

An abstract painting featuring a central figure, likely a man's face, rendered in a distorted, expressive style. The face is composed of various colors including orange, red, and white, set against a dark background. The overall composition is dynamic, with strong contrasts and visible brushstrokes. The top portion of the image is partially obscured by a dark horizontal band containing the title text.

The **Contemporary British Novel**

Edited by James Acheson and Sarah C. E. Ross

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Introduction

An increasingly complex contemporary world has given rise to increasingly complex contemporary novels – novels that students in schools, colleges, polytechnics and universities around the world often find daunting. The novels themselves, as well as the reviewers, scholars and others who discuss them, frequently invoke views of the world, ideologies and theories that can baffle; for those who write about contemporary fiction are not always clear what they mean by key terms like ‘realism’, ‘postcolonialism’, ‘feminism’ and ‘postmodernism’. *The Contemporary British Novel* seeks to define (or identify the problems involved in defining) these terms not just for students, but for teachers and interested members of the reading public; and it reveals the extent to which the practice of twenty-two leading British novelists embodies, exemplifies, modifies or rejects the theories that these terms represent. In recognition of the fact that novels often embody combinations of realism, postcolonialism, feminism and postmodernism, and include other ‘-isms’ as well, the collection is divided into four parts, each devoted to one of the four major ‘-isms’, yet each admitting other ‘-isms’ into the discussion of the novelists concerned.¹

This collection of hitherto unpublished essays examines the work of some of the most major contemporary British novelists of the past twenty-odd years. The novelists selected for discussion here are some of the most widely taught at educational institutions in Great Britain and elsewhere in the English-speaking world, as well as being some of the most widely read by members of the reading public interested in ‘serious’ contemporary fiction. John Fowles is not represented, since the focus of this volume is on the novel since 1980, and he has published only one novel since then; William Boyd, Malcolm Bradbury, David Lodge, Christine Brooke-Rose, Timothy Mo and Fay Weldon, among others, have been excluded simply because there is a limit to the number of novelists who can be accommodated in a book of this length. While the collection might have included some contemporary American and/or Irish novelists, this would have led to even greater problems of selection, and could also have meant increasing the number of ‘-isms’ dealt with in the essays.

Realism is the oldest of the major ‘-isms’ to be discussed in the collection. Ian Watt notes in *The Rise of the Novel* that the term was first used in France in 1835, but that some of the earliest English novels – those by Defoe,

Richardson and Fielding, especially – anticipate in practice certain aspects of nineteenth-century French theory.² In particular, Defoe and the others seek to create the illusion that their characters are real people living in the real world. In contrast, however, to ‘the novelists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, [who] had a shared view of the nature of reality, those of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries’, comments Fredrick Holmes in Chapter 1, ‘are generally aware that what constitutes reality is a matter for speculation and debate’. To represent the complexities of contemporary life adequately, Kazuo Ishiguro, the subject of Holmes’ chapter, blends realism with a combination of more modern ‘-isms’ in his novels – surrealism, expressionism, fabulism and postmodernism.

In Chapter 2, Judith Seaboyer finds ‘generic precursors’ for Ian McEwan partly in ‘the great reformist exponents of nineteenth-century sociopolitical realisms’. In some of his novels, she says, McEwan works and reworks themes familiar to readers of Victorian realism, updating them in the light of the extraordinary rate of change that has characterised life in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Darkly gothic, McEwan’s novels are ‘explorations of individuals and relationships within a claustrophobic private sphere . . . in which the private sphere is not only mirrored in that of the public but is a way of addressing broader social and political issues’. A good example is *The Innocent*, in which the death and dismemberment of a German ex-army sergeant becomes a metaphor for the brutality not only of the Third Reich, but of the Allies, too, exercised against civilian populations.

The main focus of Irvine Welsh’s novels, says Alan Riach in Chapter 3, is ‘people in conditions of social squalor and economic poverty’. This suggests that Welsh belongs to the tradition of Zola and the other French novelists of the nineteenth-century realist/naturalist school.³ Yet Welsh’s realism, like Ishiguro’s, is subject to ‘surreal realignments’, so that his narrative focus is often more on the characters’ dreams and nightmares than on the events of their everyday lives. ‘None of [Welsh’s] technical modes, narrative devices and contexts’, comments Riach, ‘adheres to conventional canons of realism.’

