Exploration and Discovery in the Early Novel

Fall 2020
Tuesdays, 6:00pm-8:30pm
Online

Sam Rowe
strowe@uchicago.edu

The English-language novel came into its own between the end of the 17th century and the beginning of the 19th. This was also a period that saw significant expansions in the horizons of the English-speaking world: a period in which Britain solidified its status as the world’s leading colonial power, in which explorers mapped previously unknown parts of the world, and in which researchers pushed the boundaries of scientific knowledge. In this course, we will consider novels that engage with these experiences of exploration and discovery. In the hands of our novelists, fiction became a tool for helping readers imagine worlds outside of the boundaries of everyday experience.

We will begin with a short selection from Aphra Behn’s *Oroonoko* and with Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe*, two novels about colonialism, slavery, and travel that happen to also be crucial to the history of the novel in general. We will then move to two novels that use the non-European world as a backdrop for philosophical speculation about human experience: Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* and Samuel Johnson’s *Rasselas*. The course will culminate with Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, a work that responds to scientific advances by expanding the limits of human biology, and does so in the context of polar exploration. As a coda, time permitting, we will read the South African novelist J. M. Coetzee’s *Foe*, an enigmatic work that uses Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* as an occasion for meditating on colonial violence and on fiction itself.

There are three big questions I am hoping we can ask together in this course. First, is the non-European world important to the development of the European novel, and if so how? Second, were novelists complicit in the violence of colonialism or critical of it? And third, does the importance of exploration and discovery in these early novels tell us anything about the novel writ large as an art form?

**Recommended editions**


Course schedule

Tuesday, September 29
Introduction, selection from Aphra Behn, *Oroonoko*

Tuesday, October 6
Defoe: *Robinson Crusoe*

Tuesday, October 13
*Robinson Crusoe* cont.

Tuesday, October 20
Swift: *Gulliver’s Travels*

Tuesday, October 27
*Gulliver’s Travels* cont.

Tuesday, November 3
Johnson: *Rasselas*

Tuesday, November 10
Shelley: *Frankenstein*

Tuesday, November 17
*Frankenstein* cont.
Coetzee: *Foe*