

THE DECADES SERIES

# The 2000s

A DECADE OF CONTEMPORARY  
BRITISH FICTION

Edited by Nick Bentley, Nick Hubble and Leigh Wilson

B L O O M S B U R Y

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British Fiction

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*The 1990s: A Decade of Contemporary British Fiction*,  
edited by Nick Hubble, Philip Tew and Leigh Wilson

*The 2000s: A Decade of Contemporary British Fiction*,  
edited by Nick Bentley, Nick Hubble and Leigh Wilson

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## Series Editors' Preface

Nick Hubble, Philip Tew and Leigh Wilson

Contemporary British fiction published from 1970 to the present has expanded into a major area of academic study in the last twenty years and attracts a seemingly ever-increasing global scholarship. However, the very speed of the growth of research in this field has perhaps precluded any really nuanced analysis of its key defining terms and has restricted consideration of its chronological development. This series addresses such issues in an informative and structured manner through a set of extended contributions that combine wide-reaching survey work with in-depth research-led analysis. Naturally, many older British academics assume at least some personal knowledge in charting the field of the contemporary, but increasingly many of these coordinates represent the distant past of pre-birth or childhood not only for students, both undergraduate and postgraduate, but also for younger academics. Given that most people's memories of their first five to ten years are vague and localized, an academic born in the early to mid-1980s will only have real first-hand knowledge of less than half these forty years, while a member of the current generation of undergraduates, born in the mid-1990s, will have no adult experience of the period at all. The rather self-evident nature of this chronological, experiential reality disguises the rather complex challenges it poses to any assessment of the contemporary. Therefore, the aim of these volumes, which include timelines and biographical information on the writers covered, is to provide the contextual framework that is now necessary for the study of the British fiction of these four decades.

Each of the volumes in this Decades Series emerged from a series of workshops hosted by the Brunel Centre for Contemporary Writing (BCCW) located in the School of Arts at Brunel University, London, UK. These events assembled specially invited teams of leading internationally recognized scholars in the field, together with emergent younger figures, in order that they might together examine critically the periodization of contemporary British fiction by dividing it into its four constituent decades: the 1970s symposium was held on 12 March 2010; the 1980s on 7 July 2010; the 1990s on 3 December 2010; and the 2000s on 1 April 2011. During these workshops, draft papers were offered



and discussions ensued, with the aim of exchanging ideas and ensuring both continuity and also fruitful interaction (including productive dissonances) between what would become chapters of volumes that would hopefully exceed the sum of their parts.

The division of the series by decade could be charged with being too obvious and therefore rather too contentious. In the latter camp, no doubt, would be Ferdinand Mount, who in a 2006 article for the *London Review of Books* (LRB) concerned primarily with the 1950s, 'The Doctrine of Unripe Time,' complained 'When did decaditis first strike? When did people begin to think that slicing the past up into periods of ten years was a useful thing to do?' However, he does admit still that such characterization has long been associated with aesthetic production and its relationship to a larger sense of the times. As Frank Kermode so influentially argued in *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*, published in 1967 just before the period covered by this series began, divisions of time, like novels, are ways of making meaning. And clearly both can also shape our comprehension of an ideological and aesthetic period that seem to co-exist, but are perhaps not necessarily coterminous in their dominant inflections. The scholars involved in our symposia discussed the potential arbitrariness of all periodizations, but nevertheless acknowledged the importance of such divisions, their experiential resonances and symbolic possibilities. They analysed the decades in question in terms of not only leading figures, the cultural zeitgeist and socio-historical perspectives, but also in the context of the changing configuration of Britishness within larger, shifting global processes. The volume participants also reconsidered the effects and meaning of headline events and cultural shifts such as the miners' strike of 1984–5, the collapse of communism, Blairism and cool Britannia, 9/11 and 7/7, to name only a very few. Perhaps ironically, to prove the point about the possibilities inherent in such an approach, in his LRB article Mount concedes that 'For the historian ... if the 1950s are famous for anything, it is for being dull,' adding a comment on the 'shiny barbarism of the new affluence.' Hence, even for Mount, a decade may still possess certain unifying qualities, those shaping and shaped by its overriding cultural mood.

After the symposia had taken place at Brunel, the individuals dispersed and wrote up their papers into full-length chapters (generally 10,000–12,000 words), revised in the light of other papers, the workshop discussions and subsequent further research. These chapters form the core of the book series, which, therefore, may be seen as the result of a collaborative research project bringing together twenty-four academics from Britain, Europe and North America.