David Punter begins Chapter 4, on Angela Carter, with a definition of magic realism taken from *The Bloomsbury Guide to English Literature*. Magic realism, we are told there, is ‘a term applied in literature primarily to . . . novelists . . . whose work combines a realistic manner with strong elements of the bizarre, supernatural and fantastic’. In ‘The Bloody Chamber’, for example, a castle becomes a ghostly character; and in ‘Wolf-Alice’ the narrative viewpoint is that of some wolves who adopt a little girl. In some of her other fictions, Punter comments, Carter’s characters ‘often seem as though they are characters from *somebody else’s* story – not their own, nor even their apparent author’s, but stories that come from a different, irreversible past, even if this past can be known only through a certain virtuality, a consciousness that has already in some sense been traumatised, and which is now moving in a dreamy afterlife in which the presence of a ghost at the

breakfast table would be anything but surprising'. None of this is consistent with conventional realism.

In Chapter 5, Laurence Nicoll shows how James Kelman's interest in existentialism impacts on the basic realism of his novels. Nicoll begins by reminding us that existentialism is 'a notoriously elusive term', varying from philosopher to philosopher; however, he finds that central to existentialist thinking is 'a radical notion of freedom'. Kelman writes about poverty and squalor, much like Zola and the other realist/naturalist French novelists of the nineteenth century; yet for Zola 'realism amounts to the insistence that identity, character, is *necessarily determined* by society and historical circumstance', while for Kelman to portray his characters as deterministically regulated 'would mean abandoning the central existentialist notion of a freely chosen and freely choosing self'. Kelman thus presents his characters as exercising complete freedom of will. He also refuses to employ conventional omniscient narrators, for the omniscient narrator is an analogue to God, where, as an existentialist, Kelman denies God's existence. He concerns himself not with abstractions, but with the here and now of 'facticity', the 'finite and concrete aspects of human being'. Kelman's facticity (a term used by Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Sartre) gives his realism a distinctly existential character.

Daniel Lea argues in Chapter 6 that Martin Amis' *Money* and *London Fields* 'lie firmly within the conventions of nineteenth-century realism'. Indeed, they belong to the tradition of the 'condition-of-England' novel, a tradition beginning with such novels as Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil* (1845) and Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1855). Like Disraeli and Mrs Gaskell, Amis comments on contemporary life, in *Money* satirising Thatcherism's tendency to reduce the individual to a commodity. Thatcherism has made of John Self, the novel's main character, 'an extension of the world in which [he] exists; not only does he indulge in a culture of junk, but that junk . . . renders him internally, as well externally corrupted'. *London Fields* places the blame for a lack of stable individual or national identity not on local British economic and social policy, but on global destabilisation. 'The players of *London Fields* do not have static selves from which they temporarily deviate', Lea comments, 'but consist of a fragmented collection of partial selves which alternate freely. The barriers between performed roles are no longer solid therefore, but allow an endless interpenetration.' The *London Fields* of the title constitute a dream image of England as it was in the distant past, before the complexities of late twentieth-century life began to intrude on individual and national stability.

Postcolonialism is a critical and theoretical term with an application wider than literature, also being used in relation to the critical analysis of history, politics.⁴ Aijaz Ahmad identifies the first use of the term in political theory in the 1970s, to describe the state of nations that had thrown off European control in the wake of the Second World War.⁵ Since then postco-

lonialism has come to refer to the critical analysis of modes of discourse more generally, about and in the former colonies of European imperial powers. Postcolonialism is about self-definition: the self-definition of individuals and cultures impacted by dominant cultures, those dominant cultures having constructed them during the imperial phase as 'other' and inferior. Postcolonialism seeks to deconstruct such binary conceptualisations and to recognise the impact of colonialism on colonial subjects and culture. By its nature, it is primarily concerned with colonial impact after the withdrawal of colonial powers; as Bart Moore-Gilbert and others comment: 'The "post" in postcolonial . . . hints at withdrawal, liberation and reunification'.⁶

While the emphasis of postcolonial studies has for the most part been on the modern day, postcolonialism also has far-ranging implications and applications, beginning as early as medieval and early modern studies (the Crusades, Renaissance Europe's engagement with the New World). Postcolonial theory is also invoked in reference to dispersed (diasporic) peoples such as Jews, or to minority struggles with a dominant culture, in the case of feminism or queer studies. In such ways, postcolonial literary criticism enjoys fruitful interactions with other literary-critical movements. The essays in this collection reflect such interactions.

