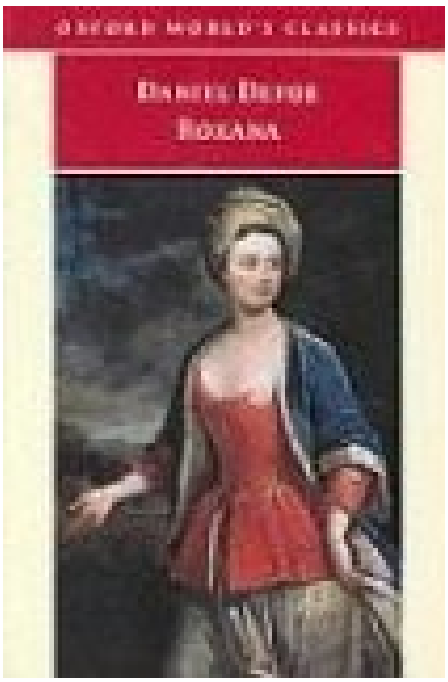

Roxana

Daniel Defoe , John Mullan (Editor)

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Roxana (1724), Defoe's last and darkest novel, is the autobiography of a woman who has traded her virtue, at first for survival, and then for fame and fortune. Its narrator tells the story of her own 'wicked' life as the mistress of rich and powerful men. A resourceful adventuress, she is also an unforgiving analyst of her own susceptibilities, who tells us of the price she pays for her successes. Endowed with many seductive skills, she is herself seduced: by money, by dreams of rank, and by the illusion that she can escape her own past. Unlike Defoe's other penitent anti-heroes, however, she fails to triumph over these weaknesses. Roxana's fame lies not only in the heroine's 'vast variety of fortunes', but in her attempts to understand the sometimes bitter lessons of her life as a 'Fortunate Mistress'. Defoe's achievement was to invent, in 'Roxana', a gripping story-teller as well as a gripping story.

Roxana Details

Date	:	Published November 19th 1998 by Oxford University Press, USA (first published 1724)
ISBN	:	9780192834591
Author	:	Daniel Defoe , John Mullan (Editor)
Format	:	Paperback 356 pages
Genre	:	Classics, Fiction, Literature, 18th Century, Historical, Historical Fiction, European Literature, British Literature, English Literature, Novels, Academic, School, Literary Fiction

From Reader Review Roxana for online ebook

Amber says

This book has the most modern, compelling and insightful argument about why women of 1724 were better to stay unmarried, which is an absolute must read and highlights all Roxana's strengths. I promise, the rest of the novel is NOTHING like this. If you're interested in checking it out, skip to the bottom spoiler tag.

I'm not one of those people who DNF's books. ~~And yeah, I abandoned *The Oresteia* but you would too if you had to read all those footnotes after you dropped the class~~

If I was smart (and if you are), I never would have finished this book. But it's weird and I'm glad I did.

The story starts off, for lack of a better word, boring. I once read somewhere that a good story starts in media res (in the middle of things), but we get a sense of who our narrator is from where she chooses to start the story.

I was born, as my friends told me, at the city of Poitiers, in the province or county of Poitou in France, from whence I was brought to England by my parents, who fled from their religionn about the year 1683, when the Protestants were banished from France by the cruelty of their persecutors.

Sound interstesting? Unfortunately, the story has nothing to do with any of this. Roxana is merely relating the facts, and while she is clear and concise here, she only devolves as the story gets going and things start to get a little more... intimate (and I'm not just talking about her choices). The summary on Goodreads paints Roxana as a woman who "traded her virtue" and as the autobiography gets going, she attempts to paint herself as this. But because this is an autobiography, and she is the narrator-turned-author, you not only get a whole lot of "But to go on with my own story" when she digresses for even a SECOND about someone else, even her most intimate acquaintance and most beloved friend, Amy. You also get a lot of this:

I may call well call it languishing, for if Providence had not relieved me, I should have died in little time. But of that hereafter.

