

*Edited by Thomas F. Staley*

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# TWENTIETH- CENTURY WOMEN NOVELISTS

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*Margaret Drabble · Susan Hill  
P.D. James · Jennifer Johnston  
Doris Lessing · Olivia Manning  
Iris Murdoch · Edna O'Brien  
Barbara Pym · Muriel Spark*

# Twentieth-Century Women Novelists

*Edited by*  
Thomas F. Staley

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# Notes on the Contributors

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**Sydney Janet Kaplan** is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Washington. Her publications include *Feminine Consciousness in the Modern British Novel* (1975), and articles on Doris Lessing, Katherine Mansfield, and a review essay on women's studies in literature and criticism for *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* (spring 1979). She recently returned from New Zealand where she was studying the Katherine Mansfield papers at the Alexander Turnbull Library in Wellington, in preparation for her next book, a critical re-evaluation of the fiction of Katherine Mansfield.

**Kingsley Widmer**, raised in midwestern small towns and educated in diverse labours and several state universities, teaches English at San Diego State University. Among his varied writings are books of literary study — on D. H. Lawrence, Herman Melville, Henry Miller, Nathaneal West and Paul Goodman, and on issues of modernism, literary rebellion and cultural dialectics.

**Harry J. Mooney, Jr.** is Professor of English at the University of Pittsburgh. His principal areas of teaching and study are the Continental and English novel of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. His publications include *Katherine Anne Porter: A Critical Study* (1957), *James Gould Cozzens: Novelist of Intellect* (1964), *The Shapeless God* (essays in the modern novel, edited with Thomas F. Staley, 1968), and *Leo Tolstoy: The Epic Voice* (1969). He is currently at work on a study of the treatment of colonial and political themes in the English novel during the period 1895–1975.

**Barbara Brothers** is Associate Professor and Chairman of the Department of English at Youngstown State University. Her articles and reviews have appeared in *Boundary II*, *Mosaic*, *ADE Bulletin*, *James Joyce Quarterly*, *Journal of Beckett Studies*, *Pi Kappa Pi Journal*, *Sean O'Casey Review* and *ACIS Newsletter*. She is presently at work on a book on Henry Greene's novels.

**Rosemary Jackson** graduated in 1973 from the School of English and Comparative Literature, University of Warwick, then wrote a D.Phil. thesis on 'Dickens and Gothic tradition' for the University of York. Until 1981 she had a full-time lectureship in literature in the School of English and American Studies, University of East Anglia. She is now a freelance lecturer and is particularly interested in feminism, fantastic literature and the relation between these in terms of subverting traditional cultural assumptions. Her book on *Fantasy* is to be published shortly.

**Bernard Benstock** teaches detective fiction, as well as James Joyce and other modern writers, in the Department of English and Program in Comparative Literature at the University of Illinois. He has published four books on James Joyce and two on Sean O'Casey, and a recent publication is *Who's He When He's at Home: A James Joyce Directory*, co-authored with his wife, Shari Benstock. In preparation is a study of crime fiction, *The Necessary Murders*, and a collection of essays on the major practitioners of the genre, *Essays in Detective Fiction*.

**Gail Cunningham** is Senior Lecturer in English at the Middlesex Polytechnic. She is the author of *The New Woman and the Victorian Novel* (1978) and is currently preparing a book on Margaret Drabble.

**William McBrien**, editor, since 1974, of the scholarly journal *Twentieth Century Literature*, is at work on a critical biography of Stevie Smith, *Me Again: Uncollected Writings of Stevie Smith*. He is Professor of Modern British Literature at Hofstra University in New York and the author of many essays and reviews on this subject.

**Darcy O'Brien** is Professor of Modern Letters in the Graduate Faculty, the University of Tulsa. His novel, *A Way of Life, Like Any Other*, received the Ernest Hemingway Award in 1978. A second novel, *The Silver Spooner*, will appear this year. His previous books include *The Conscience of James Joyce*, *W. R. Rodgers* and *Patrick Kavanagh*. He has written numerous essays on Irish literature and has done articles on Irish politics and other subjects for the *New York Times Magazine* and *New York Magazine*. In 1978 he was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for fiction writing. Currently he is at work on *The Emergency*, a novel set in Ireland during the Second World War.

**Shari Benstock** has published on various modern authors from James Joyce and Djuna Barnes to Harold Pinter and T. S. Eliot, and is co-author of *Who's He When He's at Home: A James Joyce Directory* (1980). When not engaged in her administrative duties in medical sciences at the University of Illinois, she is at work on a study of the distaff expatriates in Paris between the world wars, and chapters on the relationship between modernist literature and post-impressionist art. The first section, on James Joyce and Henri Matisse, was published in 1981.

