

RA in a Half Day
Oct 20, 2014, Richmond Cultural Centre
Speed Dating through the Genres Handout

Genre: Literary Fiction

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Description of the Genre:

- Term came into common usage in 1960s
- Denotes serious fiction with literary merit, to be distinguished from genre/popular fiction
- “In broad terms, literary fiction focuses more on style, psychological depth, and character and tends to be multilayered stories which wrestle with universal dilemmas rather than with plot. They usually provoke the reader’s beliefs and thoughts, often with an outcome of changing or altering their audience’s outlook on life. More often than not, literary fiction addresses what might be considered more serious issues to uncover a truth bringing its audience; by the way of the main character; to a deeper understanding about life.”—Writer Annie Evett
- Term “literature” is sometimes used for this genre, although it can also refer to a broader category of writing

Characteristics of Literary Fiction:

- Focuses on character development before plot (although plot is still important) in order to elicit emotional reactions and draw attention to human themes
- Explores broad themes & calls attention to subtext
- Applies a beautifully written style and is often described as “elegantly written, lyrical, and ... layered.”—Joyce Saricks. The style can be poetic and rich in imagery but it doesn’t have to be, as long as it flows
- Includes a serious tone, generally
- Uses slower pacing than some other genres
- Features a wide variety of subject matter (as opposed to some of the fixed plots and topics of many genres), although author Edan Lepucki claims that adultery, flashbacks, moments of revelation, and a dog barking in the background often feature prominently

History of Genre:

- Although the term came into popularity in the 1960s, you could argue that classics would be defined as literary fiction if they were published today. Therefore, the genre is as old as the written word. 😊
- Examples of literary fiction in the 20th century include, in no particular order, authors Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, Harper Lee, F. Scott Fitzgerald, J.D. Salinger, Ayn Rand, William Golding, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Kingsley Amis, Anthony Burgess, Graham Greene, Flannery O’Connor, John Updike, Virginia Woolf, John Irving, Robertson Davies, V.S. Naipaul, Joyce Carol Oates, D.H. Lawrence, Thomas Hardy, James Joyce, Pearl S. Buck, William Faulkner, Sylvia Plath, Salman Rushdie, Kazuo Ishiguro, etc.
- Controversy over the term because critics argue that it implies genre fiction is less serious or less literary
- Perceived by many to be just another genre even though John Updike argues that all books are “literary” simply because “they are written in words”

Important authors of today:

- There are so many! Here are a few big names in the current repertoire: Margaret Atwood, Alice Munro, Donna Tartt, Ian McEwan, Haruki Murakami, Khaled Hosseini,

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Dave Eggers, Meg Wolitzer, Jhumpa Lahiri, Herman Koch, Ruth Ozeki, Eleanor Catton, Julian Barnes, Wally Lamb, Hilary Mantel, Ann Patchett, George Saunders, Barbara Kingsolver, Amy Tan, Jonathan Franzen, Jeffrey Eugenides, Alice Hoffman, Aravind Adiga, etc.

Other tips to decide if something is Literary Fiction:

- What does the cover look like? Is it artsy?
- What format is the book? Hardcover or trade paperback versus mass market paperback?
- How about the title? Is it really long or really short? Does it use 2nd person narrative? Is it symbolic?
- Is there a decal on the cover? Look for winners of the following awards:
 - The Scotiabank Giller Prize for Fiction
 - The Governor General's Literary Award for Fiction
 - The Man Booker Prize for Fiction
 - The National Book Awards
 - The National Book Critics Circle Awards
 - The Nobel Prize for Literature
 - The Pen/Faulkner Award for Fiction
 - The Pulitzer Prize
 - The International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award
 - The Bailey's Women's Prize for Fiction

Helpful resources (print & online):

- Chapman, Harvey (n.d.). What Is Literary Fiction (and What Sets It Apart)? *Novel Writing Help*. Retrieved from <http://www.novel-writing-help.com/literary-fiction.html>
- D'addario, Daniel (2013, August 7). Jennifer Weiner was Right: What's the Difference Between "Chick Lit" and Literary Fiction? *Salon*. Retrieved from http://www.salon.com/2013/08/07/jennifer_weiner_was_right_whats_the_difference_between_chick_lit_and_literary_fiction/
- Evett, Annie (2010, April 14). What is Literary Fiction? *Write Anything*. Retrieved from <http://writeanything.wordpress.com/2010/04/14/what-is-literary-fiction/>
- Lepucki, Eden (2012, October 7). Literary Fiction is a Genre: A List. *The Millions*. Retrieved from <http://www.themillions.com/2012/10/literary-fiction-is-a-genre-a-list.html>
- Literary Fiction. (2014, August 31). In Wikipedia. Retrieved from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literary_fiction
- Literary Fiction (2014). Goodreads. Retrieved from <https://www.goodreads.com/genres/literary-fiction>
- Saricks, Joyce (2009). *The Readers' Advisory Guide to Genre Fiction* (2nd ed.). ALA Editions. p. 402.