As a modern reader, you can make the argument, well maybe they wrote differently back then. I can assure you, having read a decent amount 18th century literature, that this wasn't common. You got 1st person mainly through letters, but it was more popular to write to the moment, or in chronological sequence, rather than dropping these annoyings hints of what's coming. Me, I can't stand it. It's annoying! I don't want your spoilers halfway through, I want the compelling evidence of not knowing what is coming. Because for most of the story, I was convinced Roxana is a terrible, terrible narrator.

Even if you're not like me, you still get scenes like this, where she is so self-centered and removed from telling her story - which by the by, you never find out from what period she started narrating - that you have to struggle to keep going, because even the most excitingly awful things are glossed over:

I had but small encouragement to give her, and indeed could say but very little, but I got her to compose herself a little and not let any of the people of the ship understand what she meant or what she said. But even in her greatest composure she continued to express herself with the utmost dread and terror on account of

the wicked life she had lived, and crying out she should be damned and the like, which was very terrible to me who knew what condition I was in myself.

Yes, that is only two sentences.

I can see from some of these lines that this book could seem very compelling with its selfish narrator, who being so selfish and self-absorbed, can at times get very unreliable, especially with her limited perspective. But yet, I stand by my beliefs, which is that this book is not about deep, meaningful, poetic language. I haven't read any other Defoe, so I can't tell you if that's just his style, or if he was intending for something 'different' with this one.

However, every now and then you get a line like this:

This, however, shows us with what faint excuses and with what trifles we pretend to satisfy ourselves and suppress the attempts of conscience in the pursuit of agreeable crime, and in the possessing those pleasures which we are loath to part with.

Which is absolutely beautiful. Roxana's true gift is in making us understand her thought process and why she did things. She continually repeats herself, yes, but that repetition is there to compel you, not only into believing her often how-is-this-possible story as fact, but also as a defense. Roxana wants you to accept the chain of life and say, "Well, if you acted like this and felt this way then, well, that makes sense..."

The problem with this story is really the time period. Roxana's adventures would be perfectly acceptable (and perhaps not as profitable) in modern day. And of course I'm all for a wicked heroine. But my beef with this story is that the original, well... There's no catharsis. Roxana really is the FORTUNATE mistress. And that's a big problem.

You see, this is the end of the story

(view spoiler)

Naturally, I found fault with this ending, because everyone knows which side is supposed to win and lose, and how it's got to be a really good loss, especially after a really great gain. Well, that's a really pathetic ending. Some people took fault with this, and so a much speculated person wrote a different ending.

The problem with that ending is that it doesn't agree at all with the process of the story in many aspects. It takes Roxana, who is in Holland in the final paragraph, back to England, and starts her there. While it explains some things (view spoiler), it still breaks continuity in a bad bad way. It also doesn't agree with the final paragraph in that (view spoiler).

Now, as to why I enjoyed reading this, when it was so dull and awful and placid in the middle, was the end. Once you've read the various glories of Roxana, you're wondering, well, why is this worth telling. Because the last couple of pages bring, as described by another reader, a slow moving car crash. For me, that was the most compelling, page turning moment of the whole book. If Roxana had thought to include or not gloss over more moments of almost being burned, or having her cover blown, or just framing the instances that did happen properly, this book would be more compelling.

As it stands, I had to give it 3 stars, simply because of the beginning. I really could have given this book up! The end was really closer to 3.5 or 4.

Now would I recommend this? Maybe, if you are compelled by what you see here, enjoy classic literature, have previously enjoyed Defoe, and most importantly, know what you are getting into! I can't stress this enough, this is not the book I was promised. Here is the REAL summary of Roxana.