# Introduction

The first two novelists in F. R. Leavis's *Great Tradition* are women, and, while nearly everyone would add others, no serious student of the English novel would eliminate Jane Austen or George Eliot. The achievement of women writers of the British novel is a significant one, and the major talents within this tradition have been recognised. Besides Austen and Eliot, there are the Brontës, possibly Dorothy Richardson, and certainly Virginia Woolf. But there are others, too, who have only recently engaged wide critical attention: Elizabeth Gaskell, Mrs Humphry Ward, May Sinclair, Jean Rhys, to name only a few. In Leavis's pantheon Austen and Eliot rank with Conrad and James, and by later critical standards Woolf would rank with Lawrence, but it would be difficult to name an equally imposing quartet of women novelists of the same generation to rank with Scott, Thackeray, Meredith, or Hardy, to say nothing of Dickens. The reasons for this disparity have only recently been discussed seriously by critics such as Elaine Showalter and Ellen Moers among others. One point that I believe the essays in this volume make collectively is that those who study the British novel of the last half of this century will recognise that women novelists in this tradition have come into their own, if not dominated, during the sixties and seventies.

During the period of the 1960s and especially the 1970s there has been a dramatic change in the reception given to serious women novelists generally. They have achieved much wider recognition both critically and popularly than at any other time in the history of British fiction. The reasons for this recognition are, of course,

social as well as literary. Unlike the generation of women novelists such as Woolf and Dorothy Richardson who began writing during the early half of this century, women novelists of this period, and male novelists too for that matter, are not bold experimentalists in form or technique; their achievements rest on other claims. The themes they have inaugurated have grown out of new experiences. For example, as Gail Cunningham points out in her essay, Margaret Drabble's literary roots are clearly Victorian and Edwardian, but her heroines provide a careful portrait of the contemporary woman with crises and conflicts unknown to her predecessors. This is not to say that their personal conflicts are greater or any more frustrating, but they do reflect a much more complex engagement with the social and economic order. Women novelists of this period, like Drabble, bring to the fictional worlds they create an obviously wider range of experience from the world outside. The cataclysmic social changes and radical cultural alterations in the last twenty years have brought new freedom and along with it awesome responsibility to women. And these changes in cultural, social, and economic patterns are so significant that they have both expanded and altered the nature of reality for women. This entire phenomenon has raised some of the deepest philosophical and psychological questions of our age, and it is inevitable that these questions are embodied in the fiction of the period, and equally inevitable that they be probed by women.

The 1960s and 1970s have seen enormous changes in the ways in which some women, especially educated ones, have the opportunity to live their lives. Such opportunities have created a diversity and choice for women, but this new experience and awareness has obviously introduced new problems and frustrations. In spite of the many social advances and economic opportunities that have seemed to develop, however, like all revolutions, this one has been marked by as much pain as joy, as much guilt, frustration, and setback, as triumph, freedom, and promise. The questions of identity, career, motherhood, marriage, sexual and economic freedom are all the more complex as they become matters for active decisions rather than merely subjects for hope and speculation. And because women are beginning to enter the social world in most of its aspects, the social effect on men is also a subject of importance. These are only a few of the questions with which a new generation of women are confronted as they enter the public world and face responsibilities from which earlier generations of their sex



have been 'protected'. The feminine social world portrayed in Virginia Woolf's novels, for example, with all of its sophistication was not that much larger than that of Woolf's immediate predecessors. *A Room of One's Own* was a meagre ambition in light of female experience today. The turmoil, the triumphs, the accommodations, the anguish of these new circumstances have become the subject matter of some of the most important novels written by women during the 1960s and 1970s, and the problems that the female in the contemporary novel confronts were hardly concerns of Woolf's female characters simply because the world for them was much smaller, more enclosed. The themes and subjects, and the characters in these later novels reflect a far larger world with its shape much less clearly defined.

Perhaps the most remarkably distinguishing characteristic of the contemporary novel such as those written by the novelists discussed in this volume is the ability to create women not in some image to conform or conflict with the masculine world, but clearly as themselves.

