



Moll Flanders

Daniel Defoe

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Moll Flanders is a novel by Daniel Defoe. It purports to be the true account of the life of the eponymous Moll, detailing her exploits from birth until old age.

Moll's mother is a convict in Newgate Prison in London who is given a reprieve by "pleading her belly," a reference to the custom of staying the executions of pregnant criminals. Her mother is eventually transported to America, and Moll Flanders (not her birth name, she emphasizes, taking care not to reveal it) is raised until adolescence by a goodly foster mother. Thereafter she gets attached to a household as a servant where she is loved by both sons, the elder of whom convinces her to "act like they were married" in bed. Unwilling to marry her, he persuades her to marry his younger brother. After five years of marriage, she then is widowed, leaves her children in the care of in-laws, and begins honing the skill of passing herself off as a fortuneed widow to attract a man who will marry her and provide her with security.

Moll Flanders Details

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Author : Daniel Defoe

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From Reader Review *Moll Flanders* for online ebook

Kelly says

Largely confusing, frenetic action interspersed with long, prosy, preachy morality lessons, and then plunged right back into constant action again. Defoe's storytelling appears almost entirely random, especially towards the end, picking out one tale to tell of her wicked ways and days, and suppressing others that sound much more interesting. There's hardly any reflection on character here, if any at all. I'm not counting the times when Defoe pauses to lecture his audience on God's mercy while having Moll pretend to be stricken by conscience by things that seem highly improbable, with outcomes afterwards which seem positively incredulous.

He never really makes Moll a character at all, but rather a conduit for his opinions of the time and place. His constant message is that a girl like Moll could have led a moral life, if only she had enough money to do so. She falls in and out of good circumstances, and is a good person so long as she has the money to be. He does emphasize what a problem it was especially for a woman with no resources, and her very limited options for getting by in the world, especially if she is no longer young or beautiful. I do give him credit for that. But he makes her so unappealing... I mean, all her thoughts are either preachy and moral and obviously from Defoe himself, or justifying what she does, or glorying in her successes. She seems to forget that she has children half the time. She cares about what becomes of only one of them, and seems to disregard the other, oh.. eight of them? She doesn't seem to care for clothes, her appearance is only mentioned in connection with morality or disguising herself, she hardly has any female friends, nor do they ever talk about what women would have talked about at the time. There's no convincing woman in there.

Ellen says

The Fortunes & Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders &c.
Who was Born in Newgate, and during a Life of continu'd Variety for Threescore Years,
besides her Childhood, was Twelve Year a Whore, five times a Wife (whereof once to her own
Brother), Twelve Year a Thief, Eight Year a Transported Felon in Virginia, at last grew Rich,
liv'd Honest, and dies a Penitent. Written from her own Memorandums . . .

Original title page for *Moll Flanders*

The character of Moll Flanders has traditionally baffled critics.

Is she an ironic character? Is she truly penitent? How may her inconsistencies be justified? Critics have asserted there is irony in *Moll Flanders* but it is not in the book; that is, we--as readers--may appreciate irony in Moll's character but Defoe does not provide it. What may be easier to demonstrate, then, is that "Defoe's attitude toward Moll is consistent, even if Moll herself, ironically or otherwise, is not" (James 203). Whatever the critics propose, for

readers, Moll emerges as irascible, vibrant, and wonderfully complex. Moll also shows the limited choices for a woman of her time.

Moll Flanders, as the description from Defoe's original title page suggests, is a novel written in the confessional mode. As readers of this type of work, our role is akin to that of a priest: we listen to the confessions and tacitly provide understanding or forgiveness. To elicit our sympathy, Defoe places Moll in an environment not only hostile but enticing, a world, he would have us believe, that tempts and lures an otherwise virtuous individual into a life of crime.

Moll's world, ostensibly mimetic, is really portrayed with great selectivity. Many characters—even those as important as her first lover—are not even named; settings are often depicted as just "a house" or "the street." What does loom large on Moll's horizon is money. Again and again, Moll focuses on money and the material; early on, she defines herself in terms of her net worth.

