

WHAT IS A NOVEL? The Russian cultural theorist Mikhail Bakhtin traces the novel back to imperial Rome and ancient Hellenistic romance, while Margaret Anne Doody in *The True Story of the Novel* likewise locates its birthplace in the cultures of the ancient Mediterranean. Andre Gide's *The Immoralist* is usually described as a novel, and Anton Chekhov's 'The Duel' as a short story, but they are both about the same length. You can find poetry and dramatic dialogue in the novel, along with epic, pastoral, satire, history, elegy, tragedy and any number of other literary modes. The novel quotes, parodies and transforms other genres, converting its literary ancestors. Or it can recount the adventures of an onion, chart the history of a family over six generations, or recreate the Napoleonic wars. Several authors have been proposed as plausible candidates for the first novelist, among them Miguel de Cervantes and Daniel Defoe; but the game of identifying origins is always a dangerous one. It cannibalizes other literary modes and mixes the bits and pieces promiscuously together. In a world in which God is dead, everything, so Dostoevsky remarked, is permitted; and the same goes for a world in which the old autocratic order is dead and the middle class reigns triumphant. Myths are cyclical and repetitive, while the novel appears excitingly unpredictable. If a lecturer proclaims that the paper-clip was invented in 1905, someone at the back of the hall will always rise to announce that one has just been unearthed from an ancient Etruscan burial site. It is true that if your definition of an automobile is fuzzy enough, it is not hard to trace the BMW back to the ancient Roman chariot. (This may also help to explain why so many premature obituary notices of the novel have been issued. What they usually indicate is that one kind of novel has died, while another has come into existence.) Even so, something like the novel can indeed be found in ancient times. There are novels in verse, like Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* or Vikram Seth's *The Golden Gate*. The point about the novel, however, is not just that it eludes definitions, but that it actively undermines them. The novel is a mighty melting pot, a mongrel among literary thoroughbreds. If it is a form particularly associated with the middle class, it is partly because the ideology of that class centres on a dream of total freedom from restraint. The truth is that the novel is a genre which resists exact definition. Virginia Woolf described it as 'this most pliable of all forms. into mere components of itself in a kind of Oedipal vengeance on them. It is the queen of literary genres in a rather less elevated sense of the word than one might hear around Buckingham Palace. In fact, the novel has a finite repertoire of forms and motifs. But it is an extraordinarily capacious one even so. Because it is hard to say what a novel is, it is hard to say when the form first arose. Even a definition as toothless as this, however, is still too restricted. This in itself is not particularly striking, since many things – 'game', for example, or 'hairy' resist exact definition. It is hard to say how ape-like you have to be in order to qualify as hairy. The novel is an anarchic genre, since its rule is not to have rules. A novel is a piece of prose fiction of a reasonable length. Not all novels are written in prose. At what point does a novella or long short story become a novel? There seems to be nothing it cannot do. It can investigate a single human consciousness for eight hundred pages. An anarchist is not just someone who breaks rules, but someone who breaks rules as a rule, and this is what the novel does too. As for fiction, the distinction between fiction and fact is not always clear. And what counts as a reasonable length? It is less a genre than an anti- genre. In the ?????????? modern era, as we have seen, it has been