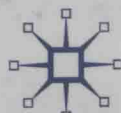# English Fiction Since 1984

Narrating a Nation

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palgrave
macmillan

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Contents

Introduction

The primary purpose of this book is to analyze in depth one key novel written by each of eleven English writers who are representative of a new form of fiction writing that has come to dominate the two decades since 1984. The eleven novels on which this book focuses have been selected both for their intrinsic importance and to form part of an argument concerning the representation of history and identity in English fiction. The argument has been subdivided into three sections each of which addresses from a different angle the question how English fiction of this period has reconfigured the ways in which subjectivity is formed and represented within the recent history of modernity. Some of the novels could have been interpreted in a different section of the book, so that their position in it represents a compromise between the need for a fair representation of this group of writers and the demands of the book's argument. A secondary aim is to provide students and teachers of contemporary English fiction with a detailed critical analysis of eleven representative and significant novels of this period which might form the core of any course they might want to undertake under this rubric. Each of the chapters refers to much of the relevant criticism of the novel to date. The work of the generation of novelists treated here constitutes an exciting departure from most of the fiction published in England since the Second World War. It is both more innovative in its methods of narration and more ambitious and wide ranging in the material it takes for its subject. It offers thoughtful and complex fictional responses to a period of profound change in everything from international power relations and the spread of global capitalism to England's sense of national identity and the conception of subjectivity in a poststructuralist climate.

Even before the revolutionary upheavals to world order that have occurred since 1984, the Stalinist purges (1932–38), the Nazi Holocaust (1941–45), and the use of nuclear weapons to end the Second World War (1945) dramatically altered everyone's perception of the kind of civilization which they had inherited in the second half of the century. The Cold War ensured that nobody could ignore the possibility of nuclear devastation that

1

threatened to bring modernity to a premature end. As Martin Amis put it, "in one minute we turned paradise into a toilet" ("The Wit" 102). The post-war generation found itself in a unique situation. We have, Angela Carter wrote in 1983, "learned to live with the unthinkable and to think it" (*Shaking* 51). During the period of time covered by this book equally dramatic changes occurred, in particular the end of the Cold War (though not of the threat of nuclear devastation) with the breakup of the USSR (1989), leaving the United States as the only superpower headed since 2000 by an aggressively neo-imperialist administration under President George W. Bush. Far from learning from the horrors of the Nazi Holocaust, the world witnessed, and in some cases stood by while witnessing, ethnic cleansings, as their perpetrators euphemistically called genocide, in Cambodia (1975–79), Rwanda (1994), Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo (1991–99) and Sudan (2004–present). The end of the Cold War was quickly succeeded by the Gulf War (1991), the terrorist bombing of the World Trade Center in New York (September 11, 2000), and the United States and Britain's invasion of Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003). The West now found itself pitted against an invisible enemy, Islamic terrorism, which has rapidly transformed the nature of the experience of modernity in the new century, as the bombings in Madrid (2004) and London (2005) demonstrated. Rushdie observed that the attack on the World Trade Center was intended "to shape our own imaginings of the future." Its message was "that the modern world itself was the enemy, and would be destroyed" (*Step* 375). Late modernity seems unavoidably tied to a sense of apocalypse.

What this new generation of English writers have in common has less to do with a similar aesthetic than with a shared response to the changing world of the closing years of the millennium. They offer a bewildering variety of narrative modes, voices and tones. But all of them place their narratives within a context, not of one class on a small island, but of a world which is threatened by the very success of the project of modernity, a world which is so thoroughly interconnected that it is no longer possible to treat any part of it as unaffected by everything else in it. This partly explains why these narrations of a nation often see questions of identity within a much wider context than that of English or British society. These novelists are very conscious of the difference between their work and that of their immediate predecessors which seemed to them an inadequate response to the modern world they grew up in. "In its current form," Martin Amis said in 1990, "the typical English novel is 225 sanitized pages about the middle classes" ("Down London's Mean Streets" 35). Ian McEwan similarly claimed that English writing in the late 1960s "was either very tiny, self-contained, or it wore an ironic sneer which allowed it no real moments of awe or silence" ("Ian McEwan's War Zone" 181). Like Martin Amis, he looked abroad, especially to American novelists like Saul Bellow and Philip Roth, for his inspiration. Most of the earlier postwar English writers lacked what Salman

Rushdie sees as a defining characteristic of the best of this later generation of novelists, "the courage or even the energy to bite off a big chunk of the universe and chew it over" (*Step* 35). Seen from the perspective of 1980, the English novel was being widely written off as "cosily provincial" (Bigsby 137), "local, quaint, and self-consciously xenophobic" (Bowers 150).