Each volume shares a common structure. Following the Introduction, the first chapter of each volume addresses the 'Literary History of the Decade' by offering an overview of the key writers, themes, issues and debates, including such factors as emergent literary practices, deaths, prizes, controversies, key developments, movements and best-sellers. The next two chapters are themed around topics that have been specially chosen for each decade, and that also relate to themes of the preceding and succeeding decades, enabling detailed readings of key texts to emerge in full historical and theoretical context. The tone and context having been set in this way, the remaining chapters fill out a complex but comprehensible picture of each decade. A 'Postcolonial Voices' chapter addresses the ongoing legacy of Britain's Empire and the rise of globalization, which is arguably the most significant long-term influence on contemporary British writing. 'Historical Representations' is concerned not just with historical novels but with the construction of the past in general, and thus the later volumes will be considering constructions of the earlier decades so that a complex multilayered account of the historicity of the contemporary will emerge over the series. The chapter on 'Generic Discontinuities' highlights the interaction between the socio-cultural contexts, established in earlier chapters, and aesthetic concerns. The 'International Contexts' chapters allow the chosen international academics allocated them to write about the key international aspects of the British fiction of the particular decade they are focusing on. This might variously concern how the fiction relates to international ideological, aesthetic and other relevant movements and/or how the fiction influenced international fiction and/or international reader reception. Each decade is different, but common threads may emerge.

In the future it is hoped to expand the Decades Series by adding to the first four planned volumes others that extend the period of 'Contemporary British Fiction': both by covering subsequent decades as they complete their course and also by featuring precursory decades, extending the focus of study backwards in time to cover the British fiction of the modern and post-war periods.

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# Introduction: Fiction of the 2000s

## Political Contexts, Seeing the Contemporary, and the End(s) of Postmodernism

Nick Bentley, Nick Hubble and Leigh Wilson

As Big Ben finished chiming midnight on New Year's Eve 1999, London welcomed in the new century with fireworks and a 'River of Fire' pyrotechnic display on the Thames. Earlier that evening, the opening ceremony of the £758 million Millennium Dome had been attended by an audience of 10,000 including the Queen and the Prime Minister, Tony Blair. It was a particularly triumphant night for Blair as he also officially opened the London Eye and then signified a new confident, successful, classless Britain by joining hands with the – somewhat uncomfortable looking – Queen in singing 'Auld Lang Syne'. Blair's 'New Labour', which had ended eighteen years of Conservative Party rule when they swept to power in the landslide election victory of 1997, were no longer constrained by their pledge to adhere to the previous Government's spending figures for the first two years of their term and were therefore set to increase public spending. They were expected to repeal the notorious Conservative 'Section 28' law in place since 1986, which outlawed the 'promotion' of homosexuality, and to further extend equal rights legislation generally. They had successfully introduced devolved government in Scotland, Wales, and – following Blair's support for the 'Peace Process' – Northern Ireland; and were looking to extend this to English regions. Furthermore, many were optimistic that they would also start the process of allowing Britain to share in the new European currency due to be introduced in two years' time. The 1990s had seen the final collapse of the Communist Bloc and the seeming advent of a 'new world order'; now there was the prospect of a more diverse and inclusive Britain emerging under New Labour politicians, who, unlike Margaret Thatcher, believed there was such a thing as Society but were none the less comfortable with individual aspiration and personal freedom.

Viewed in retrospect, this optimism now seems, at the very least, misplaced and yet to regard the feeling at the turn of the millennium as simply the product of

false consciousness is to misunderstand the significance of what actually happened during the decade. The strange thing was that rather than political failure leading to demoralization, the Labour Government were in fact successful beyond any realistic expectation. By the end of the decade, in which they remained constantly in power by comfortably winning the General Elections in 2001 and 2005, they had completed much of the progressive programme outlined above by repealing 'Section 28' in 2003, passing the Equality Act (which came into force in 2010) and investing heavily in the public sector, especially in Education and Health. Despite the setback of Northern England rejecting regional assemblies in a 2004 referendum, devolution proved to be a popular success in Scotland and Wales. The respective elections in 2007 of a minority Scottish National Party (SNP) Government, with Alex Salmond as First Minister, in Scotland and of Plaid Cymru into a power-sharing coalition with Labour in the Welsh Government, seemed to fulfil the aim of providing nationalist voices with a degree of autonomy without undermining the cohesion of the UK. It was only after 2011, when the unanticipated election of a majority SNP Government led to the 2014 referendum on Scottish Independence, which was rejected by 55 per cent of the Scottish electorate, that the potential constitutional questions thrown up by the 1997 Devolution Act suddenly became a major public issue. However, both the resultant debate and the referendum itself can be seen as reinvigorating democratic participation and therefore as a good outcome in itself. The irony of this is that, despite enabling this process, the Labour Party has been the biggest political loser as its levels of support in the immediate aftermath of the referendum plummeted in Scotland, where it had won fifty-six of the seventy-two parliamentary seats in 1997. However, that trajectory was not apparent at the end of 2009.