Moll's indoctrination into a materialistic world starts in childhood. Orphaned, Moll is raised by an elderly woman who feels amused pity for Moll's desires to become a "gentlewoman" and let Moll live with her rather than go into service. The ladies of the town, curious about the "little gentlewoman," visit her and soon begin to give Moll gifts of money and fine clothes. When Moll's elderly guardian dies, one of the families that had shown an interest in Moll takes her into their home. Though poor, Moll describes how she receives an education equivalent to that of a gentlewoman. By a twist in circumstances, Moll gets an early "taste of genteel living" (9) far above her actual station.

Although Moll describes herself initially as "very sober, modest, and virtuous" (12), she is led into a liaison with the eldest brother in the household. His dominance soon takes hold, and Moll describes his tactics in terms of *lures*: "he began with that unhappy snare to all women, viz. taking notice upon all occasions how pretty I was" or "After he had thus baited his hook" (13). Though Moll admits her strong passion for the elder brother, her stronger passion soon becomes clear. After an initial episode of kissing, the brother gives Moll money. Moll's reaction is telling: "I was more confused with the money than I was before with the love, and began to be so elevated that I scarce knew the ground I stood on" (17). On a subsequent occasion, he gives Moll a "handful of gold" (18), and its glittering reality becomes the dominant image in Moll's landscape: "As for the gold, I spent whole hours in looking upon it; I told [and yes, this is the right word:] the guineas over and over a thousand times a day" (19).

To gain Moll's complete surrender, the brother offers her a silk purse with a hundred guineas in it and the promise of one hundred guineas annually until he marries her. With irony intended or unintended, Moll's passion and greed gain equal footing: "My colour came and went, at the

sight of the purse and with the fire of the proposal together" (22), and Moll succumbs to his advances.

Significantly, money and attendant material possessions are foregrounded while the rest of Moll's setting recedes into the background. The elder brother—as we could predict—does not marry Moll and her reluctant marriage to the younger brother, done only out of financial necessity, receives a rapid narration. Moll tells us there is little worth describing, "...I lived with this husband, only to observe that I had two children by him, and that at the end of five years he died" (51). Typically, Moll assesses her present situation in terms of money, a description more graphic and several lines longer, than that of her five years of marriage.

Moll's early adventures set up her pattern of behavior. Despite her professed good intentions, when push comes to shove, Moll consistently acts out of self-interest. Moll's hostile world tempts her with material gain, she succumbs, eventually has some type of downfall, and then defines her outcome in terms of her current net worth. Moll's patterned conduct puts the reader in an interesting situation. Moll may momentarily hesitate and try to rationalize a forthcoming seduction or theft, but we never doubt the outcome.

However, in a society that would otherwise provide little choice for an unattached woman, Moll's ability to silence any internal qualms greatly increases her freedom of movement. While we might find her attempts at rationalization or short fits of morality funny, Moll Flanders is a complex character. Ultimately, she is not simply funny nor simply tragic, but fully realized and equipped with powers of resourcefulness and self-preservation that might have been admired in a man.

Shovelmonkey1 says

Moll Flanders; the tale of a bawdy wench out and about being bawdy and getting up to all manner of, well, bawdiness. For those of you not up on your ye olde Englishness, bawdy is a general term for something which is lewd, obscene and lascivious. If you don't know what any of those words mean then Moll Flanders will be a nice surprise for you (and maybe you should get out more).

Moll is essentially a working girl on the make but really she's just trying to find Mr Right and settle down with a nice respectable fellow in order to get a bit of financial security. Life in the early 18th century was no picnic after all, especially if you're a lady with a bit of a reputation and not two coppers to rub together. Social services were not around to step in, help you into a small flat and give you advice about being a job seeker.

Nope, life on the banks of the Thames was very much a sink or swim affair although many people find it difficult to swim when their throats have been cut from ear to ear and they've been heaved in head first after

their pockets have been emptied. London was not a pretty place to be and no one can blame Moll for trying to make the best of a bad situation. And try she does, although this mainly involves going through husbands faster than Elizabeth Taylor.

