**POPULAR FICTION**

It is common to mark a distinction between popular fiction and literary fiction or, as it is sometimes called, “serious literature.” (Two clarifications: Serious literature may include work that is not fictional, but I shall ignore this complication for the remainder of the essay. And although the category of fiction includes works in a wide variety of media and forms, I shall, unless otherwise indicated, use the term to refer to prose fiction only.) Dan Brown, E.L. James, Suzanne Collins and James Patterson are paradigmatic producers of the former while Jane Austen, James Joyce, Vladimir Nabokov and Virginia Woolf are well-known creators of the latter. Given such exemplars, it must seem the distinction picks out a real and important difference between two categories of writing.

Appearances, however, are often deceiving and not all distinctions we commonly mark are created equal—some are redundant, others are non-substantive, still others may be pernicious (e.g., by reflecting or reinforcing illegitimate hierarchies). What, then, about the distinction between the popular and the literary? The first section of this chapter explores this distinction and offers reasons to think that it is non-redundant, robust, and benign but that the two categories are neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive of the sphere of fiction. The section also briefly addresses the relationship between popular fiction and some broader categories such as mass art, popular art, low art, popular culture, kitsch, and entertainment. The second section of the chapter focuses on aspects of the criticism of popular fiction—specifically the interpretation and evaluation of works that fall into that category. Does the interpretation of popular fiction differ significantly from the interpretation of literary fiction? I will express some scepticism about such a view. Perhaps relatedly, popular fiction is commonly thought to be less valuable than literary fiction. Are there distinct standards of evaluation appropriate for popular fiction? Can such works be coherently compared with individual works of literary fiction and, if so, are they always inferior? These are difficult questions, but I shall argue that popular fiction and literary fiction are not evaluated in radically different ways and that we should be careful of being too quick to dismiss the value of popular fiction. Section three explores what Noël Carroll has called “the paradox of junk fiction” which arises because we seem to read popular fiction for the sake of stories while at the same time being aware of how the story will, at least in broad terms, turn out. Section four briefly addresses the relationship between popular fiction and genre.

Before I address the first substantive topic, let me say something about terminology. Why “popular fiction” and not the aforementioned “junk fiction” or such other common terms as “genre fiction”, “pulp fiction”, “commercial fiction”, “general fiction” or “mass market fiction”? I use “popular fiction” rather than “junk fiction”, a term popularized by Thomas J. Roberts in his book *An Aesthetics of Junk Fiction* (1990), to avoid the latter’s negative connotations. If there is something problematic about popular fiction it is a substantive matter—we should avoid building the problem into the term itself. On the other hand, “genre fiction” appears to pick out a perfectly respectable category and it is the term most commonly contrasted with “literature” in popular discourse. Nonetheless, the category does not quite match up to our area of interest. Not all works of genre fiction are popular, nor must all works of popular fiction be genre fiction. (And even if they were co-extensive categories, they are clearly conceptually distinct. I will have more to say about the relation between these two categories in the final section of this essay.) Finally, although the categories of mass-market, pulp, general and commercial fiction significantly overlap with popular fiction, these are business or marketing categories which are not of inherent philosophical interest. So “popular fiction” it is.

**Popular Fiction and Literary Fiction**

Most of the relevant philosophical work in this area has focused on popular art or mass art generally (e.g., Novitz 1989; Shusterman 1991; Carroll 1998; Gould 1999; Gracyk 2007a). But, unsurprisingly, many of the central philosophical concerns about popular art also arise in the context of a consideration of popular fiction. For example, just as one might wonder whether the high art/low art distinction is redundant (Cohen 1993), one might also wonder this about the popular fiction/literary fiction distinction. Does it map onto some already recognized distinction (e.g., non-literature/literature, bad literature/good literature), or does it mark a novel distinction? A number of philosophers have been interested in whether the popular/fine art distinction is substantive or merely social (Novitz 1989; Carroll 1998); the same sort of question may be asked about the popular/literary fiction distinction as can the question of whether the distinction serves to reinforce social hierarchies. Finally, it is not at all obvious what the logical relationships are between popular, mass or low art on the one hand and fine or high art on the other. Similarly, the fact that there is a distinction between popular and literary fiction does not settle how those two categories are related. They might be mutually exclusive categories, or there might be fictions that are — either at the same time or different times — both popular and literary. The two categories might exhaust the domain of fiction, or there may be fictions that belong to neither category.

