THE ROUTLEDGE GUIDE TO MODERN ENGLISH WRITING

JOHN McRAE AND RONALD CARTER

'This is that rare and admirable thing: a critical work that is both comprehensive and insightful, yet fresh, accessible and clear...'

***Sarah Waters*, one of *Granta* magazine's 'Best of Young British Novelists'**

The Routledge Guide to Modern English Writing

Britain and Ireland

JOHN McRAE and RONALD CARTER

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2004 by Routledge
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group

Typeset in Futura and Goudy by
Keystroke, Jacaranda Lodge, Wolverhampton
Printed and bound in Great Britain by
TJ International, Padstow, Cornwall

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN 0–415–28636–0 (hbk)
ISBN 0–415–28637–9 (pbk)

The Routledge Guide to Modern English Writing

In 1963 President John F. Kennedy was shot, Sylvia Plath published *The Bell Jar*, and the Beatles were in their prime. This was a changing world, which British and Irish writers both contributed to and reflected in drama, poetry and prose.

The Routledge Guide to Modern English Writing tells the story of British and Irish writing from 1963 to the present. From the first performance of Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* in the 1960s to lad novels and chick lit in the twenty-first century, the authors guide the reader through the major writers, genres and developments in English writing over the past forty years. Providing an in-depth overview of the main genres and extensive treatment of a wide range of writers including Philip Larkin, Ted Hughes, Angela Carter, Benjamin Zephaniah and Nick Hornby, this highly readable handbook also offers notes on language and cultural issues, quotations from selected works, a timeline and a guide to other works.

Drawing on the prize-winning *The Routledge History of Literature in English* (second edition 2001) by the same authors, *The Routledge Guide to Modern English Writing* is essential reading for all who are interested in contemporary writing.

John McRae is Special Professor of Language in Literature Studies at the University of Nottingham, and has been a Visiting Professor and Lecturer in over forty countries. **Ronald Carter** is Professor of Modern English Language in the School of English Studies at the University of Nottingham. He has published widely in the fields of English Language and Literary Studies.

my Bala, your Jaan

Acknowledgements

The editors and publishers wish to thank the following for permission to use copyright material:

Anvil Press Poetry Ltd for material from Carol Ann Duffy, 'A Valentine' from *Mean Time* by Carol Ann Duffy (1993);

BBC Worldwide Ltd and PFD on behalf of the author for material from Alan Bennett, 'A Chip in the Sugar' from *Talking Heads* by Alan Bennett. Copyright © FORLAKE LTD 1993;

Carcanet Press Ltd for Edwin Morgan, 'The Welcome' from *Collected Poems* by Edwin Morgan; and Eavan Boland, 'Beautiful Speech' from *In a Time of Violence* by Eavan Boland;

Curtis Brown on behalf of the author for material from Grace Nichols, 'The Fat Black Woman Goes Shopping' from *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* by Grace Nichols. Copyright © Grace Nichols 1983;

David Godwin Associates on behalf of the author for Simon Armitage, 'Xanadu' (1992);

Faber and Faber Ltd and Grove Weidenfeld, Inc for material from Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* by Tom Stoppard (1965), and Harold Pinter, *Silence* (1969); and with Farrar, Straus and Giroux, LLC for Ted Hughes, 'Fulbright Scholars' from *Birthday Letters* by Ted Hughes. Copyright © 1998 by Ted Hughes; and for material from Thom Gunn, 'In Time of Plague' from *Complete Poems* by Thom Gunn. Copyright © 1994 by Thom Gunn; Seamus Heaney, 'Digging', 'North' and 'The Rain Stick' from *Opened Ground: Selected Poems 1966–1996* by Seamus Heaney. Copyright © 1998 by Seamus Heaney; and Philip Larkin, 'Annus Mirabilis' from *Collected Poems* by Philip Larkin. Copyright © 1988, 1989 by the Estate of Philip Larkin;

Tony Harrison for material from 'The Pomegranates of Patmos' and 'Y' from *The Gaze of the Gorgon* by Tony Harrison, Bloodaxe Books (1992);