We are, however, both comforted and frustrated that artists seldom, if ever, conform to our expectations and rarely explore the popularly predictable. And so it is with the women novelists whose careers began in the 1960s and reached their mature artistry or recognition in the 1970s, or who only began their careers, as some of the writers discussed in this volume, in the 1970s. In the novels of several of these writers it would seem on the surface of things that little has changed. For example, Barbara Pym's four elderly characters in *Quartet in Autumn* build fragile defences for their lonely, meagre lives which allow them a quiet dignity and tender meaning in a dull, faceless world. Yet we can ask that had it not been for the changed atmosphere and new awareness, would her work have come to the attention of critics and, even if it had, would the reading public have so readily recognised the quiet triumph of this beautiful work? As Barbara Brothers's essay makes clear, however remote Pym's characters seem from the modern world, and however dim their prospects, they reveal their author's sensibility and her deep understanding of human nature — a sensibility surely attuned to the struggle of the female in the modern world with its larger circumference.

This portrayal of the female in the novels of women has quite properly been the central focal point of critical discussion, but another important development in the advancement of women's

fiction, and one that has received too little attention, has been the depth of understanding and wider range of sensibility women novelists have shown in their creation of male characters and their willingness to deal with the consciousness of the male directly. The creative energies of women novelists are now revealed in their characters of both sexes. This is not to say that it is only the new status of women that has brought about this new confidence; genius has its influence over time and social conditions, and these present novelists write out of a tradition inspired by George Eliot's portrayal of Tertius Lydgate in *Middlemarch*, but this masterful creation of a male figure was a rare and brilliant exception. The male experience in the contemporary world is now an integral part of the woman novelist's domain. She is no longer restricted to the deepest probing of the feminine consciousness only to leave the male nature to the surface reality of dialogue and plot, or have male motives and passion filtered through the consciousness of a woman character. This emergence is nowhere better revealed than in the work of Iris Murdoch, who also brings an intellectual quality to her work that has few parallels in the contemporary novel, as Kingsley Widmer's discussion makes abundantly clear. The most intimate concerns of mind, sexuality, and relationships of males are frequently taken up directly, confidently, and convincingly by contemporary women novelists, and literary criticism which often grudgingly and belatedly follows literature has, except in its more backward habitats, become aware of the enormous cultural and aesthetic value of women novelists.

The novelists discussed in these essays vary widely in their concerns, their subjects, and their themes, and this in itself is testimony to the broad development in female fictions. Their subjects are not predictable. Jennifer Johnston, as Shari Benstock points out in her essay, is deeply concerned with form and narrative technique. Her novel, *How Many Miles to Babylon*, among other things, evokes the atmosphere of the trenches of the First World War with brilliant detail as it deals at the same time with questions of loyalty, family, and self. Muriel Spark's fictions seem to come from another era, and at times, another world, as William McBrien suggests in his discussion of her themes and especially her style, which draws from another era. P. D. James is more than an heir to the tradition of Agatha Christie and Dorothy Sayers; her characters are more deeply drawn and her themes of good and evil are more resonant and complex than her predecessors. Her fiction,

as Bernard Benstock suggests, transcends our expectations of detective fiction. James's latest novel, *Innocent Blood*, which was published after Benstock completed his essay, confirms her growing strength as she enlarges the social and moral frame of her work. As Rosemary Jackson comments, the work of Susan Hill, 'does not seem to be primarily concerned with the subject, or the subjugation, of women'. Yet Jackson makes a convincing argument for a feminist approach to her fiction. Although Darcy O'Brien sees distinct limitations in Edna O'Brien's fictions, he recognises her achievements in the frank exploration of the sexual dimensions of her women characters. This diversity, expected in fiction by male novelists, is now a characteristic of women's fiction. When given the opportunities of a full world women novelists will write of that new world; their vision till now has only been restricted by the limited lives afforded them.

A testimony to the rich and diverse achievement in the contemporary British novel is the difficulty in making too many critical generalisations. Women novelists have always had the uncanny ability to create a small world that is a true microcosm of the conflicts and relationships, both historical and personal, that affect society. Olivia Manning's *Balkan Trilogy* is a work that deals with a small group of Englishmen engulfed in the turbulence of the Second World War, and, although her stage is deliberately confined, these novels, as Harry Mooney shows, reflect in their acuity and understanding the concerns of an entire generation of people who lived through a war that tested their ideals along with their lives. And as Olivia Manning vividly recreates a particular time and place in history, Doris Lessing, as the title of Sydney Janet Kaplan's essay suggests, passionately portrays things to come. However bleak the predictions and the elegiac tone of Lessing's recent fiction, her literary career, which began with the exploration of the feminine consciousness and has turned to predictions of a cataclysmic demise for all of us, in a curious way exemplifies the willingness of women novelists to engage the largest questions that confront all human beings. The battles for women's freedom have by no means been won, and many women novelists are deeply concerned with the problems which the victories as well as the defeats present. But with this emergence has come a more significant aspect, and that is the challenge of art that women's fiction now gives to the world — not in a partial or secluded way, but in a total one.