Husband One dies an early death and leaves her with small children to care for. She leaves them tucked up at home and heads out onto the street to begin a career as an artful con-woman hoping to snare another husband. Husband Two is wealthy but quickly bankrupts himself and does a runner to France leaving Moll with some fond memories and an empty bank account.

Swiftly moving on to husband number three, there is some exciting foreign travel followed by an unfortunate bout of incest (well, the world was a lot smaller in those days). Potential husband number four never comes through with the goods which brings Moll to potential husband number five. Number five is a slow mover and is put on the back-burner while Number six is sought out to fill the hole (pun intended) in the interim. Number six turns out to be an even bigger con-artist than Moll and hi-jinx ensue when they both think the other is looted.

Nine children later and six husbands down Moll is still far from living the high life and resorts to meaner crimes than seduction in order to fill her purse. You can imagine that a life like this is probably going to be less than kind on a lady's general appearance but Moll still seems to pull in the gentlemen. Perhaps bawdiness is a virtue in its own right.

A brilliant alternative classic tale with an unusual and bold heroine who is not chaste, girly or prim. A refreshing antidote to the later ladies of the Austen school of writing. Moll Flanders would kick Elizabeth Bennet's ass any day of the week.

Rose says

3 things I liked about this book:

1. Moll's distinctive character and voice
2. Her ability to turn almost any situation into a positive, eventually (Moll Flanders wobbles, but she never falls down!)
3. How the book highlighted the difficult positions a woman could be left in during this period as a result of, for example, becoming widowed with children, not having a husband/family to support her, having illegitimate children, or being married and thus all personal property legally belonging to the husband, who might fritter it away

3 things I did not like about this book:

1. The disregard for Moll's children. OK, I can understand her doing her best to forget them when she's in a very difficult situation. The second time round in Virginia, for example, she doesn't ask after the other child she had left there. She overdoes the "loving mother" bit a touch right at the end when she re-meets her son in Virginia, and you'd think in this mood she would be minded to say something about that son's brother or sister she left behind. Similarly, at one point she comments on going back to the place she left her two children by Robin, and finds out about (and reports back on) the fate of his parents, brother, and sister - but not a word about the two children.
2. It was skillfully written so that the reader retained more sympathy for Moll than might have been the case, but she was still a pretty nasty piece of work, however much she justified her actions to herself.

3. The ending seemed rushed, forced, and as if it was trying to make up for a prurient emphasis on "wickedness" throughout most of the rest of the book.

3 things I learnt from this book:

1. Fabric could be really, really expensive (yet apparently not subject to particularly tight security). We are told that a typical servant-girl would earn about £3 a year, £5 will pay for a baby to be fostered for a year, and Moll estimates that she could live on £6 a year. She routinely, however, steals pieces of cloth worth upwards of 20 guineas.

2. London had an area called "The Mint" in which debtors were safe from prosecution for their debts.

3. You could get hung for all sorts of crimes in the past. "At its height the criminal law included some 220 different crimes punishable by death. These crimes included such offences as "being in the company of Gypsies for one month", "strong evidence of malice in a child aged 7–14 years of age" and "blacking the face or using a disguise whilst committing a crime"." (Wikipedia)

3 words used excessively in this book:

1. satisfaction
 2. perplexity
 3. convenience
-

Paula W says

When I was younger, I was a smart girl but not smart enough to get a full scholarship to college. My parents were poor, so any help from them was out of the question. I knew I had to make it on my own. So, I worked three jobs during my freshman year. I worked at White Castle, I typed stuff for attorneys, and I did another job that I have never told anyone about until now. I was Mrs. Claus.

I worked for a company that had dozens of Mrs. Clauses who would call children during the holiday season. I got an email telling me who to call and when, and I called those little stinky spoiled children and talked to them about Santa's reindeer. I hated every minute of it, but it paid the bills, so I called those little fuckers like it was nobody's business.

