

Introduction: The Novel Today and Yesterday

An article in *The Observer* newspaper by the BBC's political editor Andrew Marr on 27 May 2001 claimed that the novel no longer provided a way of understanding the world freshly. In the article, Marr wonders if the novel has a life cycle of invention, full expression, and formal decay. His conclusion is that the 'truths' the novel is best equipped to convey have already been accepted.

The occasion of this doom-mongering, harping on the death of the novel, helps to place it in context. Chair of a panel of judges awarding a prize for the best non-fiction book of the year, Marr was so impressed by what he read that he thought it must be better than contemporary fiction. Such a belief reinforces a distinction between fiction and non-fiction that some novelists themselves now question, but it is worth recalling that the novel's obituaries had already been written on several occasions before 2001 – most prominently over 30 years earlier in the 1960s – only for them to be found premature when fiction showed itself to be full of life in the 1980s.

Pronouncements on the death of the novel in the 1960s and 1970s were followed by a wave of new writers in the ensuing decade. These were largely the figures identified in 1983 by the Book Marketing Council's list of the 'Best Twenty Young British Novelists', which included Pat Barker, Salman Rushdie, Graham Swift, Ian McEwan, Martin Amis, Julian Barnes, and Kazuo Ishiguro. Sample work by the writers on this '20 Under 40' list, which was unashamedly a promotional exercise for contemporary literature, was showcased in an issue of the literary periodical *Granta*, whose editor Bill Buford took it upon himself to produce a new list in 1993, with the help of A. S. Byatt, Salman Rushdie, and John Mitchinson of Waterstone's booksellers.

The 1983 list has since served to mark a watershed in the post-war British novel, flagging up the time at which an old guard gave way to a new generation, a large number of who have since

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become the celebrated stalwarts of contemporary fiction. Compared to the first, the second list in 1993 contained only a handful of figures who have gone on to become major figures, but it still featured many impressive novelists, including Jeanette Winterson, Will Self, Ben Okri, and Hanif Kureishi. These writers, along with others such as Iain Banks, Louis de Bernières, A. L. Kennedy, and Caryl Phillips, have become established and celebrated authors if less well known internationally than the likes of Rushdie and Amis.

Written in 2001, 18 years after the turning-point signalled by the first *Granta* list, Andrew Marr's polemic capitalized on the fact that it came at a time which can be described as both the beginning of a new century (implicitly provoking comparisons with the upheaval of fiction wrought, at least in retrospect, by Conrad, James, and others around the beginning of the twentieth century) and a moment in literary history when few young, new voices had recently broken through into the public consciousness. Instead, from Marr's perspective, it might be said that the complexion of literature from 1993 to 2001 had been marked by three things: the emergence of post-Amis 'lad lit.', from Irvine Welsh and John King to Nick Hornby and Tony Parsons; the appearance of even more media-friendly writers of 'chick lit.', including Helen Fielding and Allison Pearson; and the remarkable success in children's literature of J. K. Rowling. In other words, the 'literary' novel (which can only be loosely recognized in its broad distinction from 'genre fiction') appeared overshadowed by emerging competition from more 'popular' fiction, and Marr took the opportunity to declare the novel also eclipsed by publications in history, science, and autobiography.

The latest discussion of fiction's decline certainly coincided with a promotion of the past, especially via the television programmes of 'media dons' such as Simon Schama, David Starkey, and Niall Ferguson, as though literature and history were not only disconnected but also opposed: a curious impression after the call 'to historicise' became the rallying-cry of University literature departments in the 1990s. Yet, for many critics, science, and to lesser extent history, has appropriated a significant proportion of the narrative power traditionally associated with fiction; and not even Shakespeare, let alone any novelist, could be considered a serious rival for the title of the 'Greatest Briton' in the BBC's 2002-poll, when in competition with Brunel and Churchill.

Since which time, a new *Granta* selection has appeared. The 20 'best young novelists' list of 2003 prominently featured a handful of authors who have appeared on shortlists for prizes, such as Zadie Smith, David Mitchell, and Sarah Waters, but, with a certain degree of inevitability, has generally been considered inferior to the two previous ones. It remains to be seen how the list will appear with hindsight, but it takes a place alongside the numerous other 'best ofs' that are perhaps now the primary means of marketing literary fiction, with 2003 also seeing the BBC's compilation of Britain's 100 best loved novels, accompanied by similar rival lists from literary pundits such as Robert McCrum (see Further Reading below; see also Table 0.1 below).

Certainly the novel is not in decline in publishing terms; indeed it is in a boom period. The number of works of fiction published each year doubled between 1950 and 1990; currently, about 100 new British novels are released each week. Approximately 130 works of fiction are submitted for the Booker Prize, while around 7000 novels eligible for the prize are published in Britain and the Commonwealth annually. While quantity is not the same

Table 0.1. Young British novelists

1983	1993	2003
Martin Amis	Iain Banks	Monica Ali
Pat Barker	Louis de Bernières	Nicola Barker
Julian Barnes	Anne Billson	Rachel Cusk
Ursula Bentley	Tibor Fischer	Susan Elderkin
William Boyd	Esther Freud	Peter Ho Davies
Buchi Emecheta	Alan Hollinghurst	Philip Hensher
Maggie Gee	Kazuo Ishiguro	A. L. Kennedy
Kazuo Ishiguro	A. L. Kennedy	Hari Kunzru
Alan Judd	Philip Kerr	Toby Litt
Adam Mars-Jones	Hanif Kureishi	David Mitchell
Ian McEwan	Adam Lively	Andrew O'Hagan
Shiva Naipaul	Adam Mars-Jones	David Peace
Philip Norman	Candia McWilliam	Dan Rhodes
Christopher Priest	Lawrence Norfolk	Ben Rice
Salman Rushdie	Ben Okri	Rachel Seiffert
Lisa de Teraan	Caryl Phillips	Zadie Smith
Clive Sinclair	Will Self	Adam Thirlwell
Graham Swift	Nicholas Shakespeare	Alan Warner
Rose Tremain	Helen Simpson	Sarah Waters
A. N. Wilson	Jeanette Winterson	Robert McLiam Wilson

as quality, there is evidence here of a healthy literary scene, albeit one that is changing.

