

# Consuming Pleasures: Active Audiences and Serial Fictions from Dickens to Soap Opera



To be continued... Whether these words fall at a season-ending episode of Star Trek or a TV commercial flirtation between coffee-loving neighbors, true fans find them impossible to resist. Ever since the 1830s, when Charles Dickens's *Pickwick Papers* enticed a mass market for fiction, the serial has been a popular means of snaring avid audiences. Jennifer Hayward establishes serial fiction as a distinct genre -- one defined by the activities of its audience rather than by the formal qualities of the text. Ranging from installment novels, mysteries, and detective fiction of the 1800s to the television and movie series, comics, and advertisements of the twentieth century, serials are loosely linked by what may be called family resemblances. These traits include intertwined subplots, diverse casts of characters, dramatic plot reversals, suspense, and such narrative devices as long-lost family members and evil twins. Hayward chooses four texts to represent the evolution of serial fiction as a genre and to analyze the peculiar draw that serials have upon their audiences: Dickens's novel *Our Mutual Friend*, Milton Caniff's comic strip *Terry and the Pirates*, and the soap operas *All My Children* and *One Life to Live*. Hayward argues that serial audiences have developed active strategies of consumption, such as collaborative reading and attempts to shape the production process. In this way fans have forced serial producers to acknowledge the power of the audience.

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