This was also the view of Bill Buford, the editor of *Granta*, a new literary magazine launched in 1979. The editorial in the first issue, which introduced English readers to an exciting sample of new American fiction writers of the time, blamed British publishers most for the fact that "British fiction of the fifties, sixties, and even most of the seventies variously appears as a monotonously protracted, realistically rendered monologue. It lacks excitement, wants drive, provides comforts not challenges." ("Introduction" 3). However by its third issue the following year Buford detected a new kind of writing in Britain: "which, freed from the middle-class monologue, is experimentation in the real sense, exploiting traditions and not being wasted by them . . . The fiction of today is . . . testimony to an invasion of outsiders, using a language much larger than the culture" ("Introduction" 16). This new English fiction (not all by outsiders) of the 1980s and beyond has come to be seen as constituting a renaissance in the English novel, "re-establishing itself as the pre-eminent literary form by the turn of the twenty-first century" (Morrison 4). Naming fellow writers Timothy Mo, Martin Amis, Ian McEwan, Julian Barnes, and Angela Carter, Rushdie claimed in 1989 that what distinguished this "very un-English" new literary generation was that its "horizons are broader, its experience of life is perhaps not so relentlessly white middle class. The world of the book is bigger than it has been" ("Salman Rushdie Interviewed" 18). Kazuo Ishiguro in interview expressed a similar definition of what differentiated his and his generation's work: "I'm interested in writing things that will be of interest to people in . . . a hundred years' time, and to people in different cultures" ("Rooted" 153). These English novelists no longer exclusively address an insular English middle class readership. Viewing England (frequently cosmopolitan London) as a microcosm, they write to the world about the world in general. In Rushdie's 2005 novel, *Shalimar the Clown*, the character India reflects, "Everywhere was now part of everywhere else. Russia, America, London, Kashmir. Our lives, our stories, flowed into one another's, were no longer our own, individual, discrete" (37).

This widening of the English novel's frame of reference is partly the consequence of a parallel widening that characterized British society over this period. By the 1980s the nation had shed most of its colonial possessions and most of its pretensions as an imperial power. The Suez Crisis of 1956 had decisively demonstrated to the country its new diminished status in world affairs. The 1973 Oil Crisis brought home Britain's dependence on other countries, including its own ex-colonies, for its economic survival. Britain had to enter into partnerships with the United States and with the

European Common Market (which it joined in 1974) to promote its national interests. The nation acknowledged through its policies and attitudes that it was now part of the new global economy, and that London was a multi-cultural and international capital, not the center of a shrinking and out-dated empire. Just as former colonized peoples were colonizing the imperial center in increasing numbers in the postwar years, immigrating from the Caribbean, the Indian Subcontinent and parts of Africa, so, according to Rushdie, "the peoples that were once colonized by the language [were] now rapidly remaking it, domesticating it" (*Imaginary Homelands* 64). Bruce King claims that "the new immigrants made English literature inter-national in other ways than it had been during the Empire" (1), transform-ing a near-homogenous white England into what Linton Kwesi Johnson calls "Inglan," and London into the "Ellowen Deeowen" of *The Satanic Verses*.