Because this volume is a survey of British fiction since 1980, postcolonialism is addressed in the following essays as it is manifest in writing coming from *within* Britain. In Chapter 7, Bruce King focuses on two very different minority writers: Abdulrazak Gurnah, who immigrated to Britain from Zanzibar, and Hanif Kureishi, who grew up in Bromley, Kent, as the son of an Indian immigrant. King provocatively argues against 'postcolonialism' or 'postcolonial resistance' as adequate definitions for the distinct writings of these two men. He recognises Gurnah as part of an Arabised elite pushed from Zanzibar by a black African revolution, and Kureishi as a product of British suburbia, for whom racism is essentially a class issue, and whose interests lie less in postcolonialism than in the 1960s British counter-culture. King's essay both evokes a postcolonial critical approach and warns against the too easy use of literary-critical labels.

Hermione Lee, in Chapter 8, addresses the figure of the father in the work of perhaps Britain's most prominent postcolonial writer, Salman Rushdie. Lee argues that in Rushdie's fiction, fathers carry both personal and political significances, a 'weight' that sons carry and with which they struggle to come to terms. Rushdie's emphasis on dynasties, she argues, 'is not just personal; it has everything to do with the politics of the countries he is writing about and with postcoloniality'. In Chapter 9 Bart Moore-Gilbert examines the two novels to date of Zadie Smith, who rose to prominence in 2000 with the publication of *White Teeth*, alongside the bleaker work of Caryl Phillips. Moore-Gilbert relates postcolonial interests in the dispersal of indigenous peoples at the hands of imperial powers with the dispersal of the Jews over the last 2,000 years, exploring the figure of the Jew in the work of these two writers.

Chantal Zabus' chapter on the novels of Marina Warner, Chapter 10, serves as a link between the 'postcolonialism' and 'feminism' parts of this volume, exploring the highly productive interaction in Warner's work between these two '-isms'. As Zabus shows, postcolonialism and feminism both 'question the very concept of history and the way it foregrounds the point of view of the winners and the male sex'. Zabus explores the way in which Warner's fiction tells the stories of women and the colonised, bringing each out from under the yoke of colonialism and patriarchy, and giving voice to alternative versions of selfhood and history.

Feminism, like postcolonialism, is not just a literary theory or a literary-critical method, but a political movement, concerned with the role of women in essentially patriarchal societies, and with giving voice, opportunities and status to women and girls. Virginia Woolf is a vital precursor to modern feminist thinkers and writers, in her writings on the need for female independence, most notably in *A Room of One's Own* (1929). What is termed 'second-wave feminism', however, took off in the 1960s, with texts such as Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1969), and feminist literary criticism developed through key texts such as Ellen Moers' *Literary Women* (1976) and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979). American and English feminist thought is complemented by the more highly theoretical French feminism, represented in the work of Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray.⁷

Since the 1960s feminism has, arguably, exploded like no other movement, and now impacts on all areas of literary criticism and concepts of the 'literary canon';⁸ the literature taught in schools and universities now includes writers such as Mary Sidney, Aemilia Lanyer, Aphra Behn and Christina Rossetti. Notably, in recent years the term 'post-feminist' has been evoked to suggest that feminism is itself passé, or overly reductive in its definition of female identity and concerns. Many of the essays in this collection engage implicitly with the idea of post-feminism, arguing that the female writers at issue are 'not *only* feminist' or are 'feminist in a unique kind of way'. Such care is indicative of the wide-ranging nature of current feminism, and each essay does continue to assert the value of 'feminist' as at least one useful way of regarding the writers at hand.

In Chapter 11, Sarah Ross approaches Pat Barker as 'at first' a feminist, exploring the interaction between Barker's early novels, which focus on underprivileged women and female communities, and her later novels, which tend to focus on more masculine spheres. Barker can also very usefully be termed a 'realist' writer, and Ross argues that Barker's feminism and her recent conscientious social realism are linked by a concern with the nature of evil.