To open wider the critical discussion of the health of the novel, it is necessary to begin to historicize it, and so I'd like shortly to turn to concerns over the novel's mortality in the 1960s and 1970s; but first I want to sketch the decades since 1970 from two different perspectives: trends in politics and in fiction.

0.1. Politics

From the early 1950s, the Conservative Party broadly accepted policies, such as nationalization and the development of the Welfare State, more readily associated with the Labour Party. This led many commentators to speak of post-war Britain up to the mid-1970s as having a 'consensus politics' in which there was not a great difference between the programmes of the governments formed by the two major parties. However, after the repeated clashes between government and unions in the early 1970s, the Tory party under Margaret Thatcher moved away from 'One Nation' Conservatism towards a set of policies aimed at promoting business, consumerism, and the interests of those who aspired to be 'upwardly mobile'. Thus, the values of the Conservatives, once the party of the Establishment (the civil service, the armed forces, and the Church), shifted from general agreement with those of the upper middle classes and the professions to align with those of the new entrepreneurs and self-employed traders. In simplest terms, the Party was seen as becoming associated with the commercial sections of society under the leadership of a greengrocer's daughter. The different world this ushered in can be sensed at the end of Hanif Kureishi's first novel *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), which registers the mood of the country on election night in 1979, at the moment of the rise of the 'new right' after two decades of the so-called 'permissive society'. Early life under Thatcherism is more fully explored in texts such as Pat Barker's novel *Union Street* (1982) and Ian McEwan's film-script *The Ploughman's Lunch* (1983).

Thatcher was the longest serving Prime Minister of the twentieth century, from 1979 to 1990. Her years in power saw radical reforms that sought forcefully to express Britain's transition from a prevailing atmosphere of consensus to the radically new mood

in which there was a clear division between political left and right. After the economic and social crises of previous Labour and Conservative governments, Thatcherism aimed towards objectives that centred on a drive to change working practices: privatization of nationalized industries, regulation of professions such as medicine and teaching, an end to strike-bargaining, and a curtailment of union power. Accordingly, many political commentators have suggested that the 'Thatcher Revolution' shifted power through government reforms away from bureaucrats, the trade unions, and the Establishment to individual consumers and the free market. This could be seen in almost every economic and social sphere: parents were encouraged to take control of their schools by becoming governors; the Community Charge, or Poll Tax, was designed to recoup money more evenly for local amenities; privatization initiatives were concentrated on key public utilities like gas, electricity, telecommunications, and water, turning many of them into private monopolies. Amongst this, the influence of class supposedly diminished as the marketplace took over and the power of collective action was replaced with that of consumerism – the target of much of Irvine Welsh's fiction from *Trainspotting* (1993) to *Porno* (2002).

Many of Thatcher's reforms in the 1980s, including sharp reductions in the highest rates of personal and company tax, the removal of exchange controls, City de-regulation, the expansion of the private sector, and the weakening of trade unions, clearly benefited business, but the financial bedrock of British society arguably changed little. The modern socio-economic elite was still based on individuals with a common class background and close social contacts. This fact is biting satirized in Jonathan Coe's novel *What a Carve Up!* (1994), just as the preceding state of the pre-Thatcher nation is comically presented in his later book *The Rotters' Club* (2001), which opens with two teenagers trying to imagine 'a country that neither of us would recognize, probably Britain, 1973'.

The privileged sections of 1980s society in economic and cultural terms were the self-employed, who had long been the staunchest supporters of the Conservative Party. During the decade, advertising focussed a great deal of its energies on popularizing the self-made businessperson. This climate in which 'greed was good', in the words of Michael Douglas's character Gordon Gekko in the Hollywood film *Wall Street* (1987), made the

entrepreneur the individual most valorized by government and the media, such that in Britain the Department of Trade and Industry actively promoted an 'enterprise culture' as a method of social engineering (the spirit of the times is most scathingly presented in fiction by Martin Amis in *Money* (1984)). However, the financial crash of 1987 ended most dreams of making a quick fortune; especially as the housing market temporarily collapsed.

After its 1987 election defeat, the Labour Party's powerbrokers realized that Thatcherism had changed the agenda of British politics once and for all. By the early 1990s, the party was retreating from such policies as unilateral nuclear disarmament and the re-nationalization of core industries. The political ascendancy of the modernizing tendency was confirmed in 1994 when, following the death of John Smith, Tony Blair assumed leadership. Under Blair, Labour sought to provide greater powers to individual members, curtailing the former dominance of the trade unions over the party. In 1995, the party revised Clause Four of its constitution and thus ended Labour's historic commitment to state ownership. Blair promoted a centrist social democratic programme under the slogan 'New Labour' and led the Party to its largest-ever parliamentary majority at the General Election in May 1997, while the Conservative Party was foundering on a reputation for scandals and sleaze (cf. Ian McEwan's novel *Amsterdam* (1998)). The most significant achievements of the early New Labour government, which consciously set out to rebrand Britain, were in constitutional reform. Referendums in September 1997 established the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly, and significant progress was made in Northern Ireland with the signing of the multiparty peace declaration in April 1998.

