



Faulks on Fiction

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The British invented the novel, with the publication of **Robinson Crusoe** in 1719 marking the arrival of a revolutionary and distinctly modern form of art. But it's also true, as Sebastian Faulks argues in this remarkable book, that the novel helped invent the British: for the first time we had stories that reflected the experiences of ordinary people, with characters in which we could find our reality, our understanding and our escape.

In **Faulks on Fiction**, Faulks examines many of these enduring fictional characters from over the centuries -- Heroes from Tom Jones to John Self, Lovers from Mr Darcy to Lady Chatterly, Villains from Fagin to Barbara Covett, and Snobs from Emma Woodhouse to James Bond -- and shows us how they mapped and inspired the British psyche, and continue to do so.

Published to coincide with a major BBC series, **Faulks on Fiction** is an engaging and opinionated look at the psychology of the British through their literature, and a unique social history of Britain from one of our most respected writers.

From the Trade Paperback edition.

Faulks on Fiction Details

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From Reader Review Faulks on Fiction for online ebook

Vasilia says

Not very insightful, and Faulks has a habit of making blanket statements as though everyone universally agrees with them. E.g.: mr Darcy has depression, is attracted to Elizabeth because she can lift him out of it, like a human Prozac pill. Odd interpretation. Not offensive, just peculiar, and certainly not a universal consensus on the character of Darcy.

Deborah J says

I somehow missed the TV series that accompanies the book, but it's probably best to read about literary characters rather than watch a programme about them. This made me want to reread some novels I haven't read for some time, and read others I've never got round to (Great Expectations, Raj Quartet). I was a little taken aback by Faulks' reading of The Golden Notebook which I read in my early 20s and found moving and thought-provoking. I've never dared reread it since, and now I don't think I ever will! Faulks makes what could have been rather arid material easy to read and informative.

Daný says

This book (that Sebastian Faulks himself would have preferred calling *Novel People*) was published as a companion to a four-part BBC programme. I haven't seen the programme, but even without that, I'd recommend it over the book. In the series, Faulks travels to different locations and talks to authors and critics about the four themes/groups of characters also represented in the book: heroes, lovers, snobs, and villains. In the book, though, all we get are basically brief summaries of some of the main characters that, for Faulks, represent those four types (for example, heroes: Robinson Crusoe, Sherlock Holmes; lovers: Mr Darcy, Constance Chatterley; snobs: Emma Woodhouse, Jeeves; villains: Fagin, Ronald Merrick - all in all seven characters per 'type'). The summaries are too short to provide much space for critical reflection. (For those books I'd read I thought they didn't say anything; for the books I hadn't read, they spoil too much but still don't give too clear an idea.) Here and there are some stories of Faulks' own reading experience, but they are unable to add much in the limited amount of space per character.

All in all, this is not a book I'd recommend. Please turn to Faulks other (generally brilliant) work, such as *Birdsong*, *A Week in December* and others, or see if the BBC TV-programme is more interesting.

Jelliebeans says

This was a real pleasure to read, and its a book I may return to in a few years when I've read more of the books Faulks covers here. I found it thought-provoking in a number of places, and it has sparked my interest in reading or re-reading some of these classics of British literature. Faulks neatly places each book in its historical and literary context, reflecting on connections and broader cultural meaning. The most pleasurable thing, though, is that the treatment remains essentially human, exploring the people who come to life in the

minds of readers and writers, why they hold such attraction to us, and what that might tell us about who we are. The book has a simple structure, categorising its characters as 'Heroes', 'Lovers', 'Snobs' and 'Villains'.

The chapter on Winston Smith of '1984' stands out as my favourite. 1984 is one of the few books I have read more than once, and expect to read again in my lifetime, so perhaps its to be expected that I'd like this one. Faulks understands what makes Winston's personal actions political in the context of the twentieth century, and that his minor acts of subversion earn him a place in the book's category of 'hero'. Faulks puts it better than I can:

"In the twentieth century, the hero tends to be a captive. He can no longer, like Tom Jones or Becky Sharp, make a free stand against society, or like Robinson Crusoe triumph through individual strength over the dangers of his physical and mental landscape. Winston's heroism exists in the fact that he dares to write down his story, dares to think and dares to love, knowing all the time that this will lead to torture and to death."