Glenda Norquay and Dorothy McMillan, in Chapters 12 and 13, respectively, explore the work of two female Scottish writers, A. L. Kennedy and Janice Galloway, who are frequently compared but who practise two quite

different kinds of feminism. McMillan identifies in Galloway's fiction a 'fighting-back female voice' that is brought to life through narrative and visual experimentation: the evocation of bricolage, or 'odd-jobbery', and the use of typographical tricks. Glenda Norquay describes A. L. Kennedy as resistant to categorisation as a feminist – or, for that matter, a Scottish – writer. Kennedy pays particularly close attention to individual subjectivity, to the subject's desire for completion through interaction with others; Norquay argues that she is able to do so only in relation to the previous 'achievements of feminism, postcolonialist thinking and earlier challenges to realism'.

Chapters 14 and 15, by Sarah Sceats and Katherine Tarbox, respectively, both focus on desire. Tarbox explores A. S. Byatt's Booker Prize-winning novel, *Possession*, as underpinned and driven by characters' desire for syzygy, a hermaphroditic state achieved by one who joins together reason (conventionally male) and passion (conventionally female). Tarbox explores the novel's pastiche-poetry, as well as its Victorian and modern plots, elucidating the rich connections that exist among all three in the central characters' desire to achieve syzygy. Sarah Sceats focuses on appetite, desire and belonging in the novels of Rose Tremain – in particular, on individuals' desire to achieve a significant sense of belonging. Sceats acknowledges that Tremain focuses on male protagonists as frequently as she does on female ones, but argues that her sensitivity to marginalised people, as well as her focus on the pursuit of self-fulfilment, is what constitutes her particular feminism.

In Chapter 16, the last in this part, Paulina Palmer explores a fruitful relationship between two '-isms' in the work of one writer: feminism and postmodernism. Palmer describes the connections that exist between lesbian and postmodern perspectives, and their manifestations in Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* and *The Powerbook*. As Palmer indicates, Winterson uses strategies associated with postmodernism, such as an emphasis on performativity and intertextuality, to construct lesbian love stories that subvert the heterosexual conventions of the romance genre.

Postmodernism has been defined in a number of ways by a variety of commentators. As Daniel Bedggood points out in Chapter 17, however, Fredric Jameson and Jean-François Lyotard are often referred to where there is a need for a concise definition. For Jameson, says Bedggood, postmodernity is 'a condition brought about by the "radical break" in cultural forms and systems in the 1950s and 1960s, with the wane of political, social and philosophical models of modernity. Jameson suggests that the old certainties, aims and ideals of modernity are now insecure and debatable, and this is expressed in postmodern cultural forms as diverse as architecture, film, advertising and literature.' Lyotard similarly expresses his distrust of 'meta-narrative' or 'grand narratives' – the theories of Marx or Hegel about the course of history, for example, or the modern concept of 'Progress'.⁹

In the novels of Graham Swift and Julian Barnes, Bedggood argues, we find a similar distrust of 'metanarratives' and 'old certainties'. In Swift's *Waterland*, the idea that there can be a single, definitive history of any given series of events gives way to the conclusion that there is always 'a rich diffusion of "histories" . . . without *one* becoming dominant'. Much the same point is made in *Flaubert's Parrot*, where Julian Barnes presents 'many possible orders of "containing" Gustave Flaubert in the historical record, in a manner that effectively exposes this contingency of selecting the "truth" and makes ridiculous claims to "priority" for any one order'. Also questioned in both authors' novels is the possibility of Progress: as the narrator of *Waterland*, Thomas Crick, puts it, 'we believe we are going forward, towards the oasis of Utopia. But how do we know – only some imaginary figure looking down from the sky (let's call him God) can know – that we are not moving in a great circle?'

David Leon Higdon begins Chapter 18 by noting that although Peter Ackroyd 'rejects being called either an historical novelist or a postmodernist', his novels exploit 'the full range of postmodern techniques, turning to anti-realism, grounding themselves in a range of structural play, steeping themselves in layers of intertextuality, foregrounding their fictionality, and fully exploiting historical discontinuities, pastiche and parody'. Ackroyd's presentation of alternative worlds in his fiction, comments Higdon, falls into line with 'Brian McHale's theory that postmodern writers dramatise the shift of dominant from problems of *knowing* to problems of *modes of being* – from an epistemological dominant to an *ontological one*'. In bringing the world of an eighteenth-century architect into juxtaposition with that of a twentieth-century detective in his novel *Hawksmoor*, Ackroyd finds his 'unique postmodern voice' and a template for his subsequent fiction, which similarly alternates between the twentieth century and various earlier periods.