But the changes enacted at a macro-political level can best be seen in the ways that they affected people's lives at work and in the home. So, while in 1979 white male manual workers formed an overwhelming majority of the workforce and most of these men belonged to trade unions, by 2000, nearly 50% of the workforce was female or a member of an ethnic minority while the membership of trade unions had fallen from 13 million to below 7 million. Also, while unemployment never rose above 1.5 million from 1951 to 1979, since 1979, as governments focussed on keeping inflation at a minimum, it has been as high as 3.5 million and rarely below 2 million. In the 1980s and 1990s these changes led to talk of the development of an 'underclass' in Britain: individuals

cut off from the consumer society, poor and sceptical of the authorities. This was the most striking feature of a new 'two nations' society under the Conservatives, such that the percentage of the population living at the lowest rate of social security benefit rose from 6% in 1979 to 19% by the mid-1990s. Alongside the growth of poverty and homelessness in the 1980s came riots in poor urban areas such as Toxteth (Liverpool), Moss Side (Manchester), Handsworth (Birmingham), and Brixton (London). This picture of a divided Britain was reflected across literature: in Tony Harrison's poem *V* (1985), in David Hare and Howard Brenton's play *Pravda* (1985), and in Pat Barker's early novels, such as *Blow Your House Down* (1984).

As a response to perceptions of Britain as a country of 'haves' and 'have nots' under the Conservatives, Tony Blair promoted the notion of a 'classless society' through his rhetoric of a meritocracy of 'stakeholders'. Yet many people perceived Labour to have done little to help the less well-off and to be chiefly characterized by 'spin'. So, after coming to power on an agenda of 'education, education, education', New Labour proceeded to set its targets high (e.g. 50% participation in Higher Education) while simultaneously offering little new state funding and maintaining that individuals should pay for their own education.

Again, with regard to the effects on people's lives, the difference between pre- and post-Thatcher Britain can be seen in terms of legislation relating to women's rights, childbirth, marriage, and sexuality. In the dozen years before the Thatcher government came to power, there were key reforms, such as: the Abortion Act of 1967, legalizing termination of pregnancy; the Sexual Offences Act in the same year, decriminalizing homosexuality; the Divorce Reform Act in 1969, making divorce available through mutual consent; and the Sex Discrimination Act in 1975, banning employment and education discrimination against women. However, with campaigns centred on 'family values', the Conservative rule from 1979 to 1997 saw several comparatively regressive steps, such as Clause 28 in 1987, outlawing positive gay and lesbian images in schools, and the Child Support Agency in 1993, a Government authorized body pursuing child maintenance. When Thatcher took office, she promised to end the enlarged role of the state. But, as suggested by bodies such as the Child Support Agency, this did not in fact happen – there had merely been a change in emphasis. In 1979 the state was responsible for 43% of

the economy and in 1990 the state was still responsible for 43%. Indeed, Britain remains the most centralized state among all the major western industrial democracies. Power has increasingly been concentrated in the hands of the Prime Minister and the Cabinet: in the 1994 Police Act, the police, previously organized on a local basis were brought under the control of the Home Secretary; while schools now operate a National Curriculum, in 1988 British universities came under central research and teaching regulation for the first time; regional health authorities have been abolished and the National Health Service is now under the control of the Health Secretary; the power of local government has been dramatically weakened from 1979 to the present and local authorities no longer have the right to build homes.

Lastly, one of the most significant changes in the years since 1970 has been the apparent alteration in people's attitudes to national politics. In the General Elections since 1970 the share of the votes of the two major parties has fallen from 92% to below 75%, while the number of floating voters who switch their votes to different parties at each election has grown. People are now less attached to a specific political party than ever before. In 1964, 48% of voters said they identified strongly with one party, but in 1992 this figure had fallen to 21%, while the number of non-voters has steadily increased up to the 2001 election. This is especially true of the 18–24 age group (less than half of whom vote) and indicates a shift from the widespread belief in party politics in the 1970s to the greater concern with consumer power since the 1980s.

0.2. Fiction

Since the early 1970s, both literature and popular culture have witnessed a number of trends in response to changes in perceptions of identity in relation to sexuality, ethnicity, and gender. Against these currents has been a counterforce led by the Conservative government and dubbed 'Victorian values' in the 1980s, 'family values' in the early 1990s. In the 1980s, the backlash was confidently spearheaded by Thatcher, who once said, 'We are reaping what was sown in the 1960s ... The fashionable theories and permissive claptrap set the scene for a society in which the old virtues of discipline and self-restraint were denigrated.'

It is a striking phenomenon that the most politically repressive decade in post-war British history should also be one in which fiction was believed to have undergone a renaissance. The 1980s saw the best early work of a new group of novelists that had begun to emerge in the previous decade – many of whom are discussed in this book and now constitute the established names of British fiction. These were novelists who had known little at first-hand of the Second World War or the British Empire, but had grown up instead with a decreasing division between 'high' and popular culture, with an awareness of the literary tradition alongside the new experiences that ranged from television and rock music to the Welfare State and the Cold War. Martin Amis's early novels, such as *Dead Babies* (1974), expressed a new ethos for a younger generation, centred on drugs, sex, money, hedonism, consumer culture, and a sometimes-morbid treatment of sexuality which was also apparent in the first short fictions of Ian McEwan. No less a product of the times, an alternative fantastic, ornate, and erotic prose style became recognizable in the works of Angela Carter, such as *The Passion of New Eve* (1977), an allegory of the rebirth and self-fashioning of the women's movement in the 1970s, and *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (1979), a series of macabre, lush, sexualized versions of traditional fairy tales.