Roxana (1724), Defoe's last novel, is the autobiography of a woman brought to the brink of survival. In order to survive, she must sacrifice her virtue and honour for bread in the arms of another man. Many years later, when tragedy strikes the pair, she is offered the chance to do it all again, but this time as an undisguised mistress. Throughout, Roxana portrays herself as aloof, distant, and exotic - earning her the name she wins in England for her possession in equal parts of beauty, poise, and mystery. Often more composed than she should be, Roxana is a forgiving analyst of her own susceptibilities, begging the audience to understand how she was led down this path. Endowed with a selfishness so deep that she is unmoved by anything around her, she is able to carry on her life of renown for many years and exult in the gain. Unlike Defoe's other penitent anti-heroes, Roxana never feels guilt, sorrow, or shame unless she believes it will save her from consequence. Defoe's achievement was to invent, in 'Roxana', a gripping story-teller, but what he succeeded in was an unreliable narratess whose single-mindedness makes the storytelling less predictable than modern readers are typically used to.

Infamous passage of Roxana's views on marriage
(view spoiler)

The above is continued in the comments!

Sharon says

There is a huge difference between 17th and 18th century English literature. I had a very difficult time getting through this book. First, it was written in the style of its era, and I found the capitalized nouns and italicized proper nouns extremely distracting. Add to that the narrator's disjointed story-telling, and I almost put the book down several times. I can't say I was rewarded for persevering, but I was hugely relieved when I finished!

Thomas says

I loved psychoanalyzing Roxana and her relationships with Amy, her children, and her clients. Thanks to my brilliant Brit Lit professor, I also enjoyed discussing this book's structure (or lack thereof), the theme of redemption, and Defoe and his sadistic mind games. While I do not walk away from reading this changed or particularly impressed, I appreciate it on an intellectual level and as a work with a crazy narrator.

Natalie says

Oh! It's so deliciously old! Sentences that stretch for paragraphs; seemingly random capitalization scattered about the pages! And yet, it is so human a story you can hardly believe the creature that called themselves humans in the 1720s could have so much in common with you, your very self. Everyone is so naughty! It makes being good seem garishly modern.

Kin says

There is only one thing I want to say: FINALLY OVER!

Matthew Gatheringwater says

When Roxana strips her maid and forces the girl into bed with Roxana's own lover, she can reflect after the fact that she did this because she was unwilling to let her maid be morally superior to her. "...As I thought myself a Whore," she explains, "I cannot say that it was something design'd in my Thoughts, that my Maid should be a Whore too, and should not reproach me for it." That's the kind of introspection that makes Roxana such an interesting narrative voice and something that distinguishes her from her sister anti-heroine, Moll Flanders.

Roxana's self-knowledge, however, is inconsistent. At other times in her narration, she simply recounts her actions without having anything to say about their moral character. She is glib when she describes forcing

her son to marry a woman of her own choosing, then punishing him for his reluctance by withholding promised investment capital. This is interesting in a different way: Does she not comment because Defoe is purposefully depicting the blind spots in her character, or is this just another of the many inconsistencies in the novel? (Her age and number of children are muddled, which is not the sort of thing I'd expect an author to get wrong on purpose.) Or am I encountering values so unfamiliar to my own moral experience and observation that what is unworthy of mention in Defoe's community seems a sort of crime in mine? I don't know, and I enjoy not knowing. That is one of the reasons I like to read old novels. The morality of most contemporary novels is so blatant as to become tiresome.

Roxana's "bad" behavior is blatant, but her moral arguments are subtle. She represents herself as wicked even when she is describing acts of kindness or extraordinary fair play and generosity. By hastening to assure the reader that she agrees with the conventional opinion of her dissolute life, she (and the author) cleverly forestall the reader's condemnation, although perhaps not to the extent that prevented publishers from feeling they needed to add alternate endings to subsequent editions of the book. In these alternate endings, Roxana is punished for her wrongdoing, penitent, reformed, and usually dead. Defoe gave her a sad and abrupt end, too, but the relish with which her sins are recounted and the complexity of her moral character make me wonder how wicked she was meant to be. Wicked enough, I suppose, to make for good reading--still.

For my reference:
Roxana's taxonomy of fools begins with the passage: "If you have any regard to your future happiness, any view of living comfortably with a husband, any hope of preserving your fortunes or restoring them after any disaster, never, ladies, marry a fool."