So is the popular/literary fiction distinction redundant? As John Fisher writes, “there is a natural line of thought that suggests that the distinction between high and low art approximates the art/non-art distinction” (2005: 527). If one focuses on paradigmatic examples of literary fiction it is tempting to think that the opposed category is simply non-literature. After all, many would resist characterizing Dan Brown’s oeuvre as literary—ditto the novels of Jeffrey Archer. If so, the difference between popular fiction and literary fiction might be thought to simply recapitulate the distinction between non-literary and literary fiction.

Part of the difficulty in evaluating this proposal stems from the ambiguity of the term “literature”. There are distinct wide and narrow notions of literature (Davies 2007; Lamarque 2008) and on some wide conceptions of literature even Brown’s prose counts as literary. On the other hand, it is plausible that not all non-literary fiction counts as popular fiction. Literature is, plausibly, the sort of thing one can try but fail to produce (compare Mag Uidhir 2013 on failed-art). So many stories written by amateurs are not literature in at least some narrow senses. But it does not follow that they are popular fiction—they are, at least in many cases, simply fictions which aim at, but fail to achieve, literary status. If this is right, then the popular/literary distinction is not the same as the non-literary/literary distinction.

Does the popular fiction/literary fiction just recapitulate the bad fiction/good fiction distinction? If what I have said about amateur efforts is right, we already have reason for thinking this is not the case since the category provides plenty of examples of bad fiction which are not popular fiction. Additionally, there are examples of paradigmatic popular fiction which are widely recognized to have significant value—authors of popular fiction such as Raymond Chandler, James M. Cain, John Le Carre, Stephen King, Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers and Patricia Highsmith have legitimate claims to have produced popular fiction which is good in some sense. (For recent relevant discussion see Krystal 2012.) There are also bad works of literary fiction—Terry Eagleton (1983: 11) mentions Lamb and Macaulay, and unsuccessful experimental or avant-garde literature is also worth considering here. So the popular/literary distinction does not mirror the good/bad distinction. Although this does not settle the issue, I think we have reason to believe that the distinction in question does not merely duplicate some already recognized distinction.

The distinction between the popular and the literary does not seem to be redundant. Is it a substantive distinction? As mentioned above, this question is closely related to the debate between Carroll and Novitz about the popular/fine art distinction. To get a feel for the issue consider the notion of popularity. In one, purely numerical, sense of popularity, there is nothing more to being popular than being widely liked, appreciated or approved of. While there might be explanations of popularity in particular domains (there is, for example, a psychological literature which explores various factors related to peer popularity and sociometric status (see, for example, Newcomb et al. 2003)), there is a sense in which popularity in the “being widely liked” sense does not mark out a robust category. If being popular is just a matter of being well-liked, then we do not gain much insight into something when we learn that a work of fiction is popular. We cannot, for example, assume that all popular fictions share certain features over and above their popularity. A pursuit of the hidden essence of numerical popularity would, I suggest, be futile.

This brief discussion of popularity suggests that this numerical conception of popularity is not, in fact, what we are interested in when we are interested in popular fiction. Just as an unsuccessful hair metal band does not fail to count as having produced popular music simply because it doesn’t sell many records, so too a formulaic romance novel does not fall outside of the category of popular fiction just because it fails to sell many copies. Nor do the impressive sales figures of Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* show that it is popular fiction in the sense in which that term is typically used (cf. Carroll 1998: 190 on why *The Satanic Verses* is not an example of mass art). Moreover, it does not seem that we can even appeal to *intended* numerical popularity to mark out the category of popular fiction. It certainly seems possible for an author of popular fiction to intend their work to be hated by most and only loved by a select few. And nothing precludes the author of literary fiction from having the intention that it be widely liked. Popular fiction is, then, something more than fiction which is popular or intended to be popular.