Carter combined writing fiction with university teaching and critical writing. This is also the case with David Lodge and Malcolm Bradbury, who produced different strains of the 'campus novel' in the 1970s. Bradbury's *The History Man* (1975) satirized the sexual politics of redbrick universities, while Lodge's *Changing Places* (1975) and *Small World* (1984) poked fun at literary theory, the international conference scene, and transatlantic differences between the glamorous academic world of Euphoria State, California, and the low-budget drabness of Rummidge, England (modelled on Birmingham University).

Politically, these novels sprang out of the growing failure of the liberal consensus in the 1970s. Also from this perspective, Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* (1962) and *Children of Violence* (1952–69) quintet combined an intense interest in socialist politics with an unprecedented investigation into the forces that shaped women's emotional and social lives since the war, while others of her novels appraised her own and southern Africa's post-colonial predicament. Also trying to assess the failure of liberalism, Paul Scott dissected the end of Empire in *The Raj Quartet* (*The Jewel in*

the *Crown* (1966) to *A Division of the Spoils* (1974)), a sustained attempt to deal with the imperial legacy that most writers, with the exception of Lessing, J. G. Farrell, and Anthony Burgess seemed to want to ignore, despite the growing stature of 'Commonwealth novelists' like V. S. Naipaul and Sam Selvon. Lessing also published allegorical fantasy and science fiction in the 1970s, from *Briefing on a Descent into Hell* (1971) to her *Canopus in Argus: Archives* series. Since then, other more popular science fiction novelists (such as Brian Aldiss, Michael Moorcock, and J. G. Ballard) and fantasy writers (such as Iain Banks, Douglas Adams, Clive Barker, and Terry Pratchett) have pushed their genres into different realms of philosophical and psychological extremity, while retaining undercurrents of social comment, and gained cult status alongside horror movies and SF television series – products of the mainstream mass-consumer culture which was widely and wrongly anticipated to bring about the commercial failure of the novel.

The dominant themes of 1970s writing reflected in myriad ways the maturation of the post-war shift in social attitudes, sexual mores, religious consciousness, and youth movements, underpinned by a growing Americanization of British culture. By contrast in some respects, the 1980s showed novelists returning to the postmodernist styles of the 1960s. In the decade running up to 1970 there had been many self-conscious fictions which experimented with previous genres, toyed with literary theory, questioned traditional character-representations of a stable personal identity, and complicated familiar narrative organizations of space and time, expressing the liberationist impulse of the decade in prose techniques: John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), Christine Brooke-Rose's *Such* (1966), B. S. Johnson's *Alberto Angelo* (1964), Eva Figes's *Winter Journey* (1967), Andrew Sinclair's *Gog* (1967), and Muriel Spark's *The Driver's Seat* (1970). Developing from this, fiction in the 1980s, including Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983), Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* (1981), and Julian Barnes's *A History of the World in 10 ½ Chapters* (1989), showed a fresh postmodernist concern with history and its narrative construction (discussed by Linda Hutcheon as historiographic metafiction), which suggested that, while novelists sought to historicize their stories, analysts of historiography needed to pay attention to the same prose effects as literary critics: discourse, metaphor, fantasy, narration (different but related explorations in

chronology, history, and loss came in Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow* (1991), Marina Warner's *The Lost Father* (1988), and Ian McEwan's *The Child in Time* (1987)). Julian Barnes's earlier novel, *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), played similar tricks with biography, as did D. M. Thomas's *The White Hotel* (1981) and Peter Ackroyd's *The Last Will and Testament of Oscar Wilde* (1983). Ackroyd went on in the 1990s, with his studies of Charles Dickens and William Blake, to contest the boundary between biography and fiction from the other side, introducing overt rhetorical or literary techniques into his life-stories. The comic social novel, along the lines of Evelyn Waugh and Kingsley Amis, continued in the work of writers as varied as William Boyd, Beryl Bainbridge, and Tom Sharpe, while A. S. Byatt, in her tour de force *Possession* (1990), brought together satirical slants on post-structuralist theory, the academic novel, detective fiction, the late Victorian Romance, and literary biography. Most significantly, Byatt succeeded in blending the social perspective of the liberal realist novel with a dissection of history, identity, and language more typical of postmodernist writing.

Byatt has never explicitly presented herself as a feminist novelist, but Emma Tennant, Fay Weldon, and Pat Barker produced assertive yet questioning novels that confronted chauvinism, patriarchy, and male violence. More recent feminist novelists like Zoë Fairbairns and Sarah Dunant have remodelled masculinist genres such as the sci-fi novel, detective fiction, and crime thrillers. Fairbairns also founded the very productive Feminist Writers group with Sara Maitland, Michèle Wandor, and Michèle Roberts, while a number of new women's presses were founded in the 1970s and 1980s after the success of Virago. From the momentum gained by an increasingly militant movement in the 1970s, gay writing broke into the mainstream in the 1980s with Jeanette Winterson and Alan Hollinghurst, followed by such writers as Maureen Duffy and Jackie Kay. Gender criticism, body politics, queer theory, and media interest in (usually food-related) 'hysterical illnesses' all led to increased emphasis on sexuality and identity politics.