Roxana's false "new turn" on the subject of marriage, in which whe explains why she will sleep with, but not marry, her lover begins with: "I told him I had perhaps differing notions of matrimony from what the received custom had given us of it..."

Alex says

Daniel Defoe, the popular 1700s smut peddler, is back with another sexy story about sexy sluts having sex - and this one might be his dirtiest yet! Roxana offers her maid up for sexual purposes to her lover! She dresses like a harem slave and puts on sexy little dance numbers! It's not as dirty as famed 1750 porno Fanny Hill, but it's not so far off.

Defoe likes to put his characters in desperate straits. He's most famous for the one about the castaway, but his two next-most-famous books - this and Moll Flanders - use the word "whore" a lot, and that's enough for a pattern for me: these books were meant to titillate, and it's fair to think of Defoe as a guy who wrote dirty books. He gets away with the racy stuff by creating those desperate straits, forcing his characters to make difficult decisions, and then clucking his tongue over it a lot, a tradition that extends all the way down to the Friday the 13th movies and their beloved habit of showing teenagers having premarital sex and then getting chopped up.

More Having One's Cake And Fucking It Too
- Dangerous Liaisons
- Delta of Venus

- Lolita
- Fatal Attraction
- Fifty Shades of Grey

He's also a pedant. If his books are distinguished by the exigencies they put their protagonists into, they're also consistent in their meticulous records. Crusoe made lists of all the supplies on his island. Roxana goes through her finances with you, in to-the-dollar detail, over and over. This too is a tradition, extending through Balzac and A Tree Grows In Brooklyn. It sounds boring, but if you want to understand how money worked in the 1700s, here's your big chance. You don't, of course, so it's mostly boring.

Virginia Woolf says that Defoe "seems to have taken his characters so deeply into his mind that he lived them without knowing exactly how, and, like all unconscious artists, he leaves more gold in his work than his own generation was able to bring to the surface." It feels to me like his characters escape him: they're more than who he thinks they are. (Or, at least, there's enough life in them to become more with time.) Robinson Crusoe is a lunatic. Moll Flanders is almost a feminist.

And Roxana...well, Roxana is complicated. "Seeing liberty seemed to be the man's property, I would be a man-woman, for, as I was born free, I would die so," she says, and that's pretty awesome, right? She insists on independence. Her refusal to marry her series of companions seems triumphant to a modern reader. She reminds me of the mighty Becky Sharp, who similarly escapes her author and is punished by him for it, or despite it.

But punished she is, and *Roxana* doesn't translate as well for we modern readers as Moll Flanders does. She's a sort of accidental unreliable narrator. She sounds convincingly kind, but she's terribly cruel to her children. I *like* her; I find it hard to reconcile the woman who seems constantly aware of and concerned about the feelings of others to the woman who drops a trail of abandoned children behind her like a harp seal. This is probably Defoe's fault; he tries harder to get into Roxana's head, to describe her motivation and personality, than he ever did with Moll or Robinson, and he mucks it up a bit. She just fails to come across as a consistent, believable human. This is the most psychological of Defoe's novels, and it exposes his weakness.

On the plus side, though, there are some sexy parts.

Emma Wallace says

This novel has left me conflicted to say the least. Roxana is undoubtedly a mesmeric, beguiling character but I simply cannot disconnect my reception of her to proto-feminist notions of female empowerment and emancipation; although her character pontificates over the position of women with some choice feminist rhetoric, I am unable to quell my doubts about how much this notion of unreliable narration undercuts and in many ways is meant to invalidate what she says as mere signs of unwholesome vanity and self-interest. I think all my concerns primarily rest on Defoe's claim to absolute truth telling, a statement that leaves itself open to narrative subjectivity and in this instance a psychological uncertainty about the true nature of the main character. A rip roaring romp of theatrical proportions whose sojourns around 18th century continental Europe I certainly enjoyed as well as its fluctuation among the various strata of social standing, the main part that made this almost intolerably boring for me was its lack of an essential plot- it was simply structureless. And this lack left the story open to repetition, sporadic changes of intention and mostly just inane wondering. The very fact that this was without chapters was almost mind-numbing and the style was undoubtedly a raw, unrefined attempt at capturing character interiority; although I thought characterisation aside, Roxana was an

