

Introduction to Popular Fiction

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ALLIED ELECTIVE COURSE

Defining Popular Fiction

Popular: not always well received, or well sold, but intended for the people, and shaped by their demands.

Who are these people? “Masses” (people who do not have access to much money, education or status or other symbolic capital that exists in society)

Problem with using the term “masses” in relation with PF: Literature is a unique cultural product which requires:

- Basic level of literacy
- certain types of PF have very limited readership: Horror is sub-cultural than mass-cultural

PF can only be understood in terms of what it is not. It is not Literary Fiction.

Popular Fiction v/s Literary Fiction

Popular Fiction

- Emphasis is on story (what is being told)
- Language is maximalist
- Produces a “passive” reader
- Language of industry

Literary Fiction

- Emphasis on style (how it is being told)
- Language is minimalist
- Produces an “active” reader
- Language of art/originality

Does this difference work all the time?

“Murder on the Orient Express”

It was five o'clock on a winter's morning in Syria. Alongside the platform at Aleppo stood the train grandly designated in railway guides as the Taurus Express. It consisted of a kitchen and dining car, a sleeping car and two local coaches.

By the step leading up into the sleeping car stood a young French lieutenant, resplendent in uniform, conversing with a small lean man, muffled up to the ears, of whom nothing was visible but a pink-tipped nose and the two points of an upward curled moustache.

It was freezingly cold, and this job of seeing off a distinguished stranger was not one to be envied, but Lieutenant Dubosc performed his part manfully.

“Parade's End”

The two young men—they were of the English public official class—sat in the perfectly appointed railway carriage. The leather straps to the windows were of virgin newness; the mirrors beneath the new luggage racks immaculate as if they had reflected very little; the bulging upholstery in its luxuriant, regulated curves was scarlet and yellow in an intricate, minute dragon pattern, the design of a geometrician in Cologne. The compartment smelt faintly, hygienically of admirable varnish; the train ran as smoothly—Tietjens remembered thinking—as British gilt-edged securities.

Does this difference work all the time?



Dorothy L Sayers: Two kinds of crime fiction:

- Purely Intellectual
- Purely Sensational

“...the beauty of the suspense genre is that a writer can write profound thoughts and have some sections without physical action if he wishes to, because the framework is an essentially lively story.”

Patricia Highsmith, *Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction* (1966)

Originality & Industry

Walter Scott: “I have looked round my library and could not but observe... that, from the time of Chaucer to that of Byron, the most popular authors had been the most prolific.”

“I do say it...that a successful author is a productive labourer”

- Literary art is “original”
- Popular fiction is embedded in the language of industry/language of production (key feature)

Scott himself wrote more than 25 novels, 15 books of non-fiction, 10 volumes of poetry and scores of short stories

“Favorite of the common multitude”

- The most popular novelist and Britain’s best-selling writer of her time: Marie Corelli
- Wrote around 40 novels
- *The Sorrows of Satan* (1895) broke all previous publishing records
- She received publishers’ advances around ten thousand pounds a title
- Was avidly read by Queen Victoria, Prime Minister Gladstone and the Prince of Wales



1855-1924

Popular Fiction is Formulaic

Formulaic: certain tropes are repeated over and over again

This formulaic repetition needs to be understood in context of what can be called the driving force of popular fiction— Genre