As implied at the start of this section, inasmuch as it is useful to talk of literary decades, the 1980s has generally been seen as the foremost period for British fiction since the war. There are many reasons for this but the beginning of the decade might be considered in terms of a signal transition. In 1980 the Booker Prize was won by William Golding's *Rites of Passage* (1980), the first volume in

his *To the Ends of the Earth* trilogy: a sequence of sea novels which demonstrated his continuing concern with the interlocking of the material and spiritual planes. Golding's vision of the metaphysical complexity of human existence led him in 1983 to become, until V. S. Naipaul's award in 2001, Britain's only Nobel prize-winning novelist since the war. Golding was perhaps considered Britain's most important novelist at the end of the 1970s, but the year after Golding's Booker success, the prize was won by Salman Rushdie's second novel, *Midnight's Children* (1981) – which was also named the 'Booker of Bookers' in 1993: the outstanding winner of the first 25 years. Rushdie has since become, for literary and non-literary reasons, Britain's best-known novelist; yet his preoccupations, with politics, ethnicity, and national identity, are hugely different from Golding's spiritual concerns. More generally, as can be seen from prize lists in the 1980s, many other new names started to gain prominence: an older school of writers from Golding and Angus Wilson to Iris Murdoch and Doris Lessing were gradually being eclipsed by a new generation, from Amis and McEwan to Timothy Mo, A. S. Byatt, D. M. Thomas, and William Boyd. The most controversial work of fiction in the 1980s was Rushdie's fourth novel, which brought book-burning to Britain's streets and the *fatwa* from Iran. Rushdie's earlier excoriation of Pakistan's history since independence, *Shame* (1983), had been banned in several countries and brought him many political enemies, but *The Satanic Verses* (1988), a novel of migrants and post-colonial reinscriptions, mainly set in Ellowen Deeowen (London), provoked greater controversy on religious grounds. A defining moment in itself, the Rushdie Affair became the backdrop to Hanif Kureishi's 1995-novel of racial tension and multicultural failure, *The Black Album* (1995). Kureishi also considered the meeting of East and West in *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), a critique of 1970s trends that exposed England's partial appropriation of India's 'spirituality' alongside its wider rejection of the transnationals that Britain had actively recruited from the Commonwealth since the 1950s. Kazuo Ishiguro also provided an understated but probing examination of English values in *The Remains of the Day* (1989), a novel which took the formality and the adherence to traditional hierarchies partly explored in his earlier Japanese stories and transferred them to an analysis of English class and nostalgia, where emotional repression and the restraints imposed by master-slave relationships

were shown to have infected and stultified both personal feelings and political action.

The Scottish novel has undergone a transformation since the early 1980s every bit as great as that in English fiction. Alasdair Gray, Scotland's most experimental contemporary novelist, at the very least in terms of typography and the marriage of text and image, has been followed by such writers as James Kelman, Janice Galloway, Andrew Grieg, A. L. Kennedy, and Alan Warner. The most well known recent Anglo-Welsh novelists are Alice Thomas Ellis and Bernice Rubens, though there are new writers starting to emerge, such as Russell Celyn Jones (*The Eros Hunter*, 1998), Niall Griffiths (*Sheepshagger*, 2001), and Stephen Knight (*Mr Schmitzel*, 2001). Overall, the 1990s might be most readily drawn in terms of post-colonial themes such as decolonization and diaspora. For example, Indian fiction in English, concerned with migrant identity and colonial relationships, has revealed some of the most exciting writers of the last 30 years: Vikram Seth, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Kamala Markandaya, Amit Chaudhuri, Shashi Tharoor, and Sunetra Gupta. Alongside these has developed a plethora of highly respected award-winning British writers with Caribbean or African roots, such as Caryl Phillips and Ben Okri.

Steven Connor has argued that amid these cultural currents, transnational tensions, and international writings 'it is now hard to be sure of what "the British novel" may be said to consist' (Connor 1996: 27). Yet, the place at which the modern British novel has arrived might be described in terms of a number of tendencies or cultural dominants. For example, the majority of novels published in the early twenty-first century are likely to be written in the first person. Belief in the appropriateness of the narratorial hierarchy of discourse declined over the last century and many novelists now seem to prefer to render one consciousness or narrator in the first person, rather than write in the omniscient third person, which is a way of rendering the world that they might see as antithetical to everyday experience. Alongside this trend has been an increase in 'life-writing'. The first person narrator has very commonly been an individual in many ways similar to the author. Such books use the autobiographical mode and are written in a meditative, confessional style, while their authors often seek neither to equate the narrator with themselves nor to pretend that the narrator is simply a fictional character. Books in this mode range from Naipaul's 1987 *The Enigma of*

Arrival ('fiction') and Amis's 2000 *Experience* ('autobiography') to Winterson's 1992 *Written on the Body* and Kureishi's 1998 *Intimacy* ('autobiographical fiction' or 'fictional autobiography'). In many cases, fiction over the last 35 years has also eschewed the novel's traditional attempt to render depth, preferring to tell a story, which, instead of seeking to offer truth, deep meaning, or philosophical belief, depicts particular aspects of the modern world refracted through the life experience of individuals. It is also fair to say that the most striking characteristic of the contemporary novel is variety, epitomized by the wide range of authors whose reputations are perhaps still in the ascendant, such as Iain Sinclair, Adam Thorpe, Sarah Waters, Jim Crace, Monica Ali, Hari Kunzru, Lawrence Norfolk, Rachel Cusk, David Mitchell, Andrew Miller, and Diran Adebayo. As we will see, this emphasis on plurality has been dominant for at least the last 15 years, as the novels and novelists themselves become increasingly diverse.