This does not establish that there is a substantive category of popular fiction. Novitz holds that the popular/high distinction can only be made sense of in terms of social relations and that it ultimately “helps mark class boundaries within a society” (1989: 227, see also page 224). Something akin to this view is suggested by Eagleton’s claim that the category of literature (from which Mills and Boons novels and other works of popular fiction are excluded) is intimately connected to “social ideologies” and the “assumptions by which certain social groups exercise and maintain power over others” (1983: 16). In response to Novitz, Carroll (1998: 176-184) argues that the popular/high distinction does not neatly map onto any class boundary (hence Novitz’s claim that it functions to preserve and reinforce class divisions is implausible), and he further argues that Novitz has not considered alternative, broadly formal or structural, ways in which popular or mass art might be distinguished from literary art. Carroll’s criticisms of the “Social Reduction Theory of Mass Art” (ibid.: 177) appear as if they can be adapted to the popular/literary case, and they suggest that any ideological or socially reductive theory of that distinction is misguided.

What might those formal or structural features be which distinguish popular fiction from literary fiction? On Carroll’s view, mass art is characterized as being “intentionally designed to gravitate in its structural choices (for example, its narrative forms, symbolism, intended affect, and even its content) toward those choices that promise accessibility with minimum effort, virtually on first contact for the largest number of untutored (or relatively untutored) audiences” (Carroll 1998: 196). In the case of prose fiction, the relevant choices might be said to include erotetic (i.e., question/answer) narrative (ibid.: 194), predictability which is rooted in membership in a recognized genre, specific kinds of content such as “action/adventure scenarios” (ibid), sympathetic characters who display recognizable psychological traits, and the inclusion of features which are designed to produce standard emotional responses (Harold 2011). Note that none of these features appears to count as a necessary condition for being popular fiction and they may all also appear in literary fiction. Perhaps the right thing to say is that they are “standard” features of the category of popular fiction (Walton 1970: 339).

What, then, is the logical relationship between the categories of popular fiction and literary fiction? Do they overlap or are they mutually exclusive? Are they exhaustive of the category of fiction or are there other categories?

It is obvious that a literary work can become popular in the purely numerical sense. It is less obvious whether a literary work which is originally outside the sphere of the popular can become popular fiction in a more substantive sense. On the other hand, it is often said that some works which are originally popular fiction become works of literature over time. For example, Theodore Gracyk suggests that Charles Dickens’ novels “move from popular to fine art status” (2007a: 385). We might make sense of such a view by appealing to functional theories of fine art and literature whereby membership in those categories depends on how a work functions at a particular time (Goodman 1978). An alternative approach proposes that some art works are “bilateral” (Cohen 1999: 141-142) by which is meant that they appeal to two different audiences (i.e., a high audience and a low one) and, hence, may count as both high and low art. Adapting and extending Cohen’s conception of bilaterality, it may be useful to think of multifunctional bilateral works of fiction which are intended to function as both popular and literary works. Cohen largely focuses on film, but if this general line of thought is correct then the popular fiction/literary fiction might not be exclusive—some works of fiction (e.g., by such authors as Dickens, Austen and Bronte) may count as robustly bilateral and, hence, be both popular fiction and literary fiction at one and the same time. If this is the case then we have further reason to think that the popular/literary distinction cannot be equated with other plausibly exclusive distinctions such as good/bad, literary/non-literary, and genre/non-genre.

Popular fiction and literary fiction do not exhaust the domain of written fiction. I have already mentioned amateur literary efforts, many of which plausibly fall into neither category. And fiction, even prose fiction, is a very broad category and plausibly includes such things as experiments and philosophical dialogues, many of which fall into neither category. Perhaps more intriguingly, there are categories such as the middlebrow and what has come in recent years to be called “upmarket fiction” to consider. (Consider works by such well-known authors as Jonathan Franzen, Ian McEwan and Ann Patchett.) Sadly, the middlebrow has not been a topic of significant philosophical interest (although see Carroll 1998: 232) and, hence, the question of whether this category is distinct from both the popular and the literary or, rather, is just a sub-category of one or the other has not been seriously investigated. Carroll, following Dwight MacDonald’s account of “Midcult” (MacDonald 1960), treats middlebrow art as a distinct from mass art—roughly speaking it is a category of art that sits between mass art and avant-garde art in terms of accessibility and “that imitates that structures of past avant-garde art or traditional esoteric art” (Carroll 1998: 232). Jennifer Egan’s recent unconventionally structured novel, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, fits this description nicely and it seems to be a paradigmatic work of middlebrow fiction, but it is not clear whether works in this category count as popular, literary, both or neither.