Chapter 19, the final chapter in the collection, begins by identifying the stylistic elements of Iain Banks' postmodernism as 'the fusion – or confusion of high and popular culture; delight in the detail of new (or invented) technologies; the play of multiple and competing levels of ontology (human versus superhuman; author versus characters; art versus life); together with a great deal of black comedy that mocks the "traditional" values of Western culture'. Cairns Craig also finds in Banks' novels 'the play of different ontological levels within the novel, each level implying that another level, previously assumed to be "real", is no more than a fiction, reduces reality to a series of games, none of which can be assumed to have priority over any other'. Banks' language games, argues Craig, games involving 'the conflict between being a player and being played upon, and the difficulty of discovering the rules of the game in which one is playing, are the insistent themes of Banks's fiction'.

While it would have been desirable to include more contemporary British

novelists in the volume, considerations of space made this impossible. Such considerations also made it impossible for us to supply a list of each author's novels at the end of each essay; instead, we have referred interested readers to bibliographies either in hard copy form or on the internet. In addition, we have asked each essayist to provide a list of some five or six secondary books and/or articles for those who wish to read at greater length about the '-isms' and the novelists represented in this volume.

James Acheson
Sarah C. E. Ross

NOTES

- 1 Basic definitions and discussion of each of the '-isms' covered in this volume can be found in M. H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 7th edn (Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1999).
- 2 Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (1957; rpt. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 10. For a fuller introduction to French realism, see Damian Grant, *Realism in Literature* (London: Methuen, 1970).
- 3 For a helpful introduction to French realism/naturalism, see Lilian Furst and Peter Skrine, *Naturalism* (London: Methuen, 1971).
- 4 Two excellent introductions to postcolonialism are Bart Moore-Gilbert, Gareth Stanton and Willy Maley, eds, *Postcolonial Criticism* (London: Longman, 1997); and Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics* (London: Verso, 1997).
- 5 Aijaz Ahmad, 'The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality', *Race and Class*, 36, 3 (1995), 1–20.
- 6 Moore-Gilbert et al., *Postcolonial Criticism*, p. 2.
- 7 For an introduction to French feminist theory, see Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 1985).
- 8 Excellent introductions to feminist literary criticism include *Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. Mary Eagleton (London: Longman, 1991); and *Feminisms: an Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993).
- 9 Two very helpful introductions to postmodernism are Linda Hutcheon's *The Politics of Postmodernism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989) – not to be confused with her *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1988), a more advanced study – and Brian McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1987).

PART I

Realism and other -isms

Realism, Dreams and the Unconscious in the Novels of Kazuo Ishiguro

Frederick M. Holmes

A critical consensus has emerged about the themes, modes, narrative techniques and interrelationships of the five novels that Ishiguro has published to date. The first three – *A Pale View of Hills* (1982), *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) and *The Remains of the Day* (1989) – have been celebrated for their historically grounded realism, achieved through the limpid, masterfully controlled prose styles of their first-person narrators, all of whom depend upon memory as they look back over their troubled lives and times. Realism in fiction is a vexed concept, but it can be defined as the attempt to use linguistic and narrative conventions to create a fictional illusion of social and psychological reality that seems plausible to ordinary readers. Writers of realist fiction, David Lodge comments, assume that ‘there is a common phenomenal world that may be reliably described by the methods of empirical history’; however, he adds that ‘to the later writers in the [realist] tradition what this world *means* is much more problematical’.¹ In other words, although the novelists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had a shared view of the nature of reality, those of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries are generally aware that what constitutes reality is a matter for speculation and debate. Neither is contemporary realism usually premised on the belief that the language used to describe what Lodge calls the ‘common phenomenal world’ is a transparent medium that creates a perfect correspondence between its symbols and an objective reality external to it. On the contrary, most realists recognise that language does not so much mirror reality as use conventions to construct simulacra of what some readers can accept as reality.

While Ishiguro seeks to construct simulacra of this kind in his novels, thereby grounding them in realism, both he and the critics who have written about his fiction have also used the terms ‘surrealism’ and ‘expressionism’ to characterise certain aspects of it. These terms were originally coined to identify two different movements in twentieth-century literature and art. Originating in the 1920s under the influence of recent discoveries in psychology (Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* [1900] was especially influential), surrealism explored the creative possibilities afforded by dreams and other