picaresque, adj. and n.

Brit. /pɪˈkærsk/, U.S. /pɪˈkærsk/  [< PICARO n. + -ESQUE suffix, after Spanish picaresco of or relating to a picaro, in the style of a picaro (1569), (of narrative fiction) in the picaresque style (1836 in anécdotas picarescas, although cf. quot. 1827 at sense A. 1). Cf. Portuguese picaresco (1619), Italian picaresco (1635), French picaresque (1836). With use as noun cf. Spanish picaresca (1605 in sense ‘vagrant lifestyle’, prob. short for vida picaresca picaresque life; 1989 or earlier denoting the literary genre, prob. short for novela picaresca, historia picaresca, or literatura picaresca), French picaresque (1910, denoting the literary genre).]

A. adj.

1. Originally: relating to or characteristic of a rogue or knave. Now chiefly: designating a genre of narrative fiction which deals episodically with the adventures of an individual, usually a roguish and dishonest but attractive hero (cf. PICARO n., PICAROON n.¹ 1). Also: having the attributes associated with this genre of narrative.

The picaresque novel originated in Spain in the 16th cent., La Vida de Lazarillo de Tormes (c1554) usually being cited as the earliest example. In English, the genre is associated particularly with 18th-cent. writers such as Daniel Defoe, Henry Fielding, and Tobias Smollett. The picaresque style is characterized by social satire and realistic descriptions of scenes from low life.

[1827 SCOTT Misc. Prose Wks. IV. 284 Works of fiction in the style termed by the Spaniards Gusto Picaresco.] 1827 SCOTT Misc. Prose Wks. IV. 285 We could select from these picaresque romances a good deal that is not a little amusing. 1829 SCOTT Jnl. 28 Feb. (1946) 27 Memoirs of Vidocque..a picaresque tale..a romance of roguery. 1837 H. HALLAM Introd. Lit. Europe I. viii. 614 This [sc. the Lazarillo de Tormes] is the first known specimen in Spain of the picaresque, or rogue style. 1879 Times 26 Dec. 9/2 There was a recent case..of which I venture to condense the particulars, as they seem to me to..illustrate the windings and turnings of picaresque ingenuity. 1918 A. G. GARDINER Leaves in Wind 245 Near by lives a distinguished lady of romantic picaresque tastes, who dotes on street pianos. 1955 Times 9 Aug. 9/7 The Russians are paying a price for the energetic imposing of rigid form..on a nation which is in character essentially picaresque. 1974 Times Lit. Suppl. 11 Oct. 1112/3 The eternal resilience of the picaresque hero. 1994 H. BLOOM Western Canon II. v. 130 Cervantes’ remarkable experiment is credited by many as
having invented the novel, as opposed to the picaresque narrative. **2004 New Yorker** 9 Feb. 81/2 A picaresque series of exploits that illustrate her ability to live by her wits as an *ashawo*—a ‘semi-professional’ prostitute.

2. Of a lifestyle, etc.: wandering, drifting; transitory, impermanent.

**1959 Manch. Guardian** 28 July 6/5 The boys are attracted by the picaresque nature of working with a private building or decorating firm. **1963 Times** 30 May 17/5 They are not the kind of books to be held in a child’s hand or slipped in the teenage pocket. Weight and size deny the volumes a picaresque existence. **1992 B. E. Rollin Animal Rights & Human Morality** (rev. ed.) 227 The ideal life envisioned for the dog has never been part of its nature. No wild canids live this picaresque existence. **2004 Sunday Independent** (Ireland) (Nexis) 20 June, It was a picaresque life, lived in hotels on the fringes of ‘normal’ society.

**B. n.** Usu. with *the*: that which is picaresque; the genre or style of picaresque literature. As a count noun: an example of this; a picaresque narrative, experience, etc.

**1895 H. B. M. Watson** in *Bookman* Oct. 19/2 He exalts Disraeli... He loves a trickster; the picaresque amuses him. **1911 C. E. Morgan Rise Novel of Manners** i. 46 The form, but not the matter of the picaresque is utilized in a curious little work, *The Compleat Mendicant* (1699). **1928 C. Morley Essays** 533 Those authors’ delicious mysteries and picaresques I took for granted, not troubling over their method. **1965 Times Lit. Suppl.** 25 Nov. 1035/4 There is a strong school of black picaresque. **1976 Times Lit. Suppl.** 23 Apr. 481/5 The central character of this contemporary picaresque of the mind [sc. a novel]. **2002 A. N. Wilson Victorians** (2003) i. 19 The story, published between 1836 and 1837 in serial parts, was a rambling picaresque.