadequate to the task of getting his experience down on the page: 'as I may say ... which I cannot describe'. But about something he can manage to be precise: 'three of their Hats, one Cap, and two Shoes that were not fellows'. He does remember that the two shoes do not match: remnants to two drowned men.

It is no news that *Robinson Crusoe* shaped later fiction. Only twelve years later, Johann Gottfried Schnabel had coined the word 'Robinsonade', in the preface to his utopian fiction *Die Insel Felsenburg* - though it seems not to have appeared in English until a century later, in the 1830s.

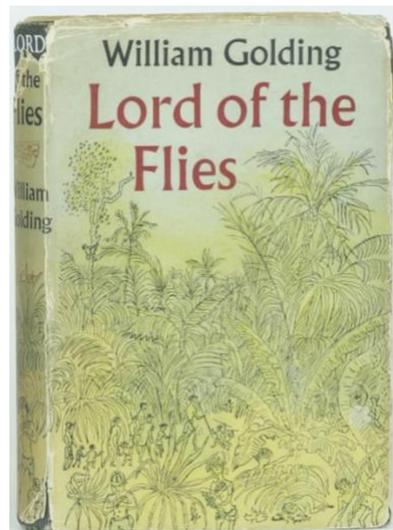
Here are, in rapid review, some Robinsonades, each age inventing its own. First, the original German (then Englished) version of the novel by the Swiss pastor Johann David Wyss.



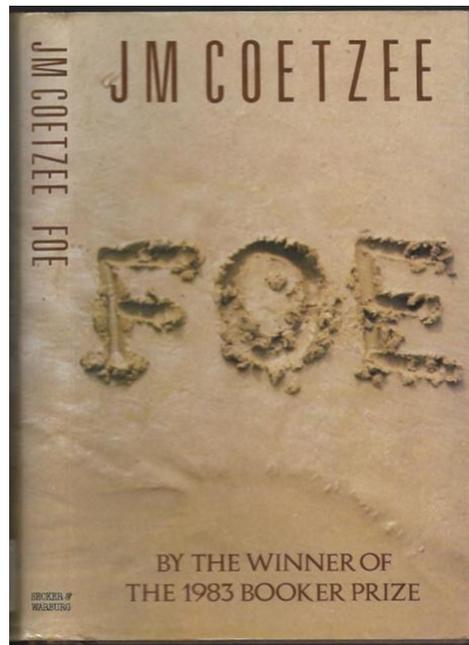
Then R.M. Ballantyne's Victorian bestseller for boys, in which three teenage boys are shipwrecked on a desert island, managing to escape the threat of sharks, cannibals and pirates.



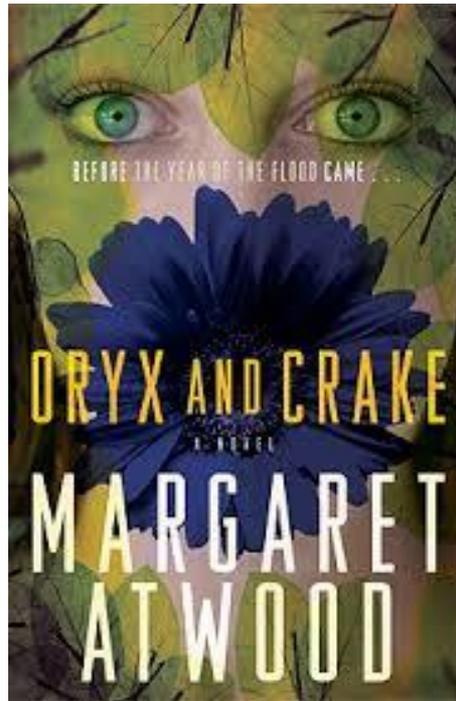
And Golding's frightening classic, which is a kind dis-enchantment of this boyish fable.



More recently, come Coetzee's 1986 revisiting of Defoe's novel, narrated from the point of view of a female castaway, Susan Barton, who encounters a sluggish Crusoe and a speechless Friday on the island where she washes up – and who later, back in London, tries to get Defoe to tell her story.



And then Margaret Atwood's post-pandemic fable human meddling, centred on a kind of castaway who was once a genetic engineer, and now lives, in sub-tropical loneliness, surrounded by peaceful but uninteresting, genetically engineered humanoids, Crakers.