Margaret Thatcher and her Conservative administrations from 1979–90 were most directly responsible for much of the transformation that overtook Britain in the 1980s. Stuart Hall wrote one of the most penetrating analyses of the ideology of "Thatcherism" in an essay, "The Toad in the Garden" (1988). In effect, he argues, she helped form a new hegemony radically dif-ferent from that of older versions of conservatism which went along with the social democratic consensus that had dominated the political scene since the War. "The aim," Hall wrote, "was to reconstruct social life as a whole around a return to the old values—the philosophies of tradition, Englishness, respectability, patriarchalism, family, and the nation" ("Toad" 39). She made freedom equivalent to the free market. Privatization became a public service. She succeeded in ideologically winning over substantial sec-tions of Labour's social base. Hall termed her new "combination of imposi-tion of social discipline from above . . . and of populist mobilization from below" "authoritarian populism" (40–41). Countering the unpopularity of the massive unemployment its policies produced with appeals to old-fash-ioned patriotism (especially during the so-called Falklands War of 1982[1]), Thatcherism became popular among many of those who were most adverse-ly affected by it. Part of Hall's explanation of this paradoxical political phe-nomenon was that the discourse of Thatcherism "depend[ed] on the subject addressed assuming a number of specific subject positions." So "the liberty-loving citizen is *also* the worried parent, the respectable housewife, the care-ful manager of the household budget, the solid English citizen 'proud to be British . . . .'" ("Toad" 49). Julian Barnes observed that a fundamental mis-take made by her opponents was that what she had done could and would eventually be undone. "Now, post-Thatcher," he wrote in 1993, "the pen-dulum continues to swing, but inside a clock that has been rehung on the wall at a completely different angle" (*Letters* 220).

Many of the novelists on whom this book focuses blamed Mrs Thatcher at the time for the uncaring society that they claimed she brought about by

turning her back on the Keynesian consensus-based society on which Britain had modeled itself since World War II. For Rushdie her premiership was a "catastrophe" ("Keeping Up" 29). For Ian McEwan, "England under Mrs Thatcher" left him "with a nasty taste" (Haffenden 187). Martin Amis wrote of "the boutique squalor of Thatcher's England (or its southeastern quadrant)" (*War* 19). Kureishi thought that her "pre-war Methodist priggishness" was responsible for the repudiation of the sixties' pleasure-seeking ethos he found so liberating and for "the resurrection of control" in the country (*My Beautiful Laundrette* 116). But, as Stuart Hall astutely observed in "The Meaning of New Times" (1989), Thatcherism was simply a manifestation of a much larger global hegemony, of "social, economic, political and cultural changes of a deeper kind taking place in western capitalist societies" ("Meaning" 223). Hall and others came to call the new social and discursive formation affecting not just Thatcher's Britain but Reagan's United States and elsewhere "New Times." This formation was given various labels, none of which comprehended every aspect of the momentous changes that went to constitute these New Times, labels like post-Fordism, post-industrialism, and post-modernism. What is common to all such historical terms is the preface "post-" (as it is in post-humanism, post-colonialism, post-structuralism and post-Marxism), which suggests that they all represent the final decades of the twentieth century as a period clearly demarcated from, and defined in contrast to, the past. At the least this period is seen as a dramatic new phase in the ongoing project of modernity. Hall insists that "Marx was one of the earliest people to grasp the revolutionary connection between capitalism and modernity" ("Meaning" 228–29). Capitalism, Marx wrote in the *Communist Manifesto*, entails the "constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social relations, everlasting uncertainty and agitation," which serves equally as a definition of modernity (229). Situated in its midst, Hall calls this new phase of modernity "a permanently Transitional Age" ("Meaning" 232).

Like most of the novelists considered in this book, I prefer to avoid exclusively calling this new phase of modernity postmodern because it is unsatisfactory as a term of periodization (it fails to apply to much of contemporary culture) and it is too limiting and negative a term when used philosophically/aesthetically (many contemporary writers still subscribe to various metanarratives). As Hall insists, modernity is by its nature paradoxical, and the paradoxes of late modernity are distinguished by being ever more extreme:

> material abundance here, producing poverty and immiseration there; greater diversity and choice—but often at the cost of commodification, fragmentation and isolation . . . The rich "West"—and the famine-stricken South. Forms of "development" which destroy faster than they create. ("Meaning" 229–30)

Whereas Lyotardian postmodernists reject the grand (or global) narratives of modernity and equate the postmodern with *petits récits*, the local and the particular, Hall claims that the "New Times have gone 'global' and 'local' at the same moment" (237).[2] Thus Rushdie, invoking Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* (1979, 1984) in 1990, can champion the novel as *the* form which embraces the "rejection of totalized explanations" (*Imaginary Homelands* 422), and yet his own novel of that time, *The Satanic Verses* (1988), represents a totalized defense of his pluralist stance. It simultaneously attacks the monologic discourse of Islamic fundamentalism and of English racism while promoting its own monologic discourse concerning the superiority of plural, competing discourses within the novel, the form "which takes the 'privileged arena' of conflicting discourses *right inside our heads*" (426). Rushdie's paradoxical combination of the unitary and the plural, the local and the global, in this novel's treatment of late-twentieth-century modernity is one of its great strengths. *The Satanic Verses,* like many of the other novels considered in this book, transcends conventional definitions of the postmodern. This does not mean that the term "postmodernism" cannot be employed productively in specific cases. For instance I have used the concept of the postmodern sublime as the major theoretical perspective in the chapter on Martin Amis's *Time's Arrow,* in part because Amis himself wrote an essay expressing his admiration for Nabokov's use of the sublime.