Nick Hern Books for material from Caryl Churchill, *Cloud Nine*. Copyright © Caryl Churchill 1979, 1980, 1983, 1984, 1985;

James & James (Publishers) Ltd on behalf of the Executors of the Estate of James MacGibbon and New Directions Publishing Corporation for Stevie Smith, 'Not Waving But Drowning' from *Collected Poems of Stevie Smith*. Copyright © 1972 by Stevie Smith;

Tom Leonard for material from 'Intimate Voices' and 'Report from the Present';

Methuen Publishing Ltd for material from Patrick Marber, *Closer* (1997), and Sarah Kane, *Blasted* (1995); with Grove Weidenfeld, Inc for material from Joe Orton, *Loot* (1966); and with Casarotto Ramsey & Associates Ltd on behalf of the authors for material from Edward Bond, *Bingo*. Copyright © 1974 by Edward Bond; and Howard Brenton, *The Romans in Britain*. Copyright © 1980, 1981 by Howard Brenton;

The Orion Publishing Group for R. S. Thomas, 'Love' from *Collected Poems* by R. S. Thomas, J. M. Dent (1978);

Penguin Books Ltd with Houghton Mifflin Company for Geoffrey Hill, 'XXII' from 'Mercian Hymns' from *New and Collected Poems 1952–1992* by Geoffrey Hill, Penguin Books (1985). Copyright © 1971, 1985, 1994 by Geoffrey Hill; and with Scribner, an imprint of Simon & Schuster Adult Publishing Group, for material from Peter Shaffer, *Equus*, Penguin Books (1977). Copyright © 1973 Peter Shaffer;

PFD on behalf of the authors for Roger McGough, 'No Surprises' from *Defying Gravity* by Roger McGough, Viking Press. Copyright © 1991, 1992; and Andrew Motion, 'Close' from *Love in a Life* by Andrew Motion, Chatto (1991); and material from Andrew Motion, 'Scripture' from *Natural Causes* by Andrew Motion, Chatto (1987);

Althea Selvon for Samuel Selvon, 'Brackley and the Bed' from *The Ways of Sunlight* by Samuel Selvon (1957);

Benjamin Zephaniah for 'As a African' from *City Psalms* by Benjamin Zephaniah, Bloodaxe Books (1992).

Every effort has been made to trace the copyright holders but if any have been inadvertently overlooked the publishers will be pleased to make the necessary amendment at the first opportunity.

Contents

Introduction

What is 'modern' writing anyway? The *Harry Potter* series and *The Lord of the Rings*, *Bridget Jones's Diary*, and *4.48 Psychosis* by Sarah Kane have all recently reached worldwide audiences – and they range from the 1950s, when Tolkien first wrote about his fantasy world, to fantasy created forty years later, and to the totally different torments of end-of-the-century female characters.

In some parts of the world English literature is still seen as '*Beowulf* to Virginia Woolf'. For many audiences, recent theatre in English comprises plays by writers such as Edward Bond and Sarah Kane, even though their work is not necessarily much staged or well known in their own country. For others, 'performance theatre' has taken over from the traditional text-based canon of drama; and in poetry, performance or dub poetry and rap have brought the genre full circle from its ancient origins to a new oral tradition.

For many readers it is modern poetry that best represents the current flowering of writing in English. With Seamus Heaney from Ireland and Derek Walcott from St Lucia winning the Nobel Prize for Literature, poetry in English has moved offshore, away from its traditional roots, while both these great voices acknowledge their deep links to the canonical traditions of English and European poetry.

It is one of the most striking features of recent writing in English that the centre has shifted. Most titles are still published in London. But they are written in different voices, from different centres, from what used to be thought of as the fringes, in voices which used to be thought of as 'outsiders'. In political terms devolution has become significant, and a sense of cultural devolution, of local assertion and affirmation, is a feature of literature too.