0.3. Criticism

In 1977, Malcolm Bradbury edited a collection entitled *The Novel Today*. The book was subtitled 'Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction' and included a range of essays from Iris Murdoch's 'Against Dryness', first published in 1961, to Gerald Graff's 'The Myth of the Postmodernist Breakthrough' from 1973. Most of the contributing writers were British, a few American, and one European: Michel Butor. The book was reissued in a new edition in 1990, presumably because either the publishers or Malcolm Bradbury felt that the first edition had been in some sense eclipsed or superseded. Yet, the essays chosen for inclusion were the same as in the first edition with two exceptions. The two new selections were not directly concerned with British, or even American writers, but reserved for the Europeans Milan Kundera and Italo Calvino. Graff's 'The Myth of the Postmodernist Breakthrough' was omitted, presumably because in the intervening years it was realized that it wasn't a 'myth', confirmed by the introduction of two heavyweight postmodernists in Calvino and Kundera. From the evidence of the negligible changes to the list of 12 essays, it seems that Bradbury in fact wanted, or at least felt able, to convey the idea that the novel 'Today' in 1990 could be represented by the novel 'Today' in 1977, or rather from 1961 to

1973. Yet, the world into which this reissue masquerading as a new edition emerged, had changed dramatically. Looking inside the pages of the two editions of *The Novel Today* provokes some noteworthy comparisons between Bradbury's two Introductions.

In the first Introduction, Bradbury is much exercised by the concerns of the 1960s: 'the Death of the novel', 'the literature of exhaustion', 'the nouveau roman', the 'anti-novel', 'metafiction', and so forth. Yet, this debate leads him to conclude that 'the novel does indeed seem to have become, in criticism, the exemplary literary object, displacing the poem, and, to a lesser extent, the play, as the type of literary experience, an ultimate example of what we do when we tell a story, report a fact, devise an order for events' (NT, 10). In this Introduction of 1977, the importance of the novel is not in question for Bradbury, and arguably its importance was signalled precisely by fiction being in some sense 'in crisis': fiction was important enough to have a crisis. The excitement surrounding the novel has often come precisely from this concern over its form and function. Bradbury says that there is an international debate in which the business of the novel is put under question, and in which certain preoccupations are evident: the fictiveness of fictions, the role of narrative, and the relationship between fictional structures and other types of prose-writing.

With respect to the British novel, while declining to cite Lessing and Golding, Bradbury considers the interrogation of realism in Angus Wilson, Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark, David Storey, John Fowles, and B. S. Johnson, novelists who questioned the associations of British fiction with sociological writing, with a persistent liberalism, and with what the critic Bernard Bergonzi labelled 'predictable pleasures'. Overall, in its interest in the future of the novel, Bradbury's 1977 Introduction is concerned with form and experiment, with the ways in which the modern novel has refracted as well as constructed contemporary reality.

After this, it perhaps comes as a surprise to read the Introduction to the 1990 edition, published subsequent to fiction's prominent resurgence in the 1980s. It is, first of all, half the length of the earlier prefatory chapter, as though there were only half as much to say. The novel, Bradbury argues, now has a 'clear character' having 'regained much of its stature and its artistic and intellectual interest' (NT2, 2). In other words, after the 1980s, the novel is no longer 'in crisis'. The reasons for this that Bradbury instances are largely extraneous to the novel: 'There has been an

increase in public discussion, major publishers have concentrated on [the novel], and even the proliferation of literary prizes for fiction has done much to draw attention to contemporary talents.' Next, this new Introduction again reviews the development of the novel in the twentieth century from Henry James to the 1960s, from modernism to postmodernism, but has little to say about 'the Novel Today'. Only on the closing page does a sense of the change emerge:

In the previous edition of this book, I made much of the emphasis on 'fictionality'. The argument seemed particularly necessary then because, in Britain at least, there did seem to be a tradition of obstinate and often provincialized realism which limited the invention of the novel [although] by that time we were already seeing the emergence of a striking new generation of writers in Britain – as various as Angela Carter, Ian McEwan, Martin Amis, Julian Barnes, Bruce Chatwin, Graham Swift and Salman Rushdie – who had broken away from the provincializing spirit of much post-war British fiction. That general widening of horizons has led to a much more expansive and interesting discussion of the novel ... (NT2, 11)

The reader expecting this discussion to then follow is disappointed because in one more paragraph Bradbury has finished the essay. He adds some remarks on Milan Kundera and concludes that there is no 'distinctive contemporary movement' in fiction so 'it is better not to seek a critical finality'. The essay finishes, forestalling discussion and signalling not the death of the novel but an end to the critic's attempt to describe it. The baton is then handed to the novelists themselves to discuss their work and its position in contemporary fiction, or rather, with the two exceptions of Kundera and Calvino, in the fiction of the 1960s and the early 1970s.

To find the discussion that Bradbury sets up but elects not to have, we might turn to an essay first given as a talk at the same time. Also speaking in 1990, one of the contributors to Bradbury's collection, David Lodge, takes up the same 'state of the novel' debate in what was later to become the preface to his own essay collection entitled *The Practice of Writing* – a title that again exhibits a concern to move away from criticism to performance. Lodge's talk also considers pluralism to be the foremost characteristic of

contemporary fiction at the end of the 1980s. He says: 'The astonishing variety of styles on offer today, as if in an aesthetic supermarket, includes traditional as well as innovative styles, minimalism as well as excess, nostalgia as well as prophecy.' (PW, 11) Without a dominant literary mode or any consensus about aesthetic value, as Lodge believes there was in the 1930s or 1950s, some other value system may take over. He argues therefore that: 'given the nature of our society it is not surprising that a somewhat materialistic notion of success, as measured by sales, advances, prizes, media celebrity etc., has filled the vacuum'. Lodge thinks that 'success' has supplanted the fashions of literary judgement.