entertaining, engaging and unique perspective whose arguments from a superficial angle you could interpret as a statement defending sex work and female sexuality. I think what niggles me about this novel was that I didn't get what its purpose was and I could only feel immense dissatisfaction, confusion and doubt when completing it- like many I do not trust Roxana as a narrator and therefore I scrutinise the sincerity of these arguments about liberty Defoe places in her mouth and feel agonistic about whether I can ever claim her to be an early feminist heroine. Although perhaps anachronistic to some, the hidden darkness that belies this story disturbs for me the power of Roxana's forward thinking narrative and, while I will simply accept this ambiguity as a product of Defoe's experimentalism with the novel format, I cannot simply give my rating of this the same benefit of the doubt.

Rosemary says

I can't believe the print edition of this is only 200+ pages. I had the ebook and it felt like at least 500 pages. Of course, there were no creative writing classes in the 1720s. The first half is fine, and there's a lot of interesting stuff about the position of women in society at the time, as well as a surprising amount of travel and commerce between England, France and the Netherlands. But the second half dragged and became a chore.

Camille ? says

Books for university are not always the best read. This book do have a fascinating, interesting and perfect woman villain though, just like in *Moll Flanders*. She was both incredibly frustrating and funny in how manipulative, devious, selfish and self-centered she was.

Ben Doeh says

Roxanne !!! put on the red light... put on the red light...

Indeed, Roxana has exceptional success in the mistress/pussypower business, becoming an independent lady in a world where men control commerce and political power. Defoe explores the role and viability of female Authority in a man's world, by narrating from Roxana's perspective.

The book has many dull passages, but the fourth star is for the novel's dark drama, and its sometimes brilliant and morally complex passages - Roxana forcing her maid into sex; her scathing account of marriage to fools; her reflections on "storm-repentance" at sea; her bedside debate with the Dutch merchant about marriage and blackly amusing comparison of being wife v mistress; and several more.

The ending of the novel sustains a tone of dread, and peculiar perplexity about women's supposedly 'maternal' instincts. I can't decide whether it feels forced, or oddly convincing for this operator in the world of men. In any case, it lingers in the mind, and makes me wonder who writes like this today. For even though women have far more options these days, many of the issues still arise.

Dree says

My last of the Defoe books on the 1001 books list!

So, this book is nearly 300 years old. And it feels like it. The language is dated and took some getting used to. The scandals wouldn't be so scandalous (not that I would want to be friends with "Roxana") today. And today, Roxana would not have to struggle to avoid marriage to keep control of her wealth. Of course, today it is a lot harder to lose someone (or to be lost yourself), so many of Roxana's problems would never have happened n the first place.

So, it is what it is. I do wonder who read this book c1724. I can't believe it was women and families--or would Roxana's behavior not be seen as shocking as much as offensive? Or was this written for men to read in clubs, and to laugh with their friends about? I should look into this.

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kingshearte says

In the realm of odd comparisons to make between books, here's one: This one and Interview With The Vampire. Not because there are any vampires or anything (obviously), but because of my feelings toward the respective protagonists. The main thing I remember about reading *Interview* is how much Louis annoyed me with his constant whining, and how much I wished he would just shut up and get over it. I'm pretty sure that that same feeling about Defoe's nameless heroine (her name isn't really Roxana) is what's going to stick with me about this book.

Because, oh my god, she frets a lot. And always about the same thing. I feel like every single page features at least one paragraph where she moans about her chosen profession and what it means for her immortal soul or whatever, and it drove me crazy. Maybe if I'd been raised in the same environment she was, with its horror of all things sex (especially as it relates to women, of course), I wouldn't have minded so much, but seriously. Once you've amassed enough wealth to live on, if you think what you're doing is so awful, stop doing it. If the wealth is important enough to you that you want to keep at it so you can get more, then do so and get over it. But either way, for the love of whatever, SHUT. UP.