The desert island narrative, the survival tale, the adventure story itself are all *Robinson Crusoe*'s progeny. Like the best kind of founding text, *Robinson Crusoe* opens itself to our changing requirements. For us, now, it is evidently a document in the history of colonialism, and Crusoe's subjugation of Friday is its main lesson.

Yet for some readers, and some other writers, this 'just History of Fact' has had an incomparable romance to it. For Charles Dickens, *Robinson Crusoe* was the elemental novel. Apart from plays by Shakespeare, it is the literary work mentioned most often in Dickens's novels. When the Ghost of Christmas Past returns the aged miser to his childhood, he sees the fictions that he once loved come back to the life they once had.

'To hear Scrooge expending all the earnestness of his nature on such subjects, in a most extraordinary voice between laughing and crying; and to see his heightened and excited face; would have been a surprise to his business friends in the city, indeed.

"There's the Parrot!" cried Scrooge. "Green body and yellow tail, with a thing like a lettuce growing out of the top of his head; there he is! Poor Robin Crusoe, he called him, when he came home again after sailing round the island. 'Poor Robin Crusoe, where have you been, Robin Crusoe?' The man thought he was dreaming, but he wasn't. It was the Parrot, you know. There goes Friday, running for his life to the little creek! Halloo! Hoop! Halloo!"

Then, with a rapidity of transition very foreign to his usual character, he said, in pity for his former self, "Poor boy!" and cried again.'

Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* (1843), Stave II

Karl Marx may have thought Defoe a kind of celebrant of capitalism, but in *Hard Times* Dickens imagines Defoe's fiction to provide an escape into the imagination for industrial capitalism's enslaved operatives.

"There was a library in Coketown, to which general access was easy. Mr. Gradgrind greatly tormented his mind about what the people read in this library: a point whereon little rivers of tabular statements periodically flowed into the howling ocean of tabular statements, which no diver ever got to any depth in and came up sane. It

was a disheartening circumstance, but a melancholy fact, that even these readers persisted in wondering. They wondered about human nature, human passions, human hopes and fears, the struggles, triumphs and defeats, the cares and joys and sorrows, the lives and deaths of common men and women! They sometimes, after fifteen hours' work, sat down to read mere fables about men and women, more or less like themselves, and about children, more or less like their own. They took De Foe to their bosoms, instead of Euclid, and seemed to be on the whole more comforted by Goldsmith than by Cocker."

Charles Dickens, *Hard Times* (1854), Book the First, Ch. VIII

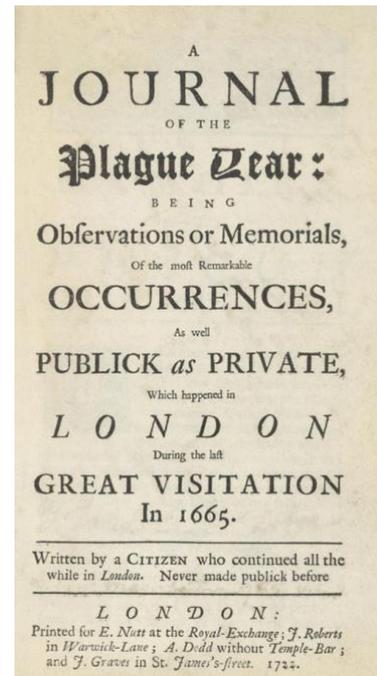
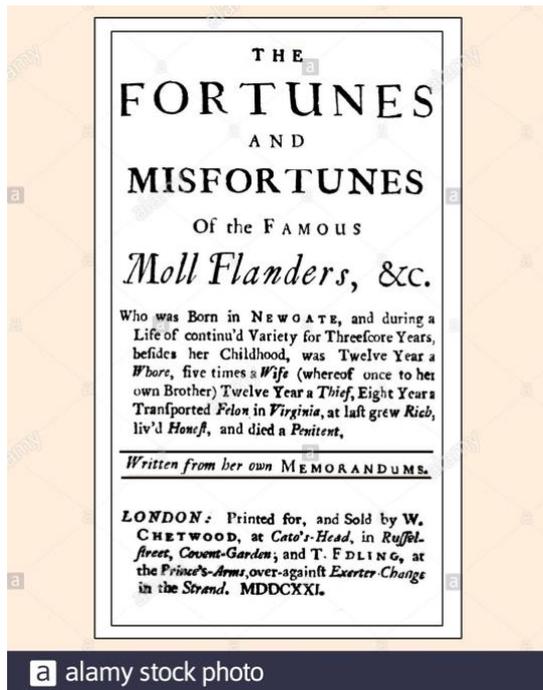
Robinson Crusoe was just the first of Defoe's novels. Its author went on from the tale of adventure to the autobiographies of penitent criminals. One of these was *Moll Flanders*. Remembering how, as an impoverished young woman, she gave in to temptation, and how she heard the voice of the devil, Moll, our narrator, also recalls some facts