Another reviewer here mentions that the writing can sometimes be alienating because Faulks assumes too much common experience - I also found this to be true. Apart from that, its simply enjoyable to spend time in the company of a fellow book-lover who can write about the books they love so eloquently.

Recommended if you don't mind the spoilers! I skipped the 'Great Expectations' chapter for this reason.

Lisa says

I really enjoyed listening to Faulks chatting about books I'd read. He's an unabashed fan of the character driven novel and this book traces how fictional characters have traced the evolution of the modern Briton.

Maya Panika says

Though ostensibly a tie-in with the BBC series of the same name, this 11 hour long audio book delves much deeper into the heart of the history of the English novel than the television programmes, and the tone is far dryer and more academic.

Focussing firmly on plot, character and writing (rather than writers), Faulks on Fiction is pretty much what it says on the tin. It is a highly personal look at what makes a great novel. No one with an opinion is likely to agree with all - or indeed, any - of Faulks' opinions and deductions on the twenty eight novels though book groups and A level students will probably find this a useful starting point to kick-off debate and discussion.

Book groups and students aside, I'm not at all sure what market this audio book is aimed at; with a level pitched somewhere between A level crib and university seminar, it seems unlikely to be of appeal to the general reader, but at anyone with a broadly academic interest in English Literature should find it at least intermittently interesting.

Since he fronts the TV show and the book bears his name, it seems odd Sebastian Faulks didn't do the reading himself, though James Wilby's voice and tone (bar the curious lapse into comedy milkmaid for Tess of the D'Urbervilles) seems perfectly pitched for this decidedly intellectual production.

Ian says

This book was published as a companion piece to a BBC television series which I've not seen. In it, Faulks considers twenty-eight characters from literature, and comments on them. The characters are split into "types": heroes, lovers, snobs and villains. And within each group, he considers a well-known character from a famous novel. Some of the choices are obvious: Sherlock Holmes as a hero, Constance Chatterley as a lover, Fagin as a villain. Some are a bit odd: James Bond as a snob (although given the use of brand-names in the books, it does sort of make sense), Winston Smith as a hero... And I wouldn't have chosen Ronald Merrick as a villain to represent the Raj Quartet – Barbie Bachelor is a much more interesting character; nor do I necessarily agree with the conclusions Faulks draws about the four books and Merrick's role in them. But then the Raj Quartet is one of the few works covered in Faulks on Fiction which Faulks read for the first time for the television series. Many of the others he had read as a schoolboy or a student, and he writes as much about how his view of the book has changed with this new read as he does in analysis of the character under discussion. Of the twenty-eight novels covered, I've read only nine (but I've seen film/tv adaptations of a further seven), which at least gives me a position to compare Faulks's thoughts with my own. He raises points I'd not considered in many cases and there's very little I'd disagree with on those characters with which I'm familiar. Admittedly, I seem to hold both DH Lawrence and Paul Scott in higher regard than Faulks does – though, to be fair, I don't prize Lawrence for his characterisation, and that's pretty much the focus of the essays in Faulks on Fiction. An interesting read.

Tweedledum says

I really enjoyed the interesting way in which Sebastian Faulks explored the development of the novel through comparing heroes, villains, snobs and lovers. The relaxed but informative discussion made me want to revisit some old favourites... Robinson Crusoe and The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling, helped me decide definitely against Clarissa, or, the History of a Young Lady and The Golden Notebook and encouraged me to seek out Mr Norris Changes Trains. Faulks analysis of Jeeves and James Bond as snobs was quite brilliant and also made me feel that I want to revisit both.

J. Watson (aka umberto) says

I found this 'companion' interesting, inspiring and informative since Sebastian Faulks, an illustrious novelist himself (I'm sorry I haven't yet read his famous "Birdsong") has portrayed different views regarding the four major characters, that is, Heroes, Lovers, Snobs and Villains based on those twenty-eight great British novels, seven in each category. In other words, each character presumably deserves readers' similar attention, my motive is that I should read any character at random according to my familiarity.

