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Literary Genres

All things in this world can be classified in some way. Colors, shapes, sizes, and many other factors are used in categorizing various things. Books are no different. By looking carefully at characters, settings, and plot, one can easily determine what kind of book is being read. This kind, or category, in literary terms is referred to as **genre.**

The two main categories of reading material are, of course, **fiction** and **nonfiction**. **Fiction** is reading material that contains a story that is made up by the author. **Nonfiction** materials are filled with facts. When strolling through a library or a book store, using the terms fiction and nonfiction in order to search for a book leaves one with far too broad a number of choices. For this reason, these categories are divided into smaller genres.

**Traditional Literature** is one of the oldest genres. These fictional stories come from many cultures and have been handed down through the years from one generation to the next. Earliest versions of traditional literature were orally shared. Later on, the tales were written down and became what we know today as fables, myths, legends, folk tales, and fairy tales. Because these kinds of stories share similar characteristics, traditional literature provided the framework for today’s fantasy genre.

The **fantasy** genre is very popular in both the worlds of books and movies. Fantasy stories contain “fantastic” or “unbelievable” characters, settings, and plots. Characters may be (but are not limited to) wizards, knights, princesses, or talking animals. Fantasy stories often take place in medieval times or magical places. Plotlines in the fantasy genre often follow a good vs. evil theme. Another popular plotline tells the story of a hero on a quest.

Often confused with fantasy, **science fiction** is another popular genre in both books and movies. Science fiction stories usually contain futuristic themes, characters, settings, and plots. A common element found in science fiction is technology. Characters may be robots, scientists, or aliens, as well as regular, everyday people. Settings are often in the future and could be in outer space or laboratories of some sort. Plotlines may also follow the good vs. evil theme, but other common plots could contain alien invasions, time travel, or an evil scientist trying to rule the world. Within the science fiction genre, there is a subgenre that has become quite significant in the last few years. Stories about *dystopian societies* that are infused with technology and governments in various stages of unrest also fall in this category.

Not all genres contain such elaborate plotlines and settings. For example, **realistic fiction** is exactly that – a made up story that contains regular people, regular places, and real world problems. **Historical fiction** is similar to realistic fiction in many ways. The historical fiction genre contains fictional stories that are set back in time with true historic events and characters intertwined in the plot, setting, and characters. For the purpose of our genre study, stories that are set in years prior to 1970 that have events that are historic in nature will be considered historical fiction.

Another exciting genre in the fiction category is **mystery and suspense**. Mystery and suspense books are fictional stories that contain a problem that must be solved. Likely characters are detectives, criminals, and victims. Settings may include places like police stations, crime scenes, or scary houses. Problems in mystery books are often crime-based, but due to the suspense aspect of this genre, stories with hauntings and more horror-like scenarios are also included.

Not all readers limit themselves to fiction. Many readers prefer nonfiction books. Just like fiction, there are many genres available in the nonfiction category. The library at WDMS has an enormous selection of **informational** reading books. The informational genre is not just limited to books. Other materials include documents, articles, newspapers, and journals. Topics covered by informational books are almost limitless. Some examples are sports, animals, space, geographical locations, and how-to books.

Another large genre in the nonfiction category is the **biography/autobiography/memoir** genre. **Biographies** are books written about a person’s life by another person. An **autobiography** is the story of a person’s life as told by that person. A **memoir** is similar to an autobiography, but instead of telling a whole life story, the author publishes a collection of short memories. Each little snippet tells about a time when the author learned a life lesson.

One final genre worth discussing is poetry. Poetry is not written in prose, which means in sentences and paragraphs. Poetry is written line by line and does not follow the standard conventions of English. That means the authors do not have to follow the rules of written language. Topics are wide and varied and pretty much unlimited.

As you can see, a reader has many options when making the choice of what book to read. Whether a reader likes factual books or fantastically created stories, the world of reading is without borders and can take the mind on trips beyond imagination. Think of these genres as flavors: don’t limit yourself to one – go taste them all!