"... the Child had a little Necklace on of Gold Beads, and I had my Eye upon that, and in the dark of the Alley I stoop'd, pretending to mend the Child's Clog that was loose, and took off her Necklace and the Child never felt it, and so led the Child on again; Here, I say, the Devil put me upon killing the Child in the dark Alley, that it might not Cry; but the very thought frighted me so that I was ready to drop down, but I turn'd the Child about and bad it go back again, for that was not its way home; the Child said so she would, and I went thro' into Bartholomew Close, and then turn'd round to another Passage that goes into St. John's-street, then crossing into Smithfield, went down Chick-lane and into Field-lane to Holbourn-bridge, when mixing with the Crowd of People usually passing there, it was not possible to have been found out; and thus I enterpriz'd my second Sally into the World."

Daniel Defoe, *Moll Flanders* (1722)

In all her fear and confusion, she knew her way through those streets. As she looks back on her fall into crime, she can at least be sure of those street names, that precise route.

Though Defoe's authorship of his novels may not have been much known in his lifetime, works like *Robinson Crusoe* and *Moll Flanders* were at least understood to be fiction. A couple of his novels (as we now call them) were, however, so like real memoirs that they were taken to be such. The title page of one of these, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, is here given alongside that of *Moll Flanders*.



When the second of these was published, Londoners were fearful about the impending arrival of the plague, which had reached the South of France. There was a flurry of publications about previous experiences of plague, including Defoe's fictional narrative – which was duly taken to be a real memoir. When, in the nineteenth century, it became clear that Defoe had concocted the whole thing, some were appalled. This was fraudulence. Now we are more likely to think that the fabrication of such a convincing document is an admirable fictional achievement.

The Romantic essayists – Hazlitt, Lamb and De Quincey – were amongst the first to see the literary merit in Defoe's novels. De Quincey wrote in *Blackwood's Magazine* of how Defoe was 'the only author known who has so plausibly circumstantiated his false historical records as to make them pass for genuine, even with literary men and critics'. He relished Defoe's invention of 'such little circumstantiations of any character or incident as seem, by their apparent inertness of effect, to verify themselves':

"for, where the reader is told that such a person was the posthumous son of a tanner, that his mother married afterwards a Presbyterian schoolmaster, who gave him a smattering of Latin, but, the schoolmaster dying of the plague, that he was compelled at sixteen to enlist for bread – in all this, as there is nothing at all amusing, we conclude that the author could have no reason to detain us with such particulars but simply because they were true. To invent, when nothing at all is gained by inventing, there seems no imaginable temptation."

Novels learnt to provide the unnecessary 'particulars' that made them seem true.

Thus, Samuel Richardson's groundbreaking novel *Pamela* (1740), written in the form of letters from a fifteen-year-old servant girl to her parents and introduced – like *Robinson Crusoe* – by a preface from a nameless 'editor', recommending the moral tendency of what will follow.

The virtuous heroine worries a good deal about her soul, but also about clothes.

"Since my last, my Master gave me more fine Things. He call'd me up to my old Lady's Closet, and pulling out her Drawers, he gave me Two Suits of fine Flanders

lac'd Headcloths, Three Pair of fine Silk Shoes, two hardly the worse, and just fit for me; for my old Lady had a very little Foot; and several Ribbands and Topknots of all Colours, and Four Pair of fine white Cotton Stockens, and Three Pair of fine Silk ones; and Two Pair of rich Stays, and a Pair of rich Silver Buckles in one Pair of the Shoes." (Letter VII)

With psychological exactitude, Richardson has his heroine so fussed by all this stuff that she cannot notice what her new master - and would-be seducer - is up to.

For even some of the eighteenth-century readers who were gripped by *Pamela* (which was a bestseller), such domestic detail was vulgar and absurd and utterly unliterary. Yet it would be taken up by the sub-genre that gave fiction new prestige in the nineteenth century: the historical novel. Its attention to little facts is still familiar to us.