This volume can make no claims to completeness in its discussion of living writers, for there were a number of others who could have been included and Barbara Pym and Olivia Manning have died since this volume went to the publisher. At the time it was conceived Jean Rhys and Antonia White were still alive, and Beryl Bainbridge's work is clearly as important as several of the writers discussed. The attempt was not to be exhaustive, but representative; to show collectively the considerable vitality of the contemporary British novel written by women in a series of essays which each treat the works of one author. It is appropriate to devote a volume of criticism to such a subject, because, first of all, it gives special focus to a significant development in the contemporary novel, and, further, directs our attention to the particular problems, approaches, and insights which the richness of this literature generates. The title of this book is more ponderous than I like; yet the diversity of these writers left thematic descriptions inaccurate or less than complete.

In the 17 October 1918 issue of *The Times Literary Supplement* there appeared a review of a now obscure book by R. Brimley Johnson, *The Women Novelists*. The reviewer praised the volume for the very interesting things it had to say about literature, but also the even more interesting discussion about the particular qualities of the literature that is written by women. The reviewer was Virginia Woolf. Today these 'particular qualities' that we find in serious women's fiction are not limitations or confined insights but rather revelations of art and experience for all of us.

August 1981

Thomas F. Staley

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# 1 Passionate Portrayal of Things to Come: Doris Lessing's recent fiction

Sydney Janet Kaplan

If genius is the power of anticipation, the passionate portrayal of things to come, then your work carries the mark of genius and over and above its artistic ventures it is a moral phenomenon.

(Thomas Mann to his brother Heinrich, 1941)

If it is dangerous to assess the work of a living author, it is especially so with Doris Lessing, who is twenty steps ahead of us whenever we try to place her in a critical framework or predict the direction of her work. Her own attitude towards her critics is highly ironic and she has questioned students about wasting their time dissecting only one book or even the works of a single author.<sup>1</sup> As a critic then, I must face the fact that my current attempts to interpret Lessing may later appear foolish, but I also know that this body of work of hers is worth being foolish over. It intrigues me, worries me, infuriates me. How I hope her vision of the future will not come true! The clarity of her depiction of the dissolution of society, with its prediction of world-wide destruction and catastrophe makes many of her readers long to reject her prophecies, her rejection of the way most people live their lives.

Some years ago I thought I saw a pattern unfolding in Lessing's development as a novelist, and I sensed that with the novels beginning with *The Four-Gated City* (1969)<sup>2</sup> she was leaving behind that intense struggle for sexual definition that had made her earlier

work so remarkable, especially *The Golden Notebook* (1962). At that time I believed that Martha Quest's death brought the whole question of 'feminine consciousness' to its end in Lessing's fiction, and that her newer work would take her 'away from the concerns of feminism'.<sup>3</sup> Lessing had commented in an interview in 1969: 'I'm impatient with people who emphasise sexual revolution. I say we should all go to bed, shut up about sexual liberation, and go on with the important matters.'<sup>4</sup> The 'important matters' for Lessing relate to the very future of the human race, to her apparent certainty that catastrophe is inevitable. In the same interview she flatly stated: 'I believe the future is going to be cataclysmic'.

A growing sense of urgency thus marks Doris Lessing's writing over the past decade, and her creative methods have become more experimental in order to convey that urgency. *Briefing For a Descent Into Hell* (1971), with its epigraph: 'Category: Inner-space fiction / For there is never anywhere to go but in',<sup>5</sup> allows Lessing to intensify her exploration of states of consciousness by incorporating into the realistic novel elements usually ascribed to the genres of fantasy, romance, and science fiction. In her most recent novel, *The Memoirs of a Survivor* (1974),<sup>6</sup> Lessing envisions – in relentlessly convincing detail – the world we will surely inhabit *after* the destruction of our present civilisation. At the same time as Lessing forces our attention on speculations about the future, the accuracy of her awareness of the psychology of human relationships and her grasp of the specifics of political and social realities never falters. As one of her reviewers has remarked: 'The most frightening aspect of Doris Lessing's *The Memoirs of a Survivor* is that her "bad times" could so easily stem from the conditions we have had a taste of in the last few years. We have had only intermittent shortages of sugar and toilet rolls, but Lessing's people live by barter and bargaining.'<sup>7</sup> In this context it is interesting to discover that Doris Lessing is presently working on a series of novels of a type she calls 'space-fiction'.<sup>8</sup>

Not only do these later works reveal Lessing's concern with humanity's future, but they also demonstrate her concurrent involvement with the study of Sufism,<sup>9</sup> which began to surface in her fiction as early as *Landlocked* (1965). For Lessing, the Sufi Way is a source of wisdom that could help people come to terms with the current sense of crisis and fear of social and personal dissolution.