So what is the relationship between popular fiction and the various broad categories that were mentioned above? Since not all fictions are works of art, it initially appears that popular fiction does not pick out a subset of mass, popular or low art. For example, some popular fiction is pornographic. Although it is controversial whether something can be both pornography and art (Maes and Levinson 2012), it is much less controversial that not all pornography is art. But surely whether or not a work of pornography is art does not depend on whether it is a work of fiction. So it seems that some pornographic popular fiction is not art and, hence, popular fiction is not a species of popular, mass or low art. But this would be too quick. Some theorists argue that at least some, perhaps all, works in these latter categories are not true art—they are, as R.G. Collingwood put it, art “falsely so called” (1938: 11). If this is right, then popular fiction might still be a subset of one or more of these categories even if it is not a subset of art. On the other hand, theorists such as Carroll, who hold that works of mass art are, by definition, art (1998: 196) might argue that our ordinary usage of the term “popular fiction” picks out only cases of prose art. If either view is correct, then the question of whether popular fiction is a sub-category of mass, popular or low art depends on whether works in the former category meet the other substantive conditions for the latter categories of art.

What about the relationship between popular fiction and other categories such as popular culture, kitsch and entertainment? Surely popular fiction is a subset of the former category, and it seems to be one of the primary species of the latter. Its relationship to kitsch is less obvious, in part because of the ambiguity of that term. Although it is sometimes used as a catch-all term for all popular and commercial art and literature (Greenberg 1939), it is often used in a much narrower sense (Kulka 1988). For this reason, and also because it has historically had negative connotations, it would be tendentious to treat popular fiction as a subset of this category.

**Interpreting and Evaluating Popular Fiction**

Does the interpretation of popular fiction differ in important respects from that of literary fiction? Since the nature of interpretation is arguably the most controversial issue in the philosophy of literature, this is a difficult question to answer. Nonetheless, at least one scholar has argued that works of popular art call for a different form of interpretation than do works of fine or high art, and if this is correct, then it seems to follow that the interpretation of popular fiction—or at least much of it—will differ from that of serious literature. David Carrier claims that “the interpretation of comics (and other genuine mass-culture art) thus differs in kind from analysis of museum paintings” (Carrier 2000: 84). With the latter (and other examples of high art), we attempt to “bring close what is distant” (ibid.: 85) and this involves the reconstruction of artists’ intentions. But since grasping the meaning of comics (and other mass-culture or “populist” art works) is—according to Carrier—easy, our interpretive project is different. With such works our aim is to “identify the ways in which it reflects the fantasies of the public” (ibid.: 7). In fact, Carrier suggests that our different attitudes toward interpretation might underwrite the difference between popular art and popular culture on the one hand and high and museum art on the other—“the difference…is less a fact about how the work is produced than a difference in our attitude toward its interpretation” (ibid.: 82).

So, is there a significant difference between how we do and/or should interpret popular fiction and literary fiction? In response to Carrier, Gracyk (2007b) has argued that the widespread use of allusion in popular art (and by implication in popular fiction) undercuts the putatively sharp distinction. Not only must allusions be understood, according to Gracyk, by reference to the intentions of the artist or author (ibid.: 71), but they also bring “interpretive problems” and “hermetic conditions” to popular art (ibid: 67). This does not provide a complete response to Carrier, but it does suggest that there is no clear cut difference between the interpretation of popular and literary fictions.

On the other hand, consider the distinction between the description and the interpretation of a work of fiction (Matthews 1977; Carroll 2009). Very roughly, description involves an account of what is given or obvious in a work, while interpretation is only called for with respect to things which are not obvious. If works of popular fiction really are designed for “accessibility with minimum effort” (Carroll 1998: 196), then perhaps there is no difference in how or what we interpret but, rather, merely a difference with respect to how much interpretation is required by popular fiction as opposed to literary fiction.

What about the evaluation of popular versus literary fiction? Are there distinct standards for evaluating works of popular fiction? Is literary fiction more valuable than popular fiction?