In a review of Hilary Mantel's *Bring Up the Bodies* in the *New Yorker* (7 May, 2012), James Wood praised the novelistic intelligence with which her 'facts' were fictionalised:

"This season young men carry their effects in soft pale leather bags, in imitation of the agents for the Fugger bank, who travel all over Europe and set the fashion. The bags are heart-shaped and so to him it always looks as if they are going wooing, but they swear they are not. Nephew Richard Cromwell sits down and gives the bags a sardonic glance.

Do you know if Mantel has manufactured or borrowed from the record this information about the fashionable Fugger bag? In some sense, it doesn't matter, because the writer has made a third category of the reality, the plausibly hypothetical. It's what Aristotle claimed was the difference between the historian and the poet: the former describes what happened, and the latter what might happen."

James Wood's question is rhetorical, but I did wonder about the answer. So, I asked Hilary Mantel – and indeed the information about the sixteenth-century man-bag was recovered from the archive, not invented. As she said when replying to my enquiry, the naming of the banking house might suggest to the reader that this is fact, not fiction, so to speak.

In the early decades of the novel, there was an important word for what it was about a novel that made it convincing. That word was probable. In the 1750s, John Cleland - author of the ingeniously pornographic novel *Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure* (1748-9) – typically applauded Tobias Smollett, Henry Fielding and Sarah Fielding as writers of a 'new species' of fiction whose subject matter is 'familiar, practical, and probable to be met with in the course of common life'. They have helped banish 'romances and novels which turn upon characters out of nature, monsters of perfection, feats of chivalry, fairy-enchancements, and the whole train of the marvellous absurd'. It is just one example.

The earliest sustained account of the rise of the novel is Clara Reeve's *The Progress of Romance* (1785), couched as a series of dialogues between two women (Euphrasia and Sophronia) and a man (Hortensius). Reeve uses the form of the dialogue not to set different arguments against each other but in order to show how anxieties about the powers of fiction might be answered by earnest enquiry. Indeed, the point of the dialogues is to reach consensus. Hortensius begins as a sceptic about the moral influence of novels, but ends up with his doubts defeated. While Reeve's book finds the roots of the novel in the romances of earlier centuries, it is clear that 'the Novel' (she uses the word in just the way we would recognize) is something new.

“The Novel gives a familiar relation of such things, as pass every day before our eyes, such as may happen to our friend, or to ourselves; and the perfection of it, is to represent every scene, in so easy and natural a manner, and to make them appear so probable, as to deceive us into a persuasion (at least while we are reading) that all is real.”

By the late eighteenth century, there was also a plentiful supply of novels that took pleasure – and gave pleasure – in transcending the ‘probable’: the so-called ‘Gothic’ novels that we will be visiting in the third of my lectures. So, it is notable that this adjective recurs when, in Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey*, Henry Tilney confronts Catherine Moreland with the folly of her Gothic-inspired fantasies.

“Dear Miss Morland, consider the dreadful nature of the suspicions you have entertained. What have you been judging from? Remember the country and the age in which we live. Remember that we are English, that we are Christians. Consult your own understanding, your own sense of the probable, your own observation of what is passing around you. Does our education prepare us for such atrocities? Do our laws connive at them? Could they be perpetrated without being known, in a country like this, where social and literary intercourse is on such a footing, where every man is surrounded by a neighbourhood of voluntary spies, and where roads and newspapers lay everything open? Dearest Miss Morland, what ideas have you been admitting?”

‘Consult ... your own sense of the probable’. It is almost like Austen’s motto for any reader of novels – and certainly for all good readers of her novels.

We might note that Ian McEwan chose this very passage as the epigraph for perhaps his most achieved and admired novel, *Atonement*. It is a novel whose protagonist is misled by her own capacity for fiction-making to turn what she has seen into what she imagines. Forget the probable, and disaster beckons.

So, the post-modernist novelist continues to be as fascinated by factual minutiae as the first pioneers of the English novel. McEwan’s fiction sometimes gluts us on detail, as if forcing fiction to be subservient to the complexity of the modern world. His 2005 novel *Saturday* is famous for this, giving us whole rallies of a squash game, or every incision and suture of a brain operation. Its protagonist, Henry Perowne, is a neuro-surgeon and rather fancies himself as a cook. Here he is making Saturday lunch, while the television in his cavernous London kitchen runs footage of the military build-up to the invasion of Iraq.