Television and cinema have created their own ways of writing and reading. Cinema has been the shaping mode of fiction in the twentieth

century. It is ironic, therefore, that it has now become the ideal mode to transform a novel and take it to the widest possible audiences: the movie of the book frequently consolidates the novel's success, at least temporarily. A writer such as Andrew Davies has made an art form of adapting classic, canonical novels for television, bringing Jane Austen, George Eliot, Anthony Trollope and other writers to audiences and readers in greater numbers than ever before.

Every year more and more novels are published. Books targeted originally to children now not only reach adult readers but win major 'adult' prizes, thanks to writers such as J.K. Rowling and Philip Pullman – this would have been astonishing only ten years ago. Detective fiction is a staple of television, and the original books have achieved literary 'respectability' through the works of P.D. James, Ruth Rendell, Reginald Hill and Ian Rankin, to name only a few. Fiction is just one of the modes of prose: cookery writing, travel writing, biography and autobiography, memoirs, diaries, journalism and critical writing: recent years have seen best-sellers, masterpieces and glowing reputations in all these areas.

Fashions change and return, writers go in and out of favour, reputations rise and fall. 'Chick lit' and 'lad lit' have reflected the tastes of the times in the late 1990s. Scotland in the 1980s and 1990s rivalled Ireland in its literary renaissance. Writers of all accents, colours and ethnic origins now contribute to the ever-richer mix that is writing in English. It is no longer surprising to find names from all continents, accents from every part of the world, voices from all viewpoints writing and making themselves heard in English. Many of these writers do not consider themselves British, or want to be considered as such: in the 1980s Seamus Heaney famously repudiated his inclusion in a book of modern English poetry, affirming his Irishness, and his distance from that kind of canonical categorisation, while never denying his close bonds with the traditions implied. Writers from different continents, from Salman Rushdie to Buchi Emecheta, from Derek Walcott and Wilson Harris to David Dabydeen and Anita Desai, illustrate how there is a less and less clear concept of what Britishness might be. Is it language, domicile, education, upbringing? It is certainly not just a question of citizenship, and as for language – it is even debatable whether there is such a thing

as English nowadays, with the growth of new Englishes all over the world.

'Best-sellers' is a term we have used to indicate books of their moment: books which move a lot of copies in a short period of time. In our present-day world of instant success and sales figures, this is the kind of indicator which gives a book and an author a very high profile. But yesterday's best-sellers are often today's forgotten remainders. Every year has its splurge of self-help books, television tie-ins, 'lifestyle' guides, cookery and gardening best-sellers. Popular fiction from Cartland and Cookson to Follett and Forsyth always sells in vast quantities. On the other hand, poetry and drama books hardly ever make the best-seller lists. Although we are concerned with readership and audiences, and frequently do use that as a criterion of success, there is also the need to signal longer term critical impact.

So can there be a 'mainstream'? Or is it only possible to make a subjective list to answer the question 'Have you read any good books lately'? Every choice is subjective in some ways. It depends on what we, the authors, two white male European writers of Scottish and English origin, one gay, one straight, have read and reacted to. We have listened to many friends, colleagues, critics and pundits. We have put in everything we consider vital, and many other things we consider significant, a lot we like, and some we don't like that much. Some writers have been given more extended consideration; and there are many quotations, selected to give a taste, however brief, of what makes that author or text distinctive, without going into textual analysis or commentary. We have left out lots of writers and books we would have liked to include. In five or ten years' time we will want to change some of the choices, as well as add many new ones.

It is a rich and bubbling, lively and exciting world, the world of modern writing in English. This is a glimpse into that world, one which we hope readers will enjoy, which will tempt them to read further, to make judgements, to challenge us and our choices and opinions, and decide for themselves the books and writers that matter.

Setting the scene

1963 AND ALL THAT

The year 1963 was when President John F. Kennedy was shot. And it was the year in which Sylvia Plath published her only novel, *The Bell Jar*. It begins, 'It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs.' In Britain it was the high summer of the Beatles and the Great Train Robbery. In the autumn the golden age of the Kennedy Camelot ended in Dallas. Forty years on Camelot is the name of the company that runs the National Lottery.