With regard to the first question, it seems plausible that genre plays an especially significant role in the evaluation of many works of popular fiction. For example, Carroll argues that when it comes to many art works, the category or categories to which those works of art belong play a significant role in their evaluation (Carroll 2009: 163-170). Those categories often have certain purposes or objectives which are best achieved by a work’s possessing certain properties. When a work belongs to that category and possesses those properties, this is a (pro tanto) good-making feature. When it belongs to that category and fails to possess those properties this may be a bad-making feature. Such an account seems to capture a great deal about the evaluation of many popular fictions which belong to established genres. Lacking a terrifying monster is, for example, a bad-making feature in a horror novel, and the presence of a well-matched couple is a good-making feature of a romance fiction.

But it would be a mistake to think that this underwrites a substantive difference between the evaluation of popular and literary fiction. If Carroll is right, then categories and their purposes are relevant to the evaluation of all works of art, not just popular works. After all, works of literary fiction also belong to various genre categories (e.g., absurdism, bildungsroman, comedy, the picaresque, satire, tragedy, etc.). Such categories are linked to purposes with respect to which those works can be evaluated.

Moreover, genre-based evaluation does not look like it can be all there is to the evaluation of popular or genre fiction. James Harold has argued that many works of popular fiction are properly evaluated according to standards that are typically associated with works of great literature; viz., with regard to the importance of the themes they address and how well they handle various literary techniques (Harold 2011). Even Carroll admits that there are aspects of evaluation which go beyond category-relative standards (2009: 191-196).

One might attempt to distinguish the evaluation of popular fiction and literary fiction by appeal to the broad species of value that we look for in each. It is commonly said that our interest in literature as literature is a concern (at least in large part) for its intrinsic merits (Lamarque 2009: 264-267), while our interest in popular literature is in its instrumental values. Popular fiction is, we are told, often valued because as a means of relaxation or of distracting us from work (ibid.: 262) whereas we value works of literature for their own sake. Perhaps the fact that works of popular fiction often seem substitutable for one another (one mystery is just as good as another in many contexts) whereas literary fictions do not typically seem substitutable lends some support to this distinction. But we ought to be cautious about this approach since it is controversial whether the value of literary fictions is, in fact, primarily intrinsic rather than instrumental. Also, some works of popular fiction are plausibly properly valued as achievements and the value of achievements is not solely instrumental. And it would be a mistake to think that works of popular fiction are always substitutable for one another. In some contexts, we are interested in a particular fantasy or detective novel and no other will do.

Is literary fiction better than popular fiction? It is clearly not the case that every example of the former is better in some sense than every example of the latter. And, as suggested above, much of our evaluation of works of fiction is category-relative. This might seem to suggest that comparing the value of popular fiction to the value of literary fiction is impossible or incoherent. This would be too quick. In the first place, we have already seen that works in both categories are subject to evaluation with respect to some of the same criteria. In the second place, works of fiction belong to multiple relevant categories, so popular works may share categories with literary ones. Finally, we certainly do make comparisons between works in the two categories. Unless we are to count our practices as irrational we need to make sense of this. One way of doing this would be to appeal to something like Mill’s distinction between higher and lower pleasures. On such a view, serious literature provides more valuable or more long lasting pleasures than does popular fiction (Lamarque 2009: 263-264, but see Harold 2011 for an expression of skepticism). Since there is reason to doubt that the value of literature and popular fiction is purely rooted in pleasure, such a view has some work to do if it is to underwrite the relative ranking of the two categories. Another strategy might be to appeal to which sorts of works are “more important to the life of society” or have greater “cultural significance” (Carroll 2009: 192). But we need to know much more about what cultural significance amounts to. After all, in one very straight forward sense of “cultural significance”, many works of popular fiction, in virtue of their capacity to capture the public imagination, possess a very high degree of that property.

**The Paradox of Junk Fiction?**

Is there a distinctive paradox raised by popular fiction? Carroll (2001) presents, and proposes a solution to, what he calls “the paradox of junk fiction” in an essay of that same name. The puzzle arises if we accept four independently plausible propositions:

1. Ordinary readers typically consume works of popular fiction for the sake of the stories in it.
2. Ordinary readers typically know, before reading a given work of popular fiction, how the story will turn out.
3. If one already knows how a story will turn out in a given piece of fiction, it is irrational to read that fiction for the sake of the story.
4. Ordinary readers are not typically irrational in their consumption of fiction.