“He’s cleaning up the kitchen, wiping his mess from the central island into a large bin, and scrubbing the chopping boards under running water. Then it’s time to tip the boiling juice off the skates and mussels into the casserole. When that’s done he has now, he reckons, about two and a half litres of bright orange stock which he’ll cook for another five minutes. Just before dinner he’ll reheat it, and simmer the clams, monkfish, mussels and prawns in it for ten minutes. They’ll eat the stew with brown bread, salad and red wine. After New York, there’s the Kuwait-Iraq border, and military trucks moving in convoy along a desert road, and our lads kipping down by the tracks of their tanks, then eating bangers next morning from their mess-tins. He takes two bags of mâche from the bottom of the fridge and empties them into a salad tosser. He runs the cold tap over the leaves. An officer, barely in his twenties, is standing outside his tent pointing with a stick at a map on an easel. Perowne isn’t tempted to disable the mute – these items from the front have a cheerful, censored air that lowers his spirits. He spins the salad and tips it into the

bowl. Oil, lemon, pepper and salt he'll throw on later. There's cheese and fruit for pudding."

There is something deliberately irritating about this, I think. This is free indirect style: it is all filtered through the character's consciousness and he is just too pleased with every aspect of his life. Perowne's complacency must be well-established in order to be threatened. And the interleaving of the scenes from a coming war is appropriately jolting – mocking, even. But he is also a descendant of Defoe's protagonists: when confusion threatens, you can at least cling to the details.

Food – *cuisine* should we call it? – has often attracted the satirical attentions of the late-20th- or early-21st-C. novelist. Here is Patrick Bateman, narrator but definitely not hero of Brett Easton Ellis's 1991 novel *American Psycho*. He is in a New York restaurant with some characterless fellow yuppies and is convinced that the waitress is flirting with him. (We can never know if this is so, as the narrative, designedly, allows us no perspective beyond his self-regard.)

"[she] laughs sexily when I order, as an appetizer, the monkfish and squid ceviche with golden caviar; gives me a stare so steamy, so penetrating when I order the gravlax potpie with green tomatillo sauce I have to look back at the pink Bellini in the tall champagne flute with a concerned, deadly serious expression so as not to let her think I am too interested. Price orders the tapas and then the venison with yogurt sauce and fiddlehead ferns with mango slices. McDermott orders the sashimi with goat cheese and then the smoked duck with endive and maple syrup. Van Patten has the scallop sausage and the grilled salmon with raspberry vinegar and guacamole."

Brett Easton Ellis, *American Psycho* (1991), 'Harry's'

Can these dishes exist? Yes! No! I don't know! I did google 'Fiddlehead ferns' and *there* was footage of 'the furled fronds of a young fern, harvested for use as a vegetable' being sautéed. Easton Ellis's details dare you to disbelieve them. Notoriously, the most frequent details are of the designer clothes of his triumphantly superficial, massively overpaid young-ish New Yorkers – and of the killing and dismembering of his many victims, mostly women. The latter are often unreadable. The former are so obsessive that we hardly notice the absurdity of what they record.

Here is an anonymous blogger, who got the point. "I recently read *American Psycho* and was extremely disturbed by its unendingly visceral and graphic nature. One particularly punishing scene describing, in vivid, unflinching detail, a Salvatore Ferragamo suit with matching Armani tie, Bottega Veneta belt and complementary Oliver Peoples glasses frames left me feeling sick to my stomach".

Such catalogues as Bateman's are another version of the stuff of fact-like fiction. We have already seen the fact-like title page of Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year*. No wonder it was mistaken for what it pretended to be, when Defoe provided its reader with statistical tables of the impact of the plague. He went to the so-called Bills of Mortality, published by London parishes, and reproduced them in what we now call his 'novel'.

lets, and Out-parts, took the same Method: As I remember, the Orders for shutting up of Houses, did not take Place so soon on our Side, because, as I said before, the Plague did not reach to these Eastern Parts of the Town, at least, nor begin to be very violent, till the beginning of *August*. For Example, the whole Bill, from the 11th to the 18th of *July*, was 1761, yet there dy'd but 71 of the Plague, in all those Parishes we call the *Tower-Hamlets*; and they were as follows.

<i>Aldgate</i>	14		34		65
<i>Stepney</i>	33	the next	58	and to the	76
<i>White Chappel</i>	21	Week was	48	1st of <i>Aug.</i>	79
<i>St. Kath. Tower</i> ¹¹⁴	2	thus.	4	thus.	4
<i>Trin. Minoiries</i> ¹¹⁵	1		1		4
	71		145		228

It was indeed, coming on a main; for the Burials that same Week, were in the next adjoining Parishes, thus.

