

Forgotten Victorian Bestsellers

Instructor: Shannon Draucker



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Course Description: Novels such as *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, *David Copperfield*, *Middlemarch*, and *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* have long dominated undergraduate survey courses and shaped our contemporary understandings of what “Victorian literature” looked like. While these works were certainly popular in the nineteenth century, they were far from the only – or even the most – commercially successful works of the Victorian period. In fact, some of the biggest Victorian “bestsellers” were texts that few people (save for some literary critics) have even heard of.

In this course, we will consider the phenomenon of the “bestseller,” a term that was first used in the nineteenth century, when new developments in industry and technology ushered in an unprecedented expansion of print culture and growth in mass readership. We will read several of the nineteenth-century works that grossed the most profit, spurred the most reprints, inspired the most reviews and commentaries, and appeared most frequently in library catalogues, publishers’ miscellanies, and bookstall advertisements. We will explore the historical, social, and economic forces that contributed to the popularity of these works and discuss the developments in print culture that enabled them to be distributed, circulated, purchased, and read.

A series of related questions will guide our readings and discussion: what makes a book “popular?” What about the novels themselves might have contributed to their success? What themes, concerns, writing styles, and narrative techniques most appealed to the Victorian reading public? How did the forces of nineteenth-century print culture enable some works to be more popular than others? Why were these bestsellers ultimately forgotten?

ASSIGNMENTS

In addition to your weekly reading assignments, you will be required to give one presentation and write two papers. More detailed assignment sheets to follow.

Presentation: Choose a novel, magazine, catalog, advertisement or other historical artifact from the nineteenth century (preferably one that is NOT on the syllabus) and give a presentation (5-10

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minutes) placing it in the context of the Victorian publishing industry. For example, if you choose a dime novel, you will describe the text and its public reception, as well as discuss the broader role of the dime novel in the nineteenth-century literary world. You are welcome to include technological, visual, and/or archival components in your presentations. These presentations will occur throughout the semester, with 1-2 students presenting each week.

Paper 1: For your first paper (5-7 pages), you will choose one of the course texts we have read thus far (*The Old Curiosity Shop*, *The Mysteries of London*, or *The String of Pearls*) and compose an original argument about its popularity in the Victorian period. Choose **1-2 literary devices or narrative techniques** that you believe may have appealed to nineteenth-century readers and contributed to the novel’s “bestseller” status. Note: while your paper may include historical research, this is primarily a close-reading and literary analysis assignment.

Paper 2: For your final paper (10-15 pages), you will conduct extensive historical research about a Victorian “bestseller.” You may write about a novel from the syllabus or (in consultation with me) another text of your choice; this can be a newspaper, catalogue, advertisement, or image. Your final paper may build on some of your work from your in-class presentation. You will devise your own **research question**, compose an **annotated bibliography** of at least 10 secondary sources (both “background” and “argument” sources), and devise an **original thesis** about your text in the context of the Victorian publishing industry.

COURSE MATERIALS

Though I usually require students to purchase printed editions of course texts, for the purposes of this class, we will be reading **online versions** of most of our novels. Recently, sites like *HathiTrust* or *Archive.org* have digitized early editions of most nineteenth-century novels; this provides us with rich opportunities to read works as they were first printed – complete with original advertisements, illustrations, and chapter and volume divisions. On the syllabus, I have provided links to the editions we will read. Note: while I recognize that our electronic reading practices will necessitate the presence of laptops or tablets in class, please make every effort to minimize all other electronic distractions (emails, messages, Facebook, etc.) Remember: full class participation is essential to your and your classmates’ full engagement with and enjoyment of the course.

If you need to read hard-copy versions or audio files for accessibility reasons, I am happy to provide suggestions for printed editions and/or audio recordings (i.e., on LibriVox or Audible).

Secondary readings are available on our course **Blackboard** site. Items marked “[BB]” on the syllabus are available in the “Content” folder on Blackboard.

Week 1

-Kate Flint, “The Victorian novel and its readers,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Victorian Novel* [BB]

-Robert L. Patten, “The New Cultural Marketplace: Victorian Publishing and Reading Practices,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Literary Culture* [BB]

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- Richard Altick, *The English Common Reader: A Social History of the Mass Reading Public*, pp. 81-98 (“The Social Background”) and 240-259 (“The Self-Made Reader”) [BB]

Week 2

****Trip 1 to the Howard Gottlieb Archival Research Center****

- Altick, pp. 260-293 (“The Book Trade, 1800-1850”) and 213-239 (“Public Libraries”)
- “Circulating Libraries,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of British Literature* [BB]
- Browse catalogues of [Mudie’s Circulating Library](#) and [The Bookseller](#) [BB]

Week 3

- Charles Dickens, [The Old Curiosity Shop](#)
- Joanne Shattock, “Literature and the Expansion of the Press,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Literary Culture* [BB]

Week 4

- George W.M. Reynolds, *The Mysteries of London* ([Vol. 1](#), [Vol. 2](#))
- Judith Flanders, “Penny Dreadfuls,” from *British Library Online* [BB]

Week 5

- Reynolds, *The Mysteries of London* ([Vol. 3](#), [Vol. 4](#))
- Browse Stanford University’s “[Dime Novels and Penny Dreadfuls](#)” digital project

Week 6

- Anon., [The String of Pearls: A Romance](#), parts 1-50

Week 7

- [The String of Pearls](#), parts 51-92

Week 8

- [Mrs. Beeton’s Book of Household Management](#) (ed. Isabella Beeton)
- Paper 1 due

Week 9

****Trip #2 to Howard Gottlieb Archival Research Center****

- Ellen Wood, *East Lynne*; read from *The New Monthly Magazine* serialization: [Parts I-IV](#), [Parts V-VIII](#), [Parts IX-XIII](#)
- Explore <http://victorianserialnovels.org>
- Linda K. Hughes and Michael Lund, “Introduction,” in *The Victorian Serial* [BB]

Week 10

- Wood, *East Lynne*; *NMM* serialization: [Parts XIV-XVI](#), [Parts XVII-XX](#), [Parts XXI-end](#)
- Graham Law, “Sensation fiction and the publishing industry,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Sensation Fiction* [BB]
- Wolfgang Shivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*, pp. 64-67 [BB]

Week 11

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-H. Rider Haggard, [She](#), pp. 1-161

-Daniel Karlin, “Introduction,” from Oxford World’s Classics edition of *She*

Week 12

-Haggard, [She](#), pp. 161-end

-Annotated bibliography for final paper due

Week 13

-George Du Maurier, *Trilby*, [vol. 1](#) and [vol. 2](#)

-Edward Purcell: “*Trilby* and Trilby-Mania: The Beginning of the Bestseller System,” from *The Journal of Popular Culture* [BB]

Week 14

-Du Maurier, *Trilby*, [vol. 3](#)

-Richard Menke, “[The End of the Three-Volume Novel System](#),” from *BRANCH*

Week 15

-Final papers due