Here then, we seem to enter the 'aesthetic supermarket', the meeting point of two ways of considering the novel, the aesthetic and the commercial. Lodge is thus viewing the novel through the political and social reformation of the Thatcher years:

It is a commonplace that the literary novel acquired a new commercial significance in the 1980s, and it is no coincidence that it was a decade dedicated to Enterprise culture and the deregulation and internationalisation of high finance. ... Prestigious literary writers became valuable assets, like brand names in the commodity market, worth far more than the income they actually generated. ... The literary bestseller was born, a concept that would have seemed a contradiction in terms to F. R. and Q. D. Leavis. (PW, 12)

In revising this talk into an essay for publication in 1996, Lodge considers the economic recession earlier in the decade. He sees publishing houses streamlining their lists as well as their staff, reviews dedicated to hyped rather than innovative fiction, and the mass marketing of competent writers alongside the downward spiral of sales of less accessible novels.

Today, novelists with a reputation do not send off a manuscript for publication but enter into negotiations between agent and publisher, with the prestigious novel itself possibly even going up for auction. Acceptance for publication is only the beginning of a campaign involving sales and marketing departments, designs teams, bookshop tours, interviews, production schedules, and an eye on the movie rights as much as the calendar of

book prizes. The Death of the author in the academy coincided with the birth of the modern literary celebrity in the media. While some writers recoil from this whole process, few manage to avoid it entirely, and the creative writer, a term which itself now smacks of institutionalisation, creative writing commonly being a course rather than a solitary activity, is encouraged to consider themselves as 'professionals in a business partnership with their publishers'. (PW, 14)

Lodge describes and decries the 'contamination of literary values by considerations of fame and money', as though literary values might exist separately from society, but his point remains that the majority of novelists today are embarking on a career as much as if not more than a vocation (while it is mooted that novels in 2004 can receive commercial payments for product placements, Fay Weldon's 2001 novel *The Bulgari Connection* was the first to be sponsored: Weldon was committed to a dozen product placements but the decision to put 'Bulgari' in the book's title was her own). In an expression which itself fixes Lodge's essay in our time, he remarks that a major repercussion of this situation is that the modern novel, even an experimental one, will be 'reader-friendly'.

Lodge hints at publishing changes in the 1990s that have had an impact on literary fiction. The first of these embraces various takeovers and mergers among publishing houses and their parent organizations that have increasingly resulted in conglomerates who perceive literature as they might any other part of their business: as a source of profit and prestige, generating cultural if not always financial capital. The other major, but now familiar, factor is the collapse of the net book agreement, which means that consumers need only pay the full price for a popular novel if they choose to – and may benefit by a 50% discount from a promotional offer, even on much literary fiction such as those works on the Booker Prize short list. This will potentially be compounded by the proposed move to remove prices from book covers altogether.

Alongside this shift, Lodge draws attention to the digital revolution in print and communications technology which has led to a proliferation of media outlets: newspapers, magazines, supplements, TV channels, and radio stations not only have an appetite for fiction but for the gossip that now surrounds it. All of which suggests that fiction at the start of the twenty-first century is very

different from how it was at the beginning or even the middle of the twentieth.

0.4. Twelve Novelists

Any selection of contemporary novelists is likely to be partial and in some ways arbitrary, but this book concentrates solely on British authors born since 1940. Indeed, with the significant exception of Zadie Smith, who alone represents authors from the 2003 *Granta* list, all the novelists considered here were born in the 40s and 50s. They have all produced their best work since 1970. Others I have not included, such as Doris Lessing, V. S. Naipaul, Alasdair Gray, and A. S. Byatt are studied alongside writers like Ishiguro and Carter on contemporary fiction courses but were born in the interwar years – and in the case of Lessing and Naipaul they produced a good proportion of their significant work before 1970. Some other important writers producing key works after 1970, such as Anthony Burgess, Iris Murdoch and William Golding, are clearly of an earlier generation: each of them published a first novel in the mid-50s, alongside *Lucky Jim*, the first novel by Kingsley Amis, Martin's father. It is perhaps a sign of this shift in culture and in reputations that Kingsley is now more often likely to be referenced this way than Martin Amis is likely to be introduced as his son.

The dozen novelists discussed here represent a cross-section of the most prominent writers born since the beginning of the Second World War. They are in a sense, for the most part, from the *Granta*-list generation, though Angela Carter was too old and Zadie Smith far too young to be included in the first list of 1983. Though others born in the period could have been chosen, from Iain Sinclair, Timothy Mo, Peter Ackroyd, Nick Hornby, and Ben Okri to Iain Banks, James Kelman, Janice Galloway, and Ben Chatwin, the novelists I have selected for inclusion are among those most often encountered on contemporary fiction courses. Also, while Zadie Smith is included because *White Teeth* has become the most likely British novel of the new millennium to be studied at University, the writers born in the 60s and 70s have generally not yet had the same impact, as a group, or appeared to critics as a generation, though certain writers have gained some prominence on syllabi: for example, John Lanchester, Will Self,

Jonathan Coe, and A. L. Kennedy. Others, such as David Mitchell and Sarah Waters, are increasingly likely to appear on courses over the next ten years. A further group appear more regularly on post-colonial literature courses for reasons that may increasingly seem anachronistic: Caryl Phillips, Joan Riley, Buchi Emecheta, and David Dabydeen.