Therefore, I started with my first two favorites, that is, Winston Smith (Heroes, no. 4) and Jean Brodie (Snobs, no. 5) because I read "Nineteen Eighty-Four" and "The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie" some 40 years ago. Reading these two characters as seen by such an author with literary stature delighted me with his unique ways of looking at each character's backgrounds, contexts as well as any hidden agenda I hadn't perceived or realized before. For instance, I found this sentence rewarding, "Winston Smith is a new kind of hero: one who loses." (p. 79) because this implies any hero who loses can be a hero which is a new paradigm

shift in that we tend to assume anyone who loses can't be a hero at all, he/she simply is a loser for ever! In other words, such a loser can be a hero if he/she can persist, keep going and do one's best for the good of those around him/her, the community and the nation.

Moreover, I found this bitter, "Her tragedy is that she turns out not to be a leader in the ranks of an enlightened culture, but the victim of self-delusion and of forces she has not understood." (p. 252) because this informs us why she (Miss Jean Brodie) can't be a leader and we're embittered by her possessing such self-delusion. One of the reasons is that she's grief-stricken by the death of her fiancé in Flanders and just imagine if we had to face a situation like that ourselves.

In short, this character anthology is for those keen novel readers who long to know more in-depth views/backgrounds related to their read/familiar ones. I mean reading those unfamiliar ones is a bit tedious and, I think, futile since it's like reading them in the dark.

Kirsty says

I was quite disappointed with this, alas. My video review can be found here:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_co...

Lily says

As there were some books that I didn't know anything about I had to skip those chapters: (I shall come back and read them when I have!)

Robinson Crusoe - read

Tom Jones - skipped

Becky Sharp - skipped

Sherlock Holmes - read

Winston Smith - read

Jim Dixon - skipped

John Self - skipped

Mr Darcy - read

Heathcliff - skipped

Tess Durbeyfield - skipped

Constance Chatterley - skipped

Maurice Bendrix - skipped

Anna Wulf - skipped

Nick Guest - skipped

Emma Woodhouse - skipped

Pip - skipped

Charles Pooter - skipped

Jeeves - skipped

Jean Brodie - read

James Bond - read

Chanu Ahmed - read

Robert Lovelace - skipped

Fagin - read
Count Fosco - skipped
Steerpike - skipped
Ronald Merrick - skipped
Jack Merridew - skipped
Barbara Covett - skipped

THINGS I FOUND INTERESTING:

Introduction: "Compare the word 'buxom,' which went roughly: supine, obedient, compliant, pleasing, wifely, womanly, large-breasted"

Robinson Crusoe: Here Faulks did something that I always find annoying - 'What the novel deals with, as everyone knows...'. No, Sebastian, not everyone *does* know. Thanks for alienating some readers before you've even started.

Sherlock Holmes: "his plots are generally in that agreeable borderland between hokum or believability" - also I didn't know that Watson had been invalidated home from Afghanistan in the original stories as well as in the BBC series! There's also a whole paragraph about how much Conan Doyle talks about Watson 'ejaculating.' Umm.

Mr Darcy: "Sir William is vulgar: he has called his house 'Lucas Lodge' (the Regency equivalent, perhaps, of having a personalised number plate)"

Norton Stone says

If it is your intention to write the next great literary fiction this collection of great character critiques is undoubtedly instructional, though it might equally put you off ever putting pen to paper again.

I'm not quite sure whether science becomes art or whether art can be disassembled into a series of quite deliberate and reproducible steps. Quite clearly we would all love to be talented but most of us are not.

It is crushingly obvious the writers here are hugely talented. Faulks shows us how the characters work, and if each piece of observational brilliance on the part of the writer was as pre-conceived as Faulks would appear to imply, it robs my heart of it's natural beat and puts something too mechanical in its place.

Did all these writers observe a literary method or were their talents deconstructed to establish a science? Head or heart? I don't feel I want to know the answer yet Faulks is relentless, and of course he's no mean writer himself.

I imagine great writers read a lot so there must be a degree of theft, and so the literary canon must be built on some structural foundation, yet I want to believe there is a randomness in the way writers emerge.

