We believe that the most prudish critic who ever wrote never attached any moral crime to the fiction of the novel writer, or regarded his tissue of imaginary events as a deliberate violation of truth. The author who portraists characters which never existed, or describes scenes which never took place, save in his own imagination, misrepresents no real transaction, and deludes no one, but for an instant, into a belief of his own veracity. Though his personages are creatures of shade, and their lives as unreal and unsubstantial, as the visions of a phantasmagoria, yet, if they never did exist, they easily might have done so; and, being the absolute creatures of their inventor, are guided, without trouble, into such a course of action, as to afford excellent examples to the more obstinate subjects of real life, who are formed of materials too stubborn to be always bent to the purposes of the moralist. The fiction of the historical novelist cannot, however, be considered so entirely innocent, for he confounds real persons and real events with imaginary ones, and produces in the end an erroneous impression on the minds of his readers, inconsistent with the immaculate purity of truth. The genuine novelist invents worlds of his own, and has a right to people them as he thinks proper; but the historical writer of fiction is like the geographer, who, in default of information, fills the parts of his map, which would be otherwise blank, with rivers, and towns, and mountains, which, though they may please the eye, will bewilder the traveller and deceive the student. He is still more culpable, who not only involves real persons in imaginary events, but who chooses a real time, a real event, assumes an historical style, utters repeated asseverations of veracity, mixes up true incidents and false, and when his composition is complete, conceals every trace of falsehood, and does his best to delude posterity. If there be any blame attached to such a procedure, the amount of it must, in a great measure, depend on the nature of the transactions thus imposed on the world as real, whether they are likely or not to be appealed to as evidence, and thus to produce evil consequences. He would, indeed, be a very harsh censor who should object to Robinson Crusoe; but we cannot help wishing that Defoe had chosen some other mode of recording the dreadful effects of the great plague than the work before us. Defoe, however, was never so happy as when he identified himself with his history, and made himself the hero of the incidents which his imagination poured forth in such abundance. His own life was of so troublous a nature, that it seems as if he delighted to lose his own identity in that of his creature, and live over his ideal adventures with nearly the intense consciousness of reality. We can easily conceive how charming the retreat from duns, pursuit, and political broils, to the peaceful island of the shipwrecked mariner, the wild and gainful adventures of Colonel Jack, or Captain Singleton, or even the awful scene which presented itself in the deserted streets of London, when that great city bowed its head beneath the rage of the pestilence. However this may be, such is the verisimilitude of all the writings of Defoe, that unless we had some other means of refuting their authenticity than internal evidence, it would be a very difficult task to dispute their claims to credit. Such is the minuteness of detail; such a dwelling is there upon particular circumstances, which one is inclined to think would have struck no one but an actual spectator; such, too, is the plainness and simplicity of style; such the ordinary and probable nature of his materials, as well as the air of conscientiousness thrown over the whole, that it is a much easier thing to say the narrative is tedious, prolix, or dull, than to entertain a doubt of its veracity. All these marks of genuineness distinguish the work before us.
perhaps more than any other compositions of the same author; and are said to have so completely deceived Dr Mead, that that able and experienced physician quoted the work as one of the grounds, or as a conformation, of his opinions on the subject of the plague. No one, indeed, can, from an examination of the history of that dreadful visitation, discover the slightest variation from the truth in the narrative of our author, but, on the contrary, every document remaining to us confirms his account, coinciding with it in most instances, and supporting it in almost every other; a fact, however, which does not diminish the blame we consider attached to the author, for pretending to be an original evidence and eyewitness to all the scenes he describes. As in most of the other works of Defoe, no author’s name appears to the work; but no one who knows the mannerism of Defoe as collected from a view of all of his writings, can, for a moment, hesitate to agree with the voice of common fame, which assigns it to him.

As the title imports, this book contains a register of the observations and reflections of a citizen, who lived in the city from the rise to the expiration of the disorder. The writer is a respectable tradesman, residing in Whitechapel, of a religious turn of mind, inquisitive of disposition, well-informed for his rank, and anxious to transmit to posterity an account of a calamity which few appeared likely to survive, and fewer still, who, in the midst of misery and disease, would have the heart to turn their attention to recording the triumphs of the conqueror, Death. The character of this man is of that plain, downright, homely, pious description, in personating which, Defoe always appears much at home; and from the circumstance of himself residing on the spot on which he has placed the journalist, exercising the same trade as this fictitious person, and himself being born a year previous to the plague, it is not improbable, that Defoe’s father may be the supposed writer, from whose mouth it is not unlikely that he received many particulars which he has interwoven in his narrative. For it will be observed, that nearly all the particulars, which are of a private nature, have their locality in the immediate neighbourhood of Aldgate, the imaginary habitation of the historian of the ravages of the plague.

After all, however, Defoe may not have been solely led to this subject by being in possession of peculiar information respecting it; for it has in itself those sombre charms which alone were sufficiently likely to attract him. There is no scene in the whole history of mankind which possesses a greater power of harrowing up the feelings, which affords more subjects for affecting or striking description, or gives greater scope for deep reflections on the nature of man, that a city under the visitation of the Plague. The incredulity which marks its rise; then, the panic which instantaneously follows certainty; then, the fluctuating state of hope or fear; the agitation of departure and separation; the struggling resolution to stay; and, when the bustle and hurry of those who flee have left the city still behind them, then the cold and fixed determination to abide and face the approaching enemy; then, the sweeping away of thousands before the giant strokes of the distemper, succeeded by the paroxysm of despair and the wailings of anguish, which, in a short time, sink into sullen indifference; then, the death of affection and love, and the dead calm which spreads over the whole population, undisturbed, except by the reckless revelry of crime and dissipation making the most of the short interval which is to elapse before their own doom; then, the gradual return of hope, followed by a premature rejoicing at delivery; then, a recurrence of alarm; and, at length, a well-grounded security in the flight of the pestilence, and a universal congratulation of the survivors upon each other’s preservation, checked only by the recollection, that they are but a few,
haunting the grave of a great city, and that too much joy would be but a mockery over the tens of thousands beneath their feet: these and numberless topics of a similar nature, would occur to the mind of one who undertook to describe a city under this awful infliction of Providence. Defoe’s genius, however, was of a description rather to produce an effect upon his reader by a careful enumeration of particulars than by general views, spirited sketches, or even by pathetic touches - and, in the present work, there is nothing which might not have been written by a respectable tradesman of some observation, common feeling, little taste or imagination, and ordinary talents, had he really witnessed the scenes he describes. Thus the reader is left with the materials of reflection, rather than a complete history.