If a question mark is more and more likely to be placed over the usefulness of the first adjective in 'black British fiction', one can also be placed over the second. On one level 'British' fiction is simply a matter of passports and residency, just as it is one of language. For example, an author such as W. G. Sebald did not write in English, was not born in Britain, but, as a long-term resident, could be claimed to be a British writer as much as Joan Brady, who was born and raised in the USA, but, now living in Devon, won the Whitbread novel award, which is open only to British writers, with a book about the USA. Another salutary example could be David Mitchell, who has to date lived most of his adult life in Japan, and has primarily written about other countries, such that he is in a sense not a British writer because he has not made his career in Britain (which was the criteria for inclusion in Merritt Moseley's book on *British Novelists Since 1960*). Irish writers, such as Brian Moore, Roddy Doyle, Patrick McCabe, John Banville, and William Trevor, have not been included as they are more than worth a separate book and the resurgence of Irish literature in recent decades has made for a distinctive literary scene with, in many cases, different if parallel concerns.

Just as Irish writing (and increasingly Scottish writing) is likely to be taught as a distinct element on courses across the British Isles, the 12 chapters here concentrate on a selection of the writers that are most often studied at University under the umbrella term 'contemporary British fiction'. There is clearly a sense therefore that they are considered to shed light on British society, culture, or literature since the 1970s. Alongside the perennial trinity of sex, love, and death, some themes recur across their work: war, apocalyptic cities, queer and gender identities, the family in crisis, serial killers, childhood, new ethnicities, and American influences. Youth subculture in its broadest sense has been a constant subject, as has the individual's relation to history and heritage. Fabulation and dirty realism have existed side-by-side, and the dominant mode has accentuated irony and first-person narrative.

The authors under consideration here are concerned with a range of subjects and they can be grouped in varying and surprising ways on topics such as national identity and post-imperial Britain (Kureishi and Smith), science (McEwan and Winterson), art and love (Barnes and Winterson), vernacular language and colonialism (Welsh and Rushdie), war and history (Barker and Swift), gender and mythology (Barker and Carter), detectives and unreliable narrators (Amis, Swift, and Ishiguro). However, if we consider what Graham Swift calls the 'here and now', then, with the notable exceptions of writers like Amis and Welsh, it does remain true that a remarkable amount of British fiction concerns the past, just as it is true that a great deal concerns other countries. A scan of the Booker and Whitbread prize winners listed below will reveal few novels about the present-day UK, which suggests that one unusual thing that can be said about the contemporary British novel is that comparatively little of it, outside of subgenres such as *ladlit* and *chicklit*, seems to be set in contemporary Britain. This is a major contrast, for example, with the American novel.

Critics have argued that British fiction has few writers with a claim to be considered alongside US novelists like Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, John Updike, or Don DeLillo. Some, like Amis for example, certainly take a large number of cues from such writers and attempt to transfer their style to a transatlantic if not always British scene. Alternatively, it could be argued that a more appropriate comparison is with European writers, and novelists like McEwan and Barnes look more often to Germany or France for the sense of a broader, international cultural position. This is arguably an acknowledgement, consciously or unconsciously, that European politics and culture provide a key context for British life and literature that can be obscured when the modern world most often 'dreams itself American', in Stuart Hall's phrase.

In much contemporary fiction, Britain's imperial past and post-colonial present provide a third geographical perspective alongside the US and Europe. Several of the writers covered in this study, notably Rushdie, Kureishi, and Smith, depict an 'inbetween' experience and viewpoint in their novels, aware of the changes needed to be wrought on traditional ideas of British identity in order to include the migrant's experience and also recognize the new British ethnic mix brought about by the post-war

diaspora. With regard to the continued importance of imperial history, it may also be worth noting that a British novelist has not won the Booker prize in the last five years – the Commonwealth has instead provided winners from South Africa, Canada, and Australia.

Kazuo Ishiguro, who has won the Booker for what is by far his most 'English' novel, is another writer who poses a question for any easy understanding of what exactly 'British' fiction is: resident and educated in England, he was born in Japan and writes about an internal world that ranges across diverse national landscapes as well as real and imagined memories. By contrast, the works of Graham Swift and Pat Barker rarely move outside the confines of England for much of their narrative (though Greece and France, for example, do feature as locations in their novels), just as Irvine Welsh mostly depicts a localized life in and around Leith, though sometimes with a European perspective and with, for example, American or Australian scenes. Different again are Carter and Winterson, who deal with myriad imaginative worlds that are likely to transport characters across borders and continents to explore ideas and emotions that are often more central than issues of geographical place.

Any conclusions about the contemporary novel have to recognize the startling diversity of subject matter and experience that characterize British fiction. Benedict Anderson has argued that print capitalism, Protestantism, and vernacular languages allowed the 'imagining' of the modern nation, and remembering that national fiction is an imagined rather than an empirical phenomenon, reinforced by capitalism and the state infrastructure, is important in trying to describe the British novel. Nation states have become more pluralistically imagined since the eighteenth century and the same has to be true for 'British' fiction, which has a number of repeated themes and concerns, including the subject of national identities, but is less amenable to definition than it ever was. Indeed the resistance to homogenizing or defining is the most important characteristic of contemporary British writing – as opposed to a 'national literature' – which bears the hallmark of diversity alongside the qualities of energy and imagination that ensure its continued importance.

Timeline