In defense of (1), Carroll points out that we are not typically interested in the aesthetic features of works of popular literature. Moreover, we don’t typically like being told the story before we read a work of popular fiction. And we typically consume popular fictions quickly—we do not linger or puzzle over them as we often do with serious poetry or works of modernist literature. As Carroll puts it “what motivates turning the page so quickly [in a work of popular fiction] is our interest in what happens next” (ibid.: 335). When it comes to popular fiction, then, it seems as if it is story that matters. In defense of (2), it is worth pointing out that most (perhaps all, but see below) popular fictions belong to recognized genres. And most readers of popular fiction, at least some of the time, read works in genres they know something about. In such cases, it seems plausible to say that readers typically know, at least in broad outline, how the story will unfold. As Carroll puts it, “in some very general sense, the audience already knows the story in question” (ibid.: 336). (3) seems to follow pretty straightforwardly from (1) and (2). After all, knowledge of what is going to happen in a book seems to preclude a rational person being motivated by concern for its story. With regard to (4), although some have argued that ordinary readers are irrational in their engagement with popular fiction, Carroll argues that such a view is implausible.

Rather than characterizing ordinary readers as irrational or denying that they read popular fiction for the sake of stories, Carroll proposes to solve the putative paradox by rejecting (3). Knowledge of how the story will turn out does not preclude reading for the sake of the story. This is because engagement with a story is a significant source of what Carroll calls “transactional value”—the value of exercising “our cognitive powers, our powers of interpretation and inference, our powers of moral judgment and emotive assessment” (ibid.: 344).

This does seem to be a part of the explanation for our interest in popular fiction. But perhaps we can provide an alternative solution to the paradox by pointing to an ambiguity in Carroll’s articulation of it. Although it is plausible that ordinary readers consume popular fictions for the sake of their stories, this is best understood as an interest in individual stories; that is, as an interest in *story tokens*. On the other hand, ordinary readers’ knowledge about stories is largely a matter of general knowledge about kinds of stories; that is, it is primarily about *story types*. But general knowledge about kinds of stories and the application of that knowledge to particular instances (e.g., knowledge that the mystery will be solved or that the couple will be happily united) does not entail detailed knowledge of individual stories (e.g., who committed the crime, how the couple will be reunited). If this is right, then the argument is defused since (3) is plausible only if “story” is understood unambiguously.

**Genre and Popular Fiction**

The vast majority of works of popular fiction fall into recognizable genres such as romance, science fiction, horror, mystery, fantasy or the Western, but it is not clear that they must do so unless one assumes that all fiction falls into such a genre. Since fiction itself may count as a genre (see Friend 2012), and popular fiction itself has a claim to count as one too (Rabinowitz 1985), every work of popular fiction may trivially fall into some genre. The question is whether they must also fall into some genre non-trivially. (And, at least for the sake of argument, we shall exclude literary forms such as the novel and short story from counting as genres.) I do not believe so, though it is difficult to offer cases since there is a strong tendency to place works of popular fiction in some genre or other. (Perhaps Alice Sebold’s 2002 novel, *The Lovely Bones*, is worth considering here—it is popular fiction but does not seem to fall straightforwardly into any genre although it contains elements of several.) But even if it were the case that all extant popular fiction is genre fiction, this is not a matter of necessity. Writing in recognized genres is merely a standard means by which authors of popular fictions aim for accessibility and a wide readership.

More straightforwardly, not all works of genre fiction fall into the category of the popular. Italo Calvino’s short stories from *Cosmicomics* are often categorized as science fiction (and, hence, genre fiction), but these tales do not seem to be members of the category of popular fiction. The same is true of some of J.G. Ballard’s works as well as some of Margaret Atwood’s novels. George Saunders’s story, “Sea Oak”, is a ghost story but not popular fiction.

Recently, some philosophers have focused on specific issues raised by popular genres of fiction. (Note that these genres are typically transmedia.) Carroll (1990) has explored a range of issues related to the horror genre. Brian Laetz and Joshua Johnston (2008) have proposed a definition of fantasy. And Alan Goldman (2011) has presented a robust defense of the appeal of mystery fiction in terms of his theory of aesthetic value. (For a classic and entertaining criticism of mystery fiction see Wilson 1945.)

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