While avoiding categorizing all the fiction of this group of writers as postmodern, I do draw on poststructuralist (including postmodern) theory throughout the book. As all of these writers grew up in an intellectual climate dominated by poststructuralist thought, it seems appropriate to draw on this body of theoretical work when interpreting their fiction. "Is Nothing Sacred?", the 1990 essay by Rushdie which I cited above, quotes not just Lyotard, but Karl Marx, Richard Rorty, and Michel Foucault. Angela Carter showed an extensive acquaintance with the work of Roland Barthes when reviewing works by him and Georges Bataille. A. S. Byatt, who spent part of her life as an English academic, writes sophisticated reviews of works by Jacques Derrida, Monique Wittig, Hayden White, Georges Bataille, and Paul Ricoeur, among others. At the same time she distances herself from literary theory even while she makes ironic use of it in a work like *Possession*: "I think many younger [writers] feel no relation at all to the world of academic criticism, which has moved far away from their concerns" (*On Histories* 6). I certainly do not, as Byatt claims of contemporary critics, "feel almost a gladiatorial antagonism to the author" (6). Nor do I identify with any particular formulation of poststructuralist theory, but use it eclectically, choosing where appropriate whatever theoretical approach best illuminates the fictional text concerned. But it can be revealing to draw on the thinking of theoretical writers who are coterminous with these novelists (who are aware of their thinking), as each draws inspiration from the other, and both help to

establish a common set of responses to the contemporary world. Writers and theorists alike of this period see language not as a method of communication that reflects an empirical reality beyond it, but as one that creates subjective reality. The self or subject is no longer regarded within a poststructuralist universe as the origin and foundation of knowledge, an assumption on which humanism is founded. Rather the self is seen as constructed by language and the values already inherent in language—values that reflect the identity politics of a nation that is in the process of redefining itself.

The poststructuralist self or subject is not an autonomous, unified entity. It is a multiple construct, different selves being called into being by different discourses—discourses of nationality, class, gender, etc. One of the founders of structuralism, Claude Lévi-Strauss, like Émile Benveniste and Roman Jakobson, never felt that he was unified in a central identity: "I appear to myself as the place where something is going on, but there is no 'I', no 'me'.Each of us is a kind of crossroads where things happen," he said (Interview, CBC). John Banville, an Irish novelist who is a contemporary of this group of novelists, said something remarkably similar to an interviewer: "When I look inside myself, I don't find a John Banville. I increasingly have come to the conclusion that there is no self. There is an infinite succession of selves" (Martelle E8). Stuart Hall argues that because the new hegemonic formation of the late twentieth century has expanded the number of positionalities and identities available to ordinary people, "the individual subject has become more important." But, Hall reminds us, the modern subject is "composed of multiple 'selves' or identities in relation to the different social worlds we inhabit, something with a history, 'produced', in process" ("Meaning" 226).

This fluid sense of multiple identity, shared by most poststructuralists, surfaces in various ways in many of the novels focused on in this book. The first section of this book, History, Modernity and Metafiction, shows how some of these writers situate the subject within the discourse of history, a history which demonstrates the increasing interdependence of Britain and both the West and the global economy. This can entail, for instance, splitting the narrator/protagonist between a narrating and narrated subject each moving in opposite directions through history and from east to west, as Amis does in *Time's Arrow,* or leaving the reader in doubt whether the characters in Byatt's *Possession* possess, or are possessed by, the past in which national interests predominate. Historical memory, as the Preface to this section argues, is a vital component of identity, both that of the country and the self. The second section, National Cultures and Hybrid Narrative Modes, looks at ways in which migrant identities are either torn between two competing national cultures, or, as Rushdie puts it, "become mutants." But, he adds, "it is out of such hybridization that newness can emerge," as is the case with Saladin in *The Satanic Verses* and Changez in *The Buddha of Suburbia* (*Imaginary Homelands* 210). National and ethnic hybridity has come

