

Lesson Plan

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Originally written for an undergraduate course on genre fiction taught by Professor Andrew Goldstone

Objectives:

1. Students acquire hands-on experience with the print genres and material formats that are central to the history of genre fiction in circulation.
2. Students understand the production and binding processes that allowed genre fiction to become a mass-market phenomenon, contextualizing those methods in the history of bookbinding.
3. Students formulate research questions that put genre fiction in relation to its visual and material attributes.

Instructors needed: 2 or 3

Time: 80 min. class period

Overview:

This lesson consists of two stations, (1) Genre Fiction Across Formats and (2) Perfect Binding: Quality and Mass Production. They are to be taught simultaneously. Divide the class in two. Each group will spend 25 minutes in one station, after which they will swap to the following station. After 50 minutes the class will reconvene as a whole and discuss as a group their thoughts, impressions and findings.

Classroom set-up:

Organize the classroom around two large tables at opposite ends of the room, if possible. In one, evenly distribute the books for station (1) by format and style around the table so students can easily paste post-it notes around them. In the other, distribute the books for station (2) chronologically. Include the dummies for the case binding and the perfect binding at the center, and around the perfect binding place examples of books contemporary to mid 20th century genre fiction.

Station 1: Genre Fiction Across Formats

This station acquaints students with the key material formats through which genre fiction circulates. Representative items from a range of these formats (pulp magazines and mass market paperbacks, especially) are arrayed around a table. The table below provides a sample from the RIB Teaching Collection that has previously proven effective.

Pulp Magazines	Paperbacks	Misc
Detective Story (1917.u2)	Who's calling? (1942.1)	The omnibus of crime (1929.3)

Love Story (1927.u2)	Death on the aisle (1945.2)	Redbook (1977.u1)
Amazing Stories (1928.u2)	Listen! The stars! / The rebellers (1963.1)	
Weird Tales (1932.u1)	World's best science fiction: 1967 (1967.3)	
	We can build you (1972.1)	
	Rules of the game	
	Boundary lines	
	The flame and the flower	
	The clock that wouldn't stop (19???.25)	

These items represent three major genres: science fiction, romance, and detective fiction. The miscellaneous category includes the first hardcover anthology of detective fiction (*The Omnibus of Crime*) and an example of a glossy magazine aimed at young women (*Redbook*), which provides a “mainstream” comparison to genre pulps.

This station's exercise is divided into two phases. In the first phase (half of time allotted; i.e. about 12 minutes in an 80 minute period), students circulate around the table, paging through books and magazines. As they consult these objects, they take from sticky note pads placed around the table (or given to each student if numbers are small enough) and leave their observations on a note next to the object in question. These observations accumulate around each item as all students make their way around the table. Though students are encouraged to leave notes about whatever they notice that seems important to them, a set of questions can be posed at the beginning to guide their noticing. Such questions might include:

- What genre does this item belong to? How do you know?
- What is its cover art like? How does the art relate the item to the conventions of its genre?
- What are the contents of the item like? Are there advertisements or other non-fictional material?
- Is this the first appearance of its text(s) in print? If not, where else did it appear first?
- What questions does this object raise that you can't yet answer? Where else might you look to start finding out?

Circulate alongside students to examine their notes and draw out points of interest for the subsequent discussion. After about 12 minutes of noticing and placing sticky notes, bring students together as a group to discuss their most interesting finds for the remaining 12-13 minutes of their time at this station. Ask them to share responses to the questions posed beforehand. Special attention might be paid to the ways that items from different genres use their material format to communicate both their membership in that genre and their specific

interpretation of it. At every stage of discussion, encourage students to point to concrete examples they encountered on the table and explain what evidence from the object leads them to their conclusion. Other possible followup questions include:

- What seem to be the differences between a pulp magazine and a paperback book? On the other hand, what features do they share?
- What kind of reading experiences do these items encourage?
- The examples on the table stretch over nearly 100 years of genre fiction's history. Do you see any trends (continuities or changes) across time?

Station 2: Perfect Binding: Quality and Mass Production

This station acquaints students with the making of genre fiction in the popular mid-20th century paperback binding structure: the perfect binding. Items from late 19th century case bindings to mid 20th century paperbacks are arranged chronologically to show change through time, while 20th century items are placed surrounding the 20th century perfect bindings to show variety in the present moment. An effective sample from the RIB Teaching Collection could be:

Binding Dummies	Pre 20th century	20th century
Perfect binding text block + cardstock paper cover	Heroism in humble life (1883.2)	Frank Merriwell's diamond foes (1929.2)
French stitched text block + hardcover case binding	Samples of 19th century rag paper.	Big Sol (1950.2)
Case binding text block		Danger in deep space (1953.1)
Spineless case binding showcasing the stitches		The paradox men / Dome around America (1955.1)
		The works of Alexander Pope (1967.1)
		The poetical works of Wordsworth (1946)
		Samples of 20th century wood pulp acidic paper.

These items showcase different forms of binding structures to illustrate the change through time of 1. the quality and nature of its materials, 2. the shape and making of its structure, and 3. their social and economical value. To do this we included dummies and samples as well as 19th and 20th century books, representative of their time period and format.

This station's exercise is divided into two phases. One is a diachronic comparison of two bookbinding structures, examining how one gradually made space for the other: the case binding and the perfect binding. The other is a synchronic comparison of the perfect binding and

other bindings contemporary to it. In the first phase go over the bindings chronologically, from 19th century case bindings to 20th century perfect bindings. Here, they engage with students showing the structures from different angles encouraging them to touch and handle them. The purpose of the first phase is to prompt them to deduct 1. the different ways in which they are made, 2. the distinction in the origin and quality of its materials, and 3. the time, labor and money spent in its making. By doing so, the perfect binding can be accurately described and identified by students. Questions students can be asked throughout the activity are:

- How does the perfect binding emerge?
- What about it is different from its predecessors?
- What are its structural and material specificities?

After covering the perfect binding's characteristics, bring students closer to the second side of the table where the 20th century items lie. Using the edition of Wordsworth's works as a pivoting point, create a contrast between paperbacks and decorated hardbacks in order to have a conversation about audiences and mass-market production. By highlighting the uses and circulation of paperback perfect bindings you will address the larger and more important question: why was perfect binding used to print genre fiction and why did it become the main way in which it was produced worldwide? Before the last couple of minutes are over, ask them to come up with a hypothesis as to why most genre fiction books were made as perfect bindings and write their thoughts on the white board. You may use the following question to lead your discussion.

- What are the advantages and disadvantages of perfect bindings?
- How would you characterize the audience and buyers of a perfect binding? Are you one?
- What place did the perfect binding have in the American 20th century market?

Final remarks:

For the lesson's final moment, gather all students together as a group around the table meant for station 1. There, ask them:

- What was something they hadn't previously thought about when studying genre fiction that is illuminated by paying attention to its materiality?
- What possible new research questions does this way of looking at books open up for you?