On that level this can be a hard read.

Shelly Dennison says

Interesting ramble through the history of fiction in English, made more entertaining by being Faulks' particular take on the novels and characters and interspersed with his own anecdotes. Doesn't pretend to be

comprehensive and divides characters into heroes, villains, lovers and snobs which in some cases is a bit arbitrary but provides the book with structure. My list of books to reread and seek out has got rather longer as a result of reading this which is no bad thing!

Nikki says

This book explores 4 types of literary characters (heroes, lovers, snobs and villains) by discussing 7 examples per type. Faulks limited himself to British novels from the 18th century till now because otherwise the selection would have been even more impossible to make.

I have to say I thoroughly enjoyed reading this book. When he analyzed a book I had already read, his thoughts helped deepen my understanding of the novel and offered new insights. For example, his view of the love between Elizabeth and Darcy is completely different from mine. I didn't particularly enjoy 'Pride and Prejudice', but I did think it was a beautiful, happy-ending love story. Faulks views their romance in a far more pessimistic, or, if I'm honest, realistic way, by saying Darcy's depression and his many flaws will inevitably drive them apart. When a book I hadn't read was talked about, it gave me a good idea of what it's about and whether or not it was something I'd enjoy. On a more universal level though, he discusses some very interesting ideas on literary characters in general and their evolution in the novel throughout the centuries.

The only reason I'm not giving this 5 stars is because of the book selection. Some books included here, like 'The Golden Notebook', 'The Line of Beauty', 'The Prime of Miss Jean Brody', 'James Bond', 'Brick Lane' and the Raj Quartet didn't appeal to me in the slightest. This made reading about them just a little tedious. As you can probably tell from this list, I prefer older novels to modern ones. I understand the need to include newer novels, otherwise you can't properly show the evolution of these types of characters, but just strictly personally speaking, I would have preferred to keep the amount of modern books to an absolute minimum. The only category I liked 100% is the 'heroes' one, I have nothing bad to say about the book selection there.

All in all, I would highly recommend this book to just about anyone with a serious love of literature and a interest to learn more about the history of the novel in a fun way. Even if you've watched the tv show, like I did, reading the book version gives you far more information.

Mark says

Having no doubt that Sebastian Faulks is better read, more intelligent and certainly better qualified than myself to comment on the novel I feel a tad reticent about holding forth but I shall. I did enjoy this trawl through British novels ranging from the gargantuan (and in my case severely unread) 'Clarissa' by Samuel Richardson to the gross and foul 'Money' by Martin Amis. Twenty eight novels by twenty six novelists are divided into seven books for the four themes of Hero, Lover, Villain and Snob. It is a fascinating reflection though I suppose, as is inevitable in a book which needs to be readable or at least 'holdable' one has to restrict the number of works reflected upon. Some of the novelists chosen or maybe more to the point those not chosen surprised me and then the works chosen appeared to me a tad eccentric but then as Faulks himself says in his section on Sherlock Holmes making lists or choices are never going to be universally applauded.

The four themes were cleverly chosen though as I read I did wonder whether a linking theme to all four

could not have been a fifth one of 'Victim'. In many of the novels chosen a glance at the work from the position of the one crushed or rejected or misunderstood would have opened out society's understanding of itself through the novelist's work in just as powerful a way if not more so.

Again, recognizing that it was Faulk's book and not mine I know it might appear churlish but it did aggravate me that he stated his opinions and ideas seemingly as universals. So for example in his discussion of 'Vanity Fair', which as a book I love, Faulks insists on saying on a number of occasions how everyone roots for Becky Sharp and is rather dismissive of Amelia Sedley and Dobbin. We all feel this he tells us, this is a universal....no Sebastian, it's not. Not in this corner of the world anyway. This might seem a small whinge and indeed it is an unimportant detail except it was repeated in other sections concerning other books. This grated on me because whilst wanting to hear the opinions of a far wiser and more articulate man I did not want to feel that my own opinions or ideas were of no consequence unless they chimed perfectly with his.

Having said all that, I did find the whole thing very interesting, easy to read, amusing and it did succeed in opening out aspects of novels I had not been aware of before.