Some of Labour's failures even proved fortuitous, both to them and the country. The five key economic criteria that were announced in 1997 as the preconditions for triggering a referendum on membership of the Euro were never met and quietly around about that time the Government abandoned the planned 2006 referendum on acceptance of the new European Constitution, which national opinion polling showed to be unpopular. Not joining the common currency turned out to be advantageous as it spared the UK from the devastation of Eurozone economies such as Spain, Ireland and Greece during the global recession in the closing years of the decade. Instead, Labour under Gordon Brown, who had taken over as Prime Minister from Blair in 2007, was successful in averting the collapse of major banks and had brought the country out of recession before the decade's end. On balance, therefore, one might have expected a positive national mood at the end of a decade marked by public

investment, devolution, social liberalization and the formal end of the British Army's 38-year deployment in Northern Ireland, following the Provisional IRA's decommissioning of its weapons and the establishment in 2007 of a power-sharing government between the Democratic Unionist Party and Sinn Féin in the newly reinstated (following its suspension in 2002 and nearly five years of direct rule from London) Northern Irish Assembly.

That the decade was not experienced in this positive light is due mainly to two sequences of events that happened in the United States but which had global consequences. The first of these took place on 11 September 2001, when the terrorist group Al-Qaeda hijacked four passenger airliners and crashed three of them into, respectively, the North and the South Towers of the World Trade Center, and the Pentagon. The fourth plane, United Airlines Flight 93, crashed into a field as the passengers attempted to overwhelm the hijackers. The attack left nearly 3,000 people dead, including sixty-seven British citizens, and led to the US President, George W. Bush, declaring a War on Terror within days. On 7 October 2001, US, UK and other allied forces from NATO invaded Afghanistan to overthrow the Taliban regime, who were harbouring elements of Al-Qaeda. At peak involvement, nearly 10,000 British troops were deployed and their final withdrawal from Afghanistan was not until 2014, by which point 453 British military personnel had died. On 20 March 2003, US and UK forces invaded Iraq in order to topple the regime of Saddam Hussein – an aim that was quickly achieved – but remained for 'peace-keeping' purposes amidst what had effectively become a civil war. British troops were based in the Southern city of Basra before their eventual withdrawal in April 2009, during which time 179 military personnel died.

The Iraq war was never popular with the British public. Between one and two million people marched through the streets of London on Saturday 15 February 2003 in opposition to the war that was then seen to be pending, and opinion polls that week showed 52 per cent of the population opposed and only 29 per cent in favour (Travis and Black). While near universal support from the political parties and the media did lead to a brief swing in public opinion during the early weeks of the invasion, there was always a large minority in opposition. Following the overthrow of the regime, the Iraq Survey Group were unable to find any Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) in Iraq – the pretext on which the war was fought – and public opinion turned decisively against the War and Tony Blair. A YouGov poll taken to mark the tenth anniversary of the invasion found that 53 per cent of the public thought the war had been wrong and that 50 per cent thought that Blair had deliberately misled Parliament about the existence of WMD: figures that echoed those recorded in October 2004 when



the news of the non-existence of the WMD was first confirmed (Farmer). The experience of the Iraq War and its ongoing legacies have left a bitter aftertaste to the memory of Blair's premiership.

The other key external event that influenced Britain during the decade was the financial crisis of 2007–8 and the subsequent global recession. The roots of the crisis lay in a combination of factors stemming from the collapse of the US housing market in 2006 and the related subprime mortgage crisis. The knock-on effects of devalued assets, which threatened the collapse of large financial institutions in the US and globally, were only contained by the use of public funds to bail out the banks – a process that was initiated in Britain by the Brown Government. The subsequent global depression lasted until 2012 and the consequences in terms of the increased national debt levels of many Western countries are very much ongoing. In Britain, the crisis and recession were marked by a succession of crisis points such as the 'run' on the Northern Rock Bank in the autumn of 2007, which resulted in its nationalization the following spring; the huge bailout of the high street banks, Lloyds and the Royal Bank of Scotland, in October 2008; and the collapse of a number of well-known shopping chains in the run-up to Christmas 2008, including Woolworths, MFI and Zavvi (which had previously been known as Virgin Megastores). By the end of the decade, Britain was back out of recession officially but the negative experience of many of the public, and the awareness that the huge increase in national debt incurred by the bank bailout would result in cuts in public services and job losses in the public sector, contributed to the sour mood that would see Labour ejected from office in May 2010.

However, the disillusionment was not simply caused by the experience of the financial crisis from 2007 but also the realization that many of the problems revealed in this period were actually the consequence of longer underlying trends. In 2014, the Credit Suisse Global Wealth Report revealed that 'the UK was the only country in the G7 to have recorded rising inequality in the 21st century' (Treanor). This was not, as the report makes clear, just as a result of the recession at the end of the decade adversely affecting those on lower incomes but a steady process of rising inequality across the whole period. In fact, the trend dated back to the rule of the Thatcher Government in the 1980s, as the sociologists Richard Wilkinson and Katie Pickett were to make clear in their influential 2009 book, *The Spirit Level*:

Long before the financial crisis, which gathered pace in the later part of 2008, British politicians commenting on the decline of community or the rise of