to characterize much of the new generation's sense of selfhood. The English—and particularly Londoners—have been compelled by changing demographics to think of themselves as heterogeneous rather than homogonous. The last section, Narrative Constructions of Identity, looks successively at the way in which gender (Carter), sexual orientation (Winterson) and class (Swift) can interpellate individuals into socially constructed positions. There is an identifiable relationship between such subject positions and the society and nation constructing those positions. Yet just as these novelists don't wholeheartedly subscribe to the poststructuralist conception of the self and insist on the possibility of individual agency, so I in my interpretations do not assume that poststructuralism's explanation of identity is infallible. It is no more than a commonly held attitude during this period in the face of the vexed question of how the self is constituted. Even Foucault, the epitome of poststructuralist thinking, was moving away from such a purely determinist understanding of subjectivity in his last two published books on the history of sexuality.

The nature of identity in a country undergoing rapid change, during a period when identities of all kinds were being radically questioned and undermined, is a topic that is of central interest to all this generation of English novelists. Thus, for instance, the problems of defining just what it meant to be English surfaces in their work at a time when loss of empire (the defining other) and devolution of England's "internal empire" (Scotland and Wales) left the English searching for a sense of specifically English identity. All the novelists considered in this book are English, although Rushdie, despite becoming a naturalized British subject, can equally be seen as international. The English used the term "British" up to the beginning of this period as a way of obscuring or evading their domination of the whole of Britain. Antony Easthope argues that national cultures are both "material in that they are produced through institutions, practices and traditions," and "are reproduced through narratives and discourses" (*Englishness* 12). Collective identity, such as national identity, he continues, involves identification with a discourse of which it is an effect. But since all discourses are constituted by rules of limit and exclusion, Easthope, quoting Slavoj Zizek, concludes, "Englishness thus becomes an 'internal limit', an unattainable point which prevents empirical Englishmen from achieving full identity-with-themselves" (22). Or as Lily reflects in Will Self's *How the Dead Live* (2000), "nowadays almost anyone is more English than the English" (94).[3]

I am not avoiding the use of the term "British" because it has become, as Phillip Tew argues, unjustly associated with "its middle-class, imperial roots," thereby leaving its user open to charges of racism and imperialism (34). True Britishness, as Tew rightly points out, has always acted as a term that is diverse "in a regional and class sense, to which progressively one can add gender and ethnicity" (34). Besides, it is extremely difficult to disentangle the two terms, "British" and "English." The latter term hardly avoids the embarrassing

associations of the former with a past imperialism which turns both terms into negative definitions that invite opposition by the liberal critic. I use the term "English" not simply because all the novels I analyze in this book are about English characters (of whatever ethnic origin or class affiliation) set in English or international settings (but virtually never in Wales, Scotland, or Northern Ireland). It is also the case that their authors belong to a period of time when the fragmentation of Britain has forced those living in England (including most of these novelists) to search for an identity separate from the earlier identification with Britain as an entity. As Phillip Tew insists, "The frequent critical conflation of Englishness with Britain . . . in part is rooted in the simple demographic reality that the population of England is larger than all the other regions combined by a factor of around five times, . . . is half the land mass and certainly could be argued to be culturally dominant" (34). It would be easy to hide behind the catchall term "British." I prefer a definition that embraces all the novels I consider in this book. At the same time I recognize the number of important writers this parameter compels me to leave out of consideration, novelists like James Kelman and Irvine Welsh, writers who, as Ian Bell writes in *Peripheral Visions*, "seem to be actively contesting the status of London as the 'core' of British culture" (3). The distinction between Britain and England remains confused, as much within the novels focused on in this book as in the country at large. So the conflation of the two terms will inevitably recur in individual chapters, reinforcing the fact that the time period in which these novels were published is marked by conflicting concepts of national identity.

