Ever since 1720, when Western Europe’s last plague epidemic died out, plague’s place has been in fiction, with authors reworking and reimagining its outbreaks in their narratives and novels. Two of the most well known and, therefore, influential plague texts are Daniel Defoe’s *A Journal of the Plague Year*, published just two years after the 1720 outbreak in France, and Albert Camus’s novel *The Plague*, which appeared two years after the end of the Second World War. Clearly, both authors were responding to the calamity: Defoe and his contemporary readers, alarmed by the French epidemic, had no way of knowing that the disease would not shortly – or ever – repeat its devastating English outbreak of 1665; Camus, a member of the French resistance, was reacting to the horror of Nazi occupation and the staggering events and loss of lives Europe had suffered. Camus’s twentieth-century plague aligns, too, with other thinkers and writers of the 1930s and 1940s who used plague to criticise fascism and dictatorships. Camus admired Defoe: similarities between their texts go far beyond the fact that both feature plague. What plague pushes Camus and Defoe towards, the exigencies it creates for its writers, the surprising creativity it enables and the uniqueness of some of its textual effects are the focus here. It becomes evident that plague’s symptoms are not just written *about* in these narratives but are written *into* them. *A Journal of the Plague Year* and *The Plague* are preoccupied by their respective recent histories: they are concerned with loss and
what this demands in terms of memory and memorialisation; they are forms of narrative witnessing which play upon and blur the usually strict boundaries that divide history from fiction. The position and significance of the plague witness in Defoe and Camus open possibilities for thinking about how fiction might contribute towards our understanding of history and also what delimitations structure such a relation. These plague texts provocatively suggest that fiction may be in a privileged position to address the trauma of enormous death counts, of fear of infection resulting from epidemic outbreaks and possibly even – hence rendering them still contemporarily relevant – other analogous historical events of mass destruction and imperilment of human life.

There are congruities between The Plague and its predecessor, as well as between the personal responses of the authors to their pestilential material, which indicate the creative potential plague carries for the narratives it engenders. These plague texts demonstrate how the symptoms of the disease can show themselves in the actual writing itself, in the stylistic and structural corpus of the texts. Famously, Boccaccio used plague as the reason and stimulus behind the Brigata’s multiplication of narratives in the Decameron (1349–52), prompting David Steel to comment that ‘the age of modern fiction was ushered in by a virus’.3 Plague, as Defoe and Camus further demonstrate, does not terminate narrative possibilities but instead, seemingly paradoxically, produces plenitude: multiple deaths and the disease’s inexplicability generate increasing numbers of individual stories to participate in and augment the overall plague account.

Defoe’s A Journal of the Plague Year is a fictional account of a historical occurrence, claiming, as it does, to be an eyewitness report of the happenings in London during 1665, the year of England’s last epidemic plague outbreak. The narrator – identifying himself only as H. F. – describes his employment as a ‘saddler’ and, while his brother flees the infested capital, for a mixture of personal, business and religious reasons, he decides to stay.4 The account is purportedly the result of his ‘Memorandums’, observations and opinions recorded throughout the plague (76). At the beginning of A Journal of the Plague Year, veracity is lent by the inclusion of Bills of Mortality and the Lord Mayor’s Orders. In his first-person testimony, H. F. describes and criticises the authorities’ measures to contain the disease through quarantine; he details the disposal of the dead; lists the palliatives invested in; and he notes the attitudes, religious or otherwise, which people have towards the outbreak and towards each other. Endearing these stricken Londoners to his readers, Defoe includes many tales of individual fates, escapes and tragedies,