Making a living isn't easy, and Moll Flanders knew that. This woman did some stuff to make ends meet that took some guts. She was a prostitute and a pick pocket. She dated men and married men and slept with men who she thought could help her. She was tough, and she was dedicated. Moll was not going to starve. Hell no, she was going to be the best prostitute/pick pocket in the world. I admire that in a perverse way.

On the one hand, it is hard to believe that a novel about an independent woman trying to survive was written in 1722. It is one of the first novels ever written, actually. On the other hand, the structure of the novel is a complete mess, making it obvious that it was written in 1722. I am willing to overlook that.

Because Moll Flanders is one of my very favorite literary characters. She is the Scarlet O'Hara of the 1700s; she has backbone. She's racy and edgy. She might have also slept with her brother on accident. I mean, haven't we all? (NO, No, and absolutely not, but we can live vicariously through Moll and her other escapades, which is way better than accidental incest, in my opinion).

Cass says

I finally finished reading *Moll Flanders*, and I loved it.

I have heard such negative reviews about this book. I have heard it said that the heroine is not likeable. She is painted as a whore and a thief. I came away with an entirely different view.

Her character hooked me from the start. A beautiful and skillful woman, she is intelligent but unworldly. She meets with great success in the beginning of the book due to her own personal accomplishments, aspirations, and personality. She takes what little she has and uses it as best she can. She keeps running into bad luck which she works hard to overcome. I just adored her.

I love everything about the book. This isn't pulp fiction. I was recently inspired listening to a Cambridge professor on the radio commenting on the idea of reading for fun. He criticised the idea that we read pulp fiction for fun, and suggested that we should read good novels for fun, he suggested *Anna Karenina* etc. The idea struck home with me, these are well written and highly enjoyable pieces of literature, why are they often considered too hard. I read *Anna Karenina* recently and found it fabulous, it blew me away.

Jason says

Women! You need to read this book. Armchair Historians! You need to read this book. Forensic Sociologists! You need to read this book.

Moll Flanders is, I think, a rare look at the treatment and disposition of lower class women in Britain in the early 1700s--what they thought, how they comported, and their daily interactions, no matter how insignificant. What makes it a rare exposition? Fiction oftentimes captures the mood and milieu of a people and their condition far more accurately--and with much more meaning--than sterile government reporting and historian interpretations thereof. And this book is a snapshot of the then-current state of low income conditions instead of a retroactive screed or a future prediction.

Daniel Defoe is regarded (by those crazy Wikipedians) as one of the most prolific of all British writers, and he is certainly one of the best at cataloging daily life. His fiction portrayed Everyman (or Everywoman in this case). It's a welcome relief to fiction of the Royal Court--its seneschals, courtiers, gallery, entourage, baggage, its rarefied air--that was so common among his literary peers. Defoe's main character, Moll, is a woman with little money and few prospects. Throughout the book we witness the vagaries of her life in astonishingly candid details. She willfully, gladly and repeatedly partakes in whoring, infidelity, incest, child abandonment, rampant thievery, collusion, obstruction, misrepresentation. Despite what would normally be intriguing yet deplorable behavior, Defoe manages to make Moll, if not a likable character, at least one under which the pressures of her demographic makes her a believable, credible, and forgivable protagonist.

I understand Moll's behavior to be a faithful representation of her class. Unschooled, abused, almost no legal rights, victimized by any able man, no great hopes to improve her condition, destitute, routinely sick, routinely pregnant--this is the daily grind for women in 1722 Britain. *Moll Flanders* is a good, though unintentional, primary source that could easily be used as a historiography of the era.

I recommend women read this book, not for my star rating, but because a man has written what I believe is a true, unabashed representation of a woman's condition in the 1700s. I'd like to know what women think of this book. I believe the abuse, sexual mores, and survival tactics of women in a brutish man's world at the lowest income levels is an unexpected reveal, and though the story drags at first, you may find yourself rooting for Moll. And despite her licentiousness, she ultimately finds modest wealth and success. She outwits the legal system, prevails to find a man of some substance, and escapes her demographic. Interestingly, she makes no excuse for how she lived; there's reflection, but no real penitence.