Understanding Genre Fiction

Featured categories



Romance



Crime, Mystery and Thrillers



Historical



Action and Adventure



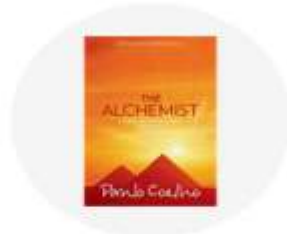
Humour



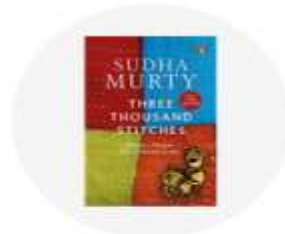
Science Fiction and Fantasy



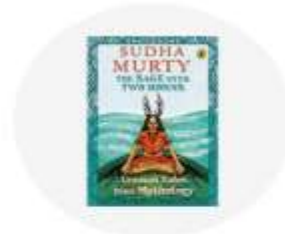
Classic Fiction



Contemporary Fiction



Indian Writing



Myths, Legends & Sagas



Poetry

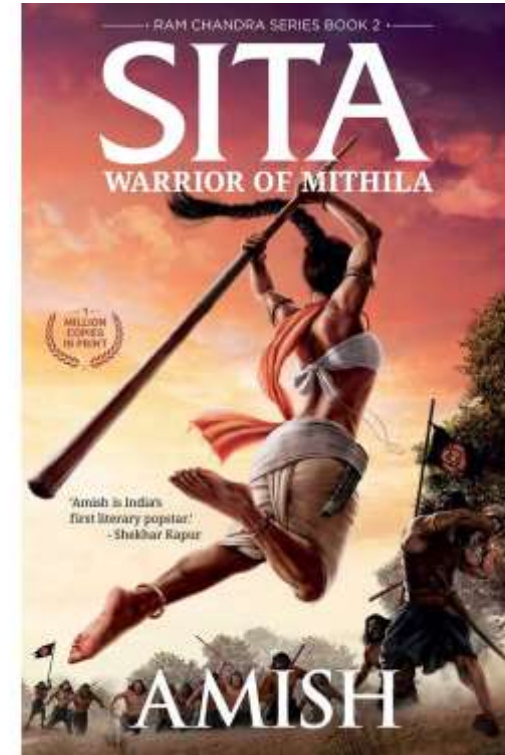
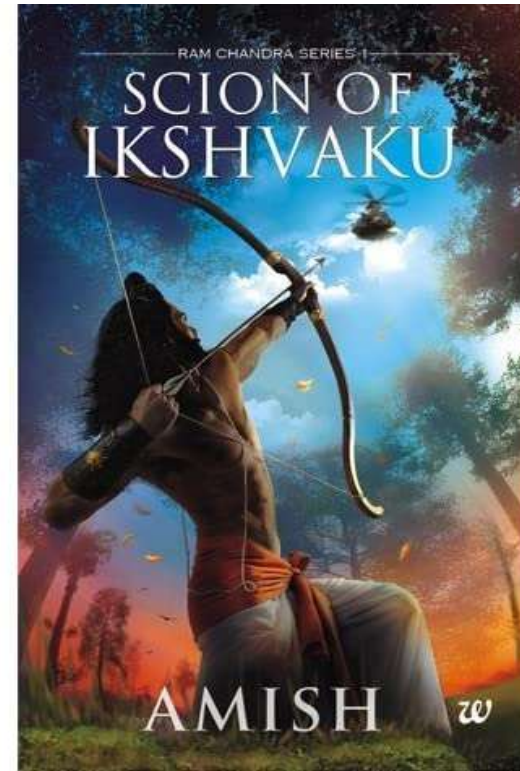
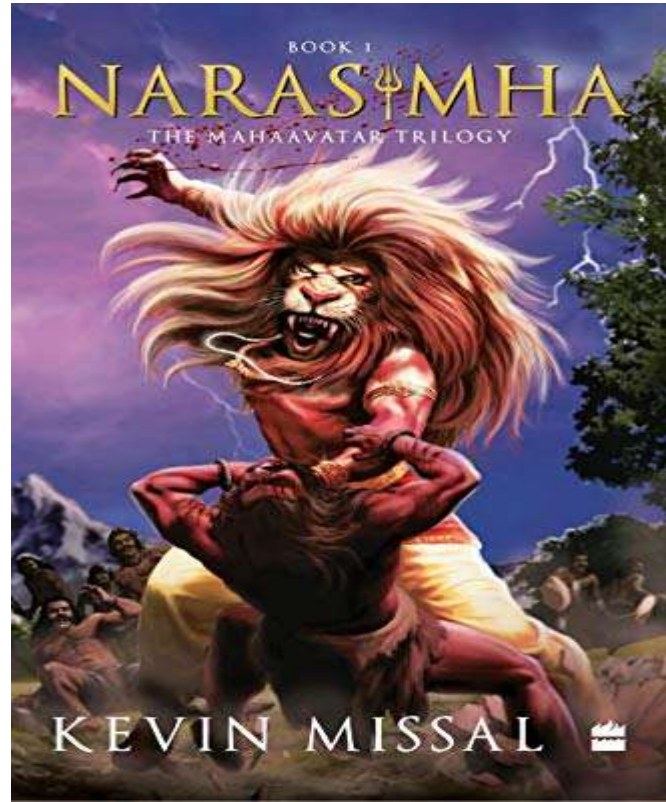
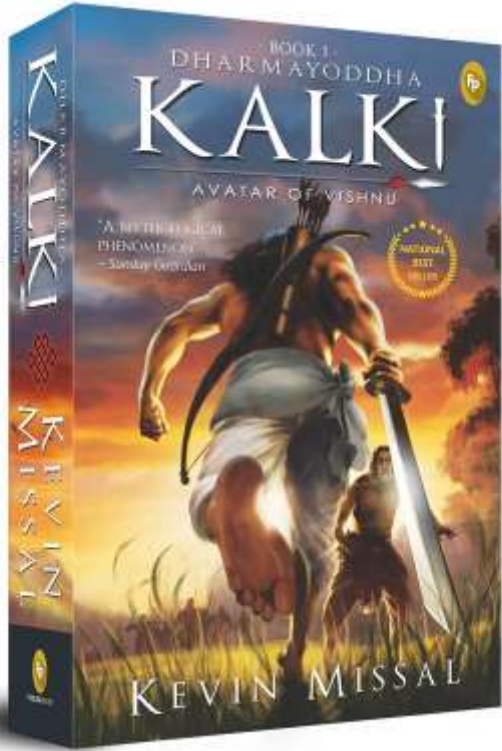