Philip Larkin summed up the start of things when he wrote that 'sexual intercourse began in 1963/ Between the *Lady Chatterley* ban and the Beatles' first LP'. From the 1960s to the present the shape, the taste, the social, economic and racial mix of Britain and of what is English has changed completely. The language is now more multicultural and socially varied than it has ever been. Attitudes and priorities have changed. The novels, plays and poetry of the past forty years reflect these changes, and in some ways encapsulate them. Where Shakespeare's Hamlet could speak of 'the form and pressure of the time' there are now a multitude of forms, media and modes of cultural production that illustrate the times. Movies and television are just as significant as creative modes as have been the more traditional forms.

The 'swinging sixties' were seen as a time of liberation, especially in sexual terms. The 1970s seemed duller, the 1980s were a time of materialism, the 1990s the consolidation of that boom, and the big decade for multiculturalism. And in the new millennium there has been something of a disillusion with that materialism, and, as yet, no new direction has emerged. Challenge has been the mode of the past few years.

In every decade, every single year, best-sellers emerge: some of these are successes of the moment, others have a lasting impact. And there is no way of telling what might be the lasting contribution to literature and what might be no more than incidental.

But looking back now over the past forty years, we can see trends and fashions, books that were not necessarily widely noticed when they were first published but which have achieved more lasting status, and, of course, we can find a few works which may yet come to be seen as representative of their age. We are not looking for what is 'the best' – that would be too subjective a judgement. But we will be looking at impact, influence and inspiration. These should be enough to give us an idea of what has been happening in writing in Britain and Ireland since the early 1960s.

SEX AND THE MARKET-PLACE

Of course in the sense of endings and beginnings that 'sexual intercourse began' line was just Larkin's little joke, in a poem called '*Annus Mirabilis*', written in 1967 and published in the 1974 collection *High Windows*.

But what he was getting at is important – until the early 1960s Britain had been living in the shadow of the Second World War, and the subsequent period of recovery, rationing and regrouping. In the 1960s the country started to enjoy itself, and to look forward to the future. New voices had already begun to be heard in the novels and poems and plays of the 1950s: working-class 'kitchen-sink' drama, angry young men (yes, they were still usually men) in novels and plays, and poetry that celebrated motorbike gangs – the tastes of the 1960s had been emerging quite distinctively for a few years.

Sex became a subject that was talked about, rather than a taboo, when a novel by D.H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, first published in 1928, was taken through the courts in 1960 and cleared of all possible charges of obscenity. Sex, as Michel Foucault memorably put it, 'became discourse'. The taboos and restrictions faded gradually over the years – censorship of the theatre, which had dated back to 1737, ended finally in 1968; homosexual behaviour became legal between consenting adults in 1967. *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, when it was

published in paperback, became one of the biggest selling books of all time, and certainly the biggest best-seller of the 1960s. It took some time for sex to become as all-pervasive a subject as it is nowadays and there was a lot of resistance, especially on television.

It is easy to see the 1960s as the decade when all the writing was therefore about young people, sex and music, and the breaking down of old ideas about class, taboos and society. That was what it may have felt like at the time, but of course the reality now seems rather different.

The move from taboo to explicit was seen as liberation and the new freedoms remain something of a keynote in folk memory of the time – hippies, the political upheavals in various countries in 1968, the boom in pop music and culture, fashion and media. Satire and new forms of comedy, new attitudes towards politics and institutions, sex and drugs and rock'n'roll – the writings of the 1960s reflect all that.

But despite all the knowingness, there is perhaps a note of innocence, ingenuousness, to be seen now in that age before the Internet, before mobile phones and digital television. The 'peace and love' generation was also the generation shaken by the assassinations of popular American heroes such as John F. Kennedy, Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King. The first of these has been depicted as the end of Camelot, a golden age that lasted for only a couple of years. The 1960s was the beginning of a brave new world, but a reaction soon set in, a loss of innocence, and along came the 1970s and different priorities. Money became the new sex.