What do women today think of Moll? Is she diamond or quartz? Is this image of woman ready for high school English--a discussion for sophomores? Now, *Robinson Crusoe* is close to my heart as one of my rare 5 star ratings, and the only book I've read both as a child and an adult, with equal curiosity and gusto, producing equal coolness. But I'm a man, and that was a man-story (and a boy's story too). So, if this story is about a women, does it work in the same regard as *RC* does for men?

The writing, by common translation, has all the mile markers of early 18th century prose. The pervasive capitalization of random nouns, the apostrophe-heavy argot, no break for chapters, and the fastidiousness of complete thoughts for every sentence. All the hallmarks of what was then 'proper writing.' In the handwritten manuscript, I picture the letter 's' written like so many 'f's. 3.5 stars.

Katharine says

Last year I described this book as being like a big gushy Cinnabon, sweet, sticky, and cloying. I love it to bits, but it does make me feel like I need to wash, or something.

Jim says

Amusing, picaresque portrait of an unsrupulous antiherione (the narrator) in 17th century England and America. She lies, she steals, she whores - whatever it takes.

I, and I suspect she, lost track of how many children she has by an assortment of fathers, but no matter. The fact that there are no separate chapters may daunt some, but her amoral, approach to all her conflicts is most satisfying and you root for her to succeed.

Pinky says

Ever wondered what the significance of Ned Flander's wife's name on the Simpons?

Moll Flanders is about a woman that not only fell on hard times, but is a strong, self asserted woman that uses any possible wiles to survive in a time when women were still nothing more than trinkets. She goes from reputable, to the London street slum, to accidentally marrying her brother, to living a long life with one that she loves.

Far beyond its time, *Moll Flanders* is a classic. Hard to read at times, as is most of the books that came from the 1700s-1800s, just meerly because of the style of writing can get long in the tooth. This isn't a book for someone to pick up that isn't willing to **read**.

Whitaker says

Did I enjoy this novel? No. In some ways, its story and writing technique are far too rudimentary for a 21st century reader. It certainly didn't grab me the way other books have. But I think if you want to see how the novel got from there to here, you can't pass this by.

Because reading *Moll Flanders* is like watching the grainy footage of a home video of your lover at five years old. You can see the gestures and traits that make up the person today, but only sketched out in infant form. You have to love it because you love the fully formed adult person now, and it's so squee-fascinating to see that some bits have been there since the very beginning.

I'm a bit of lit-geek and I loved seeing how you could see the beginnings of the character/realist novel in *Moll Flanders*. The whole thing is more plot than character. Certainly Moll has far less internal substance and texture than Madame Bovary or Anna Karenina. However, Moll is also the progenitor or one of the progenitors of later heroines like Scarlett O'Hara (*Gone with the Wind* / Margaret Mitchell) or Emma Harte (*A Woman of Substance* / Barbara Taylor Bradford): survivalist bad girl who triumphs over everything the author throws at her.

And boy does he throw everything at her: "husband" #1 is a seducing cad who marries her off to his brother; husband #2 dies after a few years of marriage; husband #3 turns out to be her brother; husband #4 is a highway man who tricks her into marrying him but eventually lets her go; husband #5 is a decent man who dies after five years of marriage. And in between husbands 3 and 4 is an extended love affair. And so, Moll is also the daughter of the Wife of Bath.

Was this a good read? Not in the fun sense of the term, nor in the value-judgement sense either. But I think it certainly belongs in the canon and if that's something that matters to you (and there's zero reason why it should), then it certainly was a good read.

