

Epistolary novel

Epistolary novel is a novel told through the **medium of letters** and is written by one or more characters. In the epistolary novel most or all of the plot is advanced by the letters or journal entries.

Epistolary fiction dates back at least to ancient Roman times. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, Aphra Behn in Britain and Charles Louis de Montesquieu in France produced works of fiction told through the medium of letters. However, the epistolary novel as a distinct genre first gained prominence in Britain in the mid-eighteenth century.

Though the genre began in early eighteenth century, many scholars still regard Samuel Richardson's *Pamela* (1740) to be the first example of the epistolary novel. The form/genre has been originated with Samuel Richardson's epistolary novel - *Pamela; or, Virtue Rewarded* (1740). It is the story of a servant girl's victorious struggle against her master's attempts to seduce her. Indeed, it is the first mature novel to be written in English. Richardson's ground-breaking work is marked by a coherence of characterization, plot, and theme which had been missing in earlier epistolary novels. In his epistolary novel he included realism, complexity, and psychological subtlety. The novel is one of the earliest forms of novel which developed and remained one of the most popular forms of novel up to the 19th century. It was a time when there was an increase in reading public. The public found literary works as depictions of ordinary experience presented realistically.

Since the epistolary novels are written from subjective points of view, they naturally offer intimate insight into characters' thoughts and feelings. The author does not interfere in the plot. Since the epistolary novel depends on subjective points of view, later it gave birth to the modern psychological novel.

The advantages of the novel in letter form are that it presents an intimate view of the character's thoughts and feelings without interference from the author. Also,

the presentation of events from several points of view gives the story a touch of realism. Though the method was most often a vehicle for sentimental novels, it was not limited to them. Of the outstanding examples of the form, Richardson's *Clarissa* (1748) has tragic intensity, Tobias Smollett's *Humphry Clinker* (1771) is a picaresque comedy and social commentary, and Fanny Burney's *Evelina* (1778) is a novel of manners. Jean-Jacques Rousseau used the form as a vehicle for his ideas on marriage and education in *La Nouvelle Héloïse* (1761; "The New Eloise"), and J.W. von Goethe used it for his statement of Romantic despair, *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (1774; The Sorrows of Young Werther). The letter novel of Pierre Choderlos de Laclos, *Les Liaisons dangereuses* (1782; Dangerous Acquaintances), is a work of penetrating and realistic psychology.

Epistolary authors commonly wrote about questions of morality, and many epistolary novels are sentimental in nature. Because of the "private" nature of the form, with the depiction of domestic and personal concerns, much epistolary fiction was written by or about women. Women writers of the time achieved public recognition for their art through epistolary novels. Female characters in the novels often wrestle with sexual temptation and moral correctness. They use the medium of letters to express themselves honestly and thoroughly and they confide in a trusted friend.

Many critics in Richardson's day regarded the letters he wrote in the voices of his female protagonists to be the finest expression of feminine concerns and sensibilities of the period. Genuine female voices are found in the some of the most popular and best-known epistolary novels of the eighteenth century.

Mary Davys, one of the first women to support herself through her writing, produced several epistolary works, including *The Reform'd Coquet: or Memoirs of Amoranda* (1724), which tells of the "taming" of Amoranda, a good but fickle young woman.

Familiar Letters' *Betwixt a Gentleman and a Lady* (1725), a satire about politics and women's place in society.

Fanny Burney's *Evelina: or the History of a Young Lady's Entrance into the World* (1778) is a novel of manners that explores a young, innocent woman's entrance into society.

Marie-Jeanne Riccobini's highly successful *Les Lettres de Mistriss Fanni Butlerd* (1757), is an exchange of letters between a simple young Englishwoman and her aristocratic lover.

It makes clear the division between private and public spheres that were a feature of women's social reality in the eighteenth century. Many women writers of the period in their novels point out women's exclusion from public matters, and often their female characters seek to transcend social barriers by making their own autonomous decisions.

Some disadvantages of the form were apparent from the outset. Dependent on the letter writer's need to "confess" to virtue, vice, or powerlessness, such confessions were susceptible to suspicion or ridicule. The servant girl Pamela's remarkable literary powers and her propensity for writing on all occasions were cruelly burlesqued in Henry Fielding's *Shamela* (1741), which pictures his heroine in bed scribbling, "I hear him coming in at the Door," as her seducer enters the room. From 1800 on, the popularity of the form declined, though novels combining letters with journals and narrative were still common. In the 20th century letter fiction was often used to exploit the linguistic humour and unintentional character revelations of such semi-literates as the hero of Ring Lardner's *You Know Me Al* (1916).

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