The problems directly associated with national identity are given prominence in the three novels analyzed in the second section of this book. But they can be discerned as unsettling any sense of self-presence in *Atonement* in the first section where the younger generation find themselves alienated from the older hierarchical notion of English society, which the mother holds so strongly that she causes her elder daughter's life to unravel. Problems of national identity are similarly responsible for the difference in A.S. Byatt's "Morpho Eugenia" between the inbred aristocratic family of the Alabasters destined for evolutionary extinction and the lower middle class William and Matilda who end up leaving a hidebound England for the Amazon. National identity is equally an issue that complicates Vince's sense of his self-worth in his dealings with Mr Hussein in *Last Orders,* and Fevvers's dealings with her American lover Walser in *Nights at the Circus.* Even where the focus appears to be concentrated on the relationship between history and contemporaneity or on the construction of individual identity, these novelists are situating their narration within the larger context of national history and national constructions of identity. Class, for instance, operates in very different ways for the English than, say, for Americans. But in every case characters are seen to be the effect of multiple identities, so that in *Last Orders* Vince's class and gender affiliations interact and compete with his

xenophobic sense of national identity, just as Saladin's earlier assimilation with, and later distancing of himself from, English culture in *The Satanic Verses* is also the product of his professional identity as an actor and his family identity as a rejected husband. Peter Ackroyd has developed an entire theory about the nature of the English tradition in literature. The idea that "all the previous structures of our language lie just beneath the one we are presently using" (*Collection* 369) provides the glue which holds the three historically separate strands of *Chatterton* (or the two of *Hawksmoor)* together. So English national and cultural identity is a problematic presence that is common to most of these novels, surfacing as a major theme in some and remaining a subterranean presence in others.

The other part of my argument in this book concerns the ways in which these novelists have felt the need to seek out new and alternative forms, strategies, tones, and styles in which to narrate their experience of what I have been calling late modernity. The contradictory way in which this period is constituted has forced this generation of novelists to respond to it with equally paradoxical ways of narrating it. There is no common response among them unless it is a determination to find innovative fictional forms and narrative strategies that aesthetically correspond to the paradoxical nature of the world they are refracting in their work. However, many of them see what they are doing as some kind of reaction against fictional realism. "Realism is a footling consideration," Amis has said (Haffenden 8). Ishiguro, reacting against the common interpretation of *The Remains of the Day* as "a slice of social history," told an interviewer, "I wished to move right away from straight realism" ("Artist"). Carter insists that "there's a materiality to imaginative life"; "the story is always real as story" (Haffenden 85, 80). Winterson is contemptuous of "the mimicry of Realism." "Art is excess," she insists (*Art Objects* 72, 94). For Rushdie, as for Saleem, "[r]eality is a question of perspective; . . . or rather, it becomes clear that illusion itself *is* reality" (*Midnight's Children* 189). But what each writer means by literary realism is rarely defined and differs from one novelist to another. Following Brecht, Andrzej Gasiorek, in his book-length examination of postwar British novelists who try to reconceptualize realism, views literary realism "as a family of writings that share a certain cognitive attitude to the world, which manifests itself in a variety of forms in different historical periods" (v). "Realism," Gasiorek, insists, "cannot be aligned with any particular political position or any given set of fictional techniques" (191). All of the novelists I consider believe that they are offering a truer representation of reality by departing from what they understand to be narrative realism, by which they seem to mean mimetic artifice. But all of them share with realist writers what Gasiorek calls their "general orientation to the world: they believe it has an existence that is independent from the perceptions of the cognizing self, and that the writer's task is to explore that enormously complex world as fully as possible" (191).

This is what distinguishes the writers focused on in this book from the earlier avant-garde group of postwar English novelists who were themselves inspired by the *nouveaux roman* (new novel), the work of Alain Robbe-Grillet, Michel Butor, Nathalie Sarraute, and Claude Simon.[4] Robbe-Grillet, the leading exponent, was anti-humanist in that, as Roland Barthes wrote, he "describes objects in order to expel man from them" (*Critical Essays* 94). These French writers dispensed with psychological motivation and conventional plotting in favor of what Robbe-Grillet called "the movement of the writing" (64), turning the novel into what Butor termed "the laboratory of narrative" (Jefferson 17). Yet they saw this radical subversion of the traditional novel as a heightened form of realism. The same is true of the group of English novelists who published a similar brand of avant-garde fiction in the 1960s. The best known of these are B. S. Johnson and Christine Brooke-Rose. Frank Kermode summarizes the common element running through all Johnson's work: "Johnson's plan to revolutionize the novel came down to the use of 'devices' intended to disrupt ordinary forms of attention by involving the physical book itself, the material base of writing, in unusual ways, as if to take revenge on it for a long history of tyranny" ("Retripotent" 11). Johnson's novels employ typographical playfulness including blank pages, a hole in two pages to reveal the future text on the third one, and most notoriously in the case of his third novel, *The Unfortunates* (1969), a novel in a box, consisting of twenty seven unbound chapters of which only the first and last were identified as such at the urging of his publisher. Yet, as Dominic Head observes, beneath the physical innovation lies a personal memoir that could as easily have been narrated in a conventionally bound novel (228).