Short Stories

Generic Identities

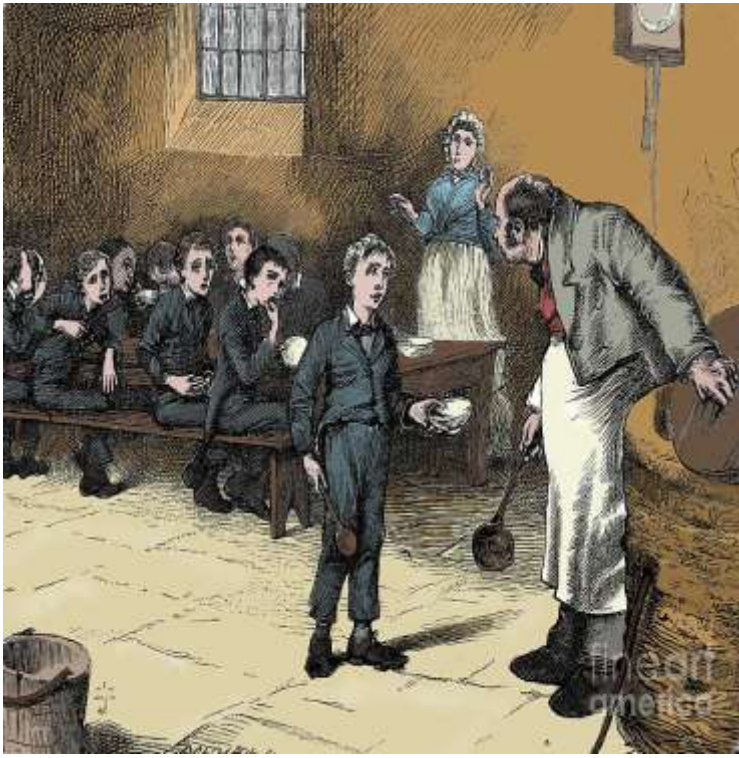
- The entire field of popular fiction is written for, marketed and consumed generically.
- Genre provides the primary logic for popular fiction's production, identification and evaluation
- Even Literary Fiction is divided into categories: modernist novel, novel of manners, the bildungsroman, the postmodern novel
- In LF, generic features may or may not be immediately recognizable
- With PF, generic identities are always visible.

Marketing 'Genre'



Building a Brand





Why are we reading Popular Fiction in
the University today?