Paul Bryant says

It is an universall and Fixed law that should a reader take up any of *the works of Master De Foe* she shall be obliged to begin forthwith to write and may I say even to think in the manner of Master De Foe; for *it is like a virulent infection*; which will, it may be seen redilly, be habituated in exentrick spellings, irregular Capitilizations, alarming and *unexplainable lunges into the italick*; and headlong sentense construction, and the Devil take the hindmost. Mistress Moll Flanderses tale self told came off but three Yeares from the romaunce of Robinson Crusoe *that was cast away on the Island in the Oroonoquoo*. This Dan Foe, for such indeed was his original name, was a scribbler for the news presses and a great stirrer of potheres for the Politick Parties and so twas nothing astonishing that he got himself into Newgate a time or two and also had a spell in the Stocks; and he dabbled in Matters of Business with *more gusto than wise discrimination*, and of a like twas no great surprize that he finds himself Publickly Bankrupted; and so finding he can turn out tales at speed, and that the Printers are at need of a very fluid pen, he puts forth eight long tales in FIVE YEARS

and him a man of SIXTY years. In those dayes of Queen Anne and King George THE FIRST this style of tale telling was new, there was hardly an one before Crusoe, and so it was called novel, meaning, a NEW THING.

So, to come now to Mistress Moll, it was no meer *nothing that an entertainment should* be found in the detailed moral conundrums that this woman was got into at so many times, and what she herself made of them, and how she justified them, and so forth. Each twist of FATE is to be chewed over mightily for page upon page until Mistress Moll's jaws may shurely have begun twingeing. Ponder ponder ponder, so goes she. And then : *ponder ponder ponder*. But on occasion Moll will come forth with such a line as this

It is but here and there that a Man is to be Found who is fit for a Woman to Venture upon.

In regards to the NOVEL may we say this, I wonder. That by the time the 4th or 5th child has begun walking and talking it is not such a Phenomenon – indeed, may you look back and shake your Head at the great wonder you did make of the first that did so.

Frederick says

This, of course, was called an actual memoir when it was published. Today's novelists should take note: The first novels definitely were meant to deceive the public into thinking they were true stories.

The Norton Critical Edition I read in college was one soild paragraph. This means Defoe didn't get an effect out of the LOOK of his prose, unless an effect of incredible suffocation was intentional. The fact that it was one paragraph drove me insane, as it did my elder brother, who, upon hearing I had read it, said, "Oh, my God. It was one paragraph!"

It is a great story about a woman who uses her body to free herself. It's frightening, funny and tragic. The character of Moll Flanders clearly influenced James Joyce in his characterization of Molly Bloom. (No need to ignore the fact that both characters share the first four letters of their names.) MOLL FLANDERS is told in the first person, as is Molly Bloom's soliloquy in ULYSSES.

Defoe gave us ROBINSON CRUSOE (which was marketed as an actual account) and A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR, which, although it was a work of fiction, is still used by historians.

Moll Flanders is not a very likeable woman, but she is a survivor and her escapades are well worth taking in. Take her home.

karen says

the person who was reading this used, 49 cent, copy of *moll flanders* before me stopped reading at page 26, judging by the abrupt cessation of circled words like "prattle", "would you were, sir", "brother fell", and "he would" i like to think about this person, and their busy pen. it's so arbitrary - they are not even words that might be unfamiliar to a moderately-literate reader. i tried to find a code in it: "help, i am being held hostage by a mad librarian", but to no avail. almost every page has at least six circles or underlines and then suddenly - nothing. did the pen run out of ink? did they abandon *moll flanders*? did they fall out of a tree? it's mysterious. another thing that is mysterious is moll flanders. she swans through this book, dripping babies from her body like a tree sheds leaves, stealing and whoring and manipulating men to keep her head above water and yet i'm not in love with her. how can this be? i mean, it's a fine book, but i can't see falling in love with it or with her character. and honestly, i don't know what to make of the realization that if she had just

stayed married to her brother in the first place, she would have avoided a whole lot of trouble and had a lovely son and a fruitful plantation. let this be a lesson to you: choose wisely; incest or a life of crime. there is no in-between.

come to my blog!

Ahmad Sharabiani says

Moll Flanders, Daniel Defoe
The Fortunes and Misfortunes of the Famous Moll Flanders. Who was Born in Newgate Prison, and during a Life of continued Variety for Threescore Years, besides her Childhood, was Twelve Year a Whore, five times a Wife, Twelve Year a Thief, Eight Year a Transported Felon in Virginia, at last grew rich, lived Honest, and died a Penitent. Written from her own Memorandums.
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