<i>St. Len. Shoreditch</i> ¹¹⁶	64	the next Week	84	to the 1st.	110
<i>St. But. Bishopsg.</i> ¹¹⁷	65	prodigiously en-	105	of <i>Aug.</i>	116
<i>St. Giles Crippel.</i>	213	creased, as	421	thus.	554
	342		610		780

This shutting up of houses was at first counted a very cruel and Unchristian Method, and the poor People so confin'd made bitter Lamentations: Complaints of the Severity of it, were also daily brought to my Lord Mayor, of Houses causelessly, (and some maliciously) shut up: I cannot say, but upon Enquiry, many that complained so loudly, were found in a Condition to be continued,¹¹⁸ and others again, Inspection³ being made upon the sick Person, and the Sickness not appearing infectious, or if uncertain, yet, on his being content to be carried to the Pest-House, were released.

There, in one way, is the truth of it. What does H. F., Defoe's narrator, say in the face of it? H.F. tells us how the living, delirious with fear, would throw themselves into the plague pits in which the dead were being buried: 'it is impossible to say any Thing that is able to give a true Idea of it to those who did not see it, other than this; that it was indeed *very, very, very* dreadful, and such as no Tongue can express'. It is the narrator's very ineloquence - '*very, very, very*' - that is so expressive here, the crude emphasis of the italics enacting a horrified inarticulacy. As ever, what Defoe cares about catching is the appearance of truthfulness, and the inadequacy of his story-teller is the truest fiction of all.

Facts make narratives convincing. But also, characters and narrators clutch at facts when their own powers of understanding or explanation are not to be trusted. From Defoe to now, the novel has

Here is the last paragraph of Kazuo Ishiguro's 2005 novel, *Never Let Me Go*. It is narrated by Kathy H., a human clone living in a just-slightly different version of England in the 1990s. She, and her fellow clones, have been created to supply organs for transplant surgery for the benefit of the rest of us. Before she does this and 'completes' (i.e. is killed), she is employed as a 'carer', tending others who are in the process of 'donation'. One of these, Tommy, has recently 'completed'. She drives around England doing her 'caring', and one day drives to Norfolk, and stops somewhere she has never been before.

"I found I was standing before acres of ploughed earth. There was a fence keeping me from stepping into the field, with two lines of barbed wire, and I could see how this fence and the cluster of three or four trees above me were the only things breaking the wind for miles. All along the fence, especially along the lower line of wire, all sorts of rubbish had caught and tangled. It was like the debris you get on a seashore: the wind must have carried some of it for miles and miles before coming up against these trees and these two lines of wire. Up in the branches of the trees, too, I could see, flapping about, torn plastic sheeting and bits of old carrier bags.

That was the only time, as I stood there, looking at that strange rubbish, feeling the wind coming across those empty fields, that I started to imagine just a little fantasy thing, because this was Norfolk after all, and it was only a couple of weeks since I had lost him. I was thinking about the rubbish, the flapping plastic in the branches, the shore-line of odd stuff caught along the fencing, and I half-closed my eyes and imagined this was the spot where everything I'd ever lost since my child hood had washed up, and I was now standing her in front of it, and if I waited long enough, a tiny figure would appear on the horizon across the field, and gradually get larger until I'd see it was Tommy, and he'd wave, maybe even call. The fantasy never got beyond that – I didn't let it – and though the tears rolled down my face, I wasn't sobbing or out of control. I just waited a bit, then turned back to the car, to drive off to wherever it was I was supposed to be."

Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (2005), Ch. Twenty-Two

Knausgaard's fictional other, in the face of his father's death; Defoe's resourceful record-makers, in the face of possible extinction; Ishiguro's parentless young woman, with little time left. We believe all of them both because of what they cannot say – but also because of all that they can notice.

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Further reading

- Miriam Allott, *Novelists on the Novel* (1957; repr. Columbia University Press, 2020)
 Liam McIlvanney and Ray Ryan, eds., *The Good of the Novel* (Faber and Faber, 2011)
 John Mullan, *How Novels Work* (Oxford University Press, 2006)
 John Richetti, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Daniel Defoe* (Cambridge University Press, 2008)
 Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (Penguin, 1957; repr. 2015)