Don't get me wrong. I'm sympathetic to a point. It's not her fault she believes that her soul is in peril because of the way she lives her life. The society in which she was brought up made that very clear to her. The only thing worse than giving up your favours outside of marriage is profiting by it. No, sorry, there's one thing that's even worse than that: enjoying it. Worst thing a woman could possibly do.

Because here's the thing. At the beginning, when she was trying to decide whether she should become someone's mistress in the first place, one of the ways she justifies it is to say that, if it's a matter of life or death, then surely it can be forgiven. And for her, as she was pretty much on the verge of starvation, it was a matter of life or death, so her "fall" was forgivable. But really, sex pretty much was a matter of life or death for all women in that era. Women, as a general rule, were not allowed to make money in any "acceptable" way (even if they were born into wealth that just provided an income without having to work for it, women didn't generally get to inherit any of that), which means they basically had to rely on a man to provide for them. Whether you marry the dude or not, it basically still boils down to trading sexual favours and your reproductive system for food and shelter. Marriage simply makes it a more binding contract. So by that logic, every woman of that era should get a pass on this particular way of living.

But then, of course, she finds herself having to admit that she enjoys it. She likes the attention and the admiration, and I want to say it was implied in at least one spot that she actually enjoys the act itself (gasp!). And that's when the real hand-wringing starts, and when I started to check out.

The rest of the book carries on in a similar vein. She becomes mistress to a handful of men (four, by my count, not counting her first husband, and she did eventually marry one of the four – not an unreasonable number), makes a pile of money, and frets about it all the whole way through. So tedious.

And I suppose I should address the final section. It is believed that it was actually written by someone other than Defoe, as there are some inconsistencies. One mentioned by the introduction writer was that while Defoe tended to use "frighted," the author of the last section used "frightened." I also observed that Defoe had his heroine refer to her husband most often as her "spouse," while in the last section, she used the word "husband" more frequently. Furthermore, while, as mentioned above, I found much of the narrative tedious, the first part of the final section was painfully so. The details of their trip from London to Dover were related with such minute precision that it was maddening.

That said, assuming that Defoe did indeed not write that last section, I'm left with one question for him: WTF? His ending is essentially "Then they moved to Holland and terrible things happened. The end." What?! And then I found my own reaction to this kind of fascinating. Why is it that "and they lived happily ever after" is so much more acceptable as an ending than "and they lived miserably ever after"? It's no less abrupt. I guess it just comes down to narrative conventions. Good storytelling generally relies on conflict. If they lived happily ever after, that implies that there's no more conflict, so there's no more story. If they lived miserably ever after, it's presumably because there was still some conflict, which we as readers want to hear about and find out how it got resolved. All the more so because it's not like Defoe's narrative ended with the resolution of all outstanding conflicts, so there were just future ones to deal with. No, he leaves us still right in the middle of the most recent one he's introduced. It's all just very strange, and I'm not particularly surprised that someone felt the need to write an actual conclusion to the story.

At any rate, at this point, I think I can state fairly confidently that I'm done with Defoe. I've read three of his books and haven't particularly liked any of them. Someone would have to come up with a very compelling argument for me to read any more.

Samantha wickedshizuku Tolleson says

Okay so, I would have never read this if it hadn't been on the 1001 Books to Read Before you Die list. I'm glad that it's on the list!
I was amused by Lady Roxana's antics, and feel that this was mere child's play compared to modern morality. It gives you a perspective of how strict and stressful life of women in the 1670s and beyond were. This would be a useful reference for anyone pursuing a History major, or Literature minor.

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kler says

I loved this book SO MUCH!!!! I have to say that the end is a bit weird... I didn't expect it to end this way but I didn't hate it anyway. It is very well written, so pleasurable to read. Roxana is one of the best character I have ever known, she's SO feminist and I loved her badass side. She hates men as much as I do. Loved her.