

From *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*

**novel**, nearly always an extended fictional prose **narrative**, although some novels are very short, some are non-fictional, some have been written in verse, and some do not even tell a story. Such exceptions help to indicate that the novel as a literary **genre** is itself exceptional: it disregards the constraints that govern other literary forms, and acknowledges no obligatory structure, style, or subject-matter. Thriving on this openness and flexibility, the novel has become the most important literary genre of the modern age, superseding the **epic**, the **romance**, and other narrative forms. Novels can be distinguished from **short stories** and **novellas** by their greater length, which permits fuller, subtler development of characters and themes. (Confusingly, it is a shorter form of tale, the Italian *novella*, that gives the novel its name in English.) There is no established minimum length for a novel, but it is normally at least long enough to justify its publication in an independent volume, unlike the short story. The novel differs from the prose romance in that a greater degree of **realism** is expected of it, and that it tends to describe a recognizable secular social world, often in a sceptical and prosaic manner inappropriate to the marvels of romance. The novel has frequently incorporated the structures and languages of non-fictional prose forms (history, autobiography, journalism, travel writing), even to the point where the non-fictional element outweighs the fictional. It is normally expected of a novel that it should have at least one character, and preferably several characters shown in processes of change and social relationship; a **plot**, or some arrangement of narrated events, is another normal requirement. Special **subgenres** of the novel have grown up around particular kinds of character (the **Künstlerroman**, the spy novel), setting (the **historical novel**, the **campus novel**), and plot (the detective novel); while other kinds of novel are distinguished either by their structure (the **epistolary novel**, the **picaresque novel**) or by special emphases on character (the **Bildungsroman**) or ideas (the **roman à thèse**). Although some ancient prose narratives like Petronius' *Satyricon* (1st century CE) can be called novels, and although some significant forerunners of the novel—including François Rabelais's *Gargantua* (1534)—appeared in the 16th century, it is the publication in Spain of the first part of Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote de la Mancha* in 1605 that is most widely accepted as announcing the arrival of the true novel. In France the inaugural landmark was Madame de Lafayette's *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678), while in England Daniel Defoe is regarded as the founder of the English novel with his *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Moll Flanders* (1722). The novel achieved its predominance in the 19th century, when Charles Dickens and other writers found a huge audience through serial publication, and when the conventions of realism were consolidated. In the 20th century a division became more pronounced between the popular forms of novel and the various experiments of **modernism** and **postmodernism**—from the **stream of consciousness** to the **anti-novel**; but repeated reports of the 'death of the novel' have been greatly exaggerated. *adjective: novelistic.*

See also **fiction**.

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