Christine Brooke-Rose is certainly more deeply radical and is steeped in poststructuralist theory. Her fifth novel, *Out* (1964) is, according to her, the only novel written directly under the influence of Robbe-Grillet and the *nouveau roman*. Looked at retrospectively, it forms the first of what she has called her successive attempts "to expand the possibilities of the novel form" (Tredell 30). Reviewers insisted on treating all her subsequent novels as English offshoots of the *nouveau roman*, despite her moving further away from it with each subsequent novel she published. But the direction she chose to move in was to "explode human discourse" (Brooke-Rose, "Ill Wit" 137). When she published *Amalgamemnon* (1984), the first of a quartet of novels which began as "an effort towards more readability" (Tredell 30), she confined her use of verbs to the future, conditional, subjunctive and imperative moods. "As a result," Richard Martin comments, "everything is talked about but nothing *can* happen" (119). The commitment of this group of avant-garde novelists to formal experimentation left them marginalized by readers, even when their intentions were to offer critiques of English society or of modernity itself. Their narrative experimentation came across as disconnected from the subject of their narration. Or, to put it another way, it is as if narrative experimentation took priority and dictated the narrative content.

John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) may have acted as the more immediate predecessor to this later group of novelists who rose to prominence in the 1980s. He combines formal innovation with contemporary ideological interests (in, for instance, existentialism) and accessibility. Where Fowles captures the reader with the lure of sexual desire thwarted for the length of most of *The French Lieutenant's Woman,* Christine Brooke-Rose in *Between* (1968) subordinates acts of sex to a desire to have her heroine, like the Saussurean sign, define herself against her negative. So the protagonist of *Between*, a female translator who spends her time flying between conferences, is equally circumscribed by the positive and negative regulations of planes and airports (Fasten Your Seat Belts. No Smoking) and of successive lovers whose act of intercourse becomes "the confusional sliding from active to passive" (157). There is still, however, a distance between Fowles and these later writers considered in this book. Two of them who have reviewed Fowles's work distance themselves from it, both having major reservations about it. A. S. Byatt sees *The French Lieutenant's Woman* as being one of those "modern diminishing parodies" of the complexities of Victorian attitudes and beliefs and criticizes Fowles's use of an "existential moment of crisis of faith" when writing "natural histories, centring on a set of beliefs in gradual change" (*On Histories* 79). Martin Amis is more broadly dismissive. Referring disparagingly to "Fowles's considerable gifts as a middlebrow story-teller," Amis sees him as "giving people the impression that culture is what they are getting. He sweetens the pill: but the pill was saccharine all along" (*The War* 140).

So what is it that distinguishes the present group of writers from their predecessors? Put in the broadest terms, they combine a serious and complex response to the contemporary world with both a respect for the power of and desire for narratives and a realization that this late phase of modernity necessitates distinctive modes of narrating it. Like Fowles but for different reasons, they accept the fact that an omniscient narrator is an anachronism. But they do not use the fragmentation of their contemporary world to serve as an excuse to fall back on linguistic or metafictional play for its own sake. In every case the narrative strategy that each of these novelists employs represents their solution to the problem of how to narrate their response to contemporary life. Only when Martin Amis had discovered the technique of chronological inversion did he have the confidence to tell a story about the Holocaust. The how preceded and made possible the what. Narrative strategy for these writers is not a supplementary technique to be applied retrospectively to material that has an independent existence. The mode of narration enables the nature of the narrative itself. By inventing a woman with wings, Carter simultaneously entered her own world of magic realism and made it possible to embody in narrative form her unique understanding of the triumphs and excesses of twentieth-century feminism. Her feminist heroine is a narrator whose powers overwhelm not just the man she desires but the reader. A narrative about feminine subjectivity becomes