In *The Four-Gated City* Lessing describes Martha's struggle to

develop innate but limited extra-sensory powers which might help her to forecast the oncoming disaster and allow her to make preparations to escape from it. The novel ends with the appearance of mutant children who are born with such powers fully realised, indicating at least a possible hope for the survival of human life, as well as a concept of the direction of its evolution. Such notions appear to be in accord with certain Sufi beliefs that Lessing makes explicit when she quotes from Idries Shah's *The Sufies* at a crucial juncture in *The Four-Gated City*:

Sufis believe that, expressed in one way, humanity is evolving towards a certain destiny. We are all taking part in that evolution. Organs come into being as a result of a need for specific organs. The human being's organism is producing a new complex of organs in response to such need. In this age of the transcending of time and space, the complex of organs is concerned with the transcending of time and space. What ordinary people regard as sporadic and occasional bursts of telepathic and prophetic power are seen by the Sufi as nothing less than the first stirrings of these same organs. The difference between all evolution up to date and the present need for evolution is that for the past ten thousand years or so we have been given the possibility of a conscious evolution. So essential is this more rarefied evolution that our future depends on it. (p. 492.)

But people who appear to be developing these new organs are often misunderstood by others with more limited capacities. In *Briefing For a Descent Into Hell* Charles Watkins is declared 'insane' by his doctors when he begins to experience higher states of consciousness. Charles becomes aware of interconnections between all things and envisions human life as part of a larger whole. His vision also communicates to Lessing's readers a painful, last-chance appeal to change before we destroy ourselves and the planet that is our home, because 'some sort of a divorce there has been somewhere along the path of this race of man between the "I" and the "We", some sort of a terrible falling away. . .'. (p. 103.)

The most profound moments of Charles Watkins's interior journey parallel innumerable descriptions of 'the highest state of consciousness' expressed throughout the centuries by visionaries from diverse cultures and traditions. While Lessing's approach



appears to be through Sufism, her uninitiated readers might be able to grasp at least a part of her intent through a more generalised description of the concept of mind-expansion, such as the following by John White:

. . . all are agreed in calling it the highest state of consciousness: a self-transforming perception of one's total union with the infinite. It is beyond time and space. It is an experience of the timelessness which is eternity; of unlimited unity with all creation. One's socially conditioned sense of 'me' is shattered and swept away by a new definition of the self, the I. In that re-definition of self, I equals all mankind, all life and the universe. The usual ego boundaries break down and the ego passes behind the limits of the body.<sup>10</sup>

The consciousness behind and within Lessing's fiction strains those boundaries in *Briefing For a Descent Into Hell*, while in *The Memoirs of a Survivor* it dissolves them completely, as its narrator and those who are linked with her pass 'out of this collapsed little world into another order of world altogether'. (p. 182.)

Within this context of earthly calamity and psychic evolution the Lessing novel interceding between *Briefing* and *Memoirs* almost seems like a throwback to much earlier concerns. When I first read *The Summer Before the Dark* (1973)<sup>11</sup> I thought that it might imply Lessing's return to her earlier focus on the role of women in society, sexual relationships and the problems of independence for intelligent women. But I quickly realised that this apparent 'return' was not to the same questions at all. For if this seemingly 'conventional' novel is viewed within the contexts of Lessing's concern with the collapse of present systems and the evolution of consciousness it may even be recognised as one of her most deeply revelatory works. Its deceptively simple story about a middle-aged woman's attempts at self-discovery actually complements the more overtly grand vision of the novel which preceded it. Kate Brown's journey, in its geographical locations alone, hints at a connection with Doris Lessing's overriding concern with spiritual evolution. Istanbul and Spain, the two 'foreign' destinations of Kate's initial wanderings, are both centres of ancient Sufi wisdom. Watching a bird fly past her window in Istanbul, Kate feels 'that subtle approaches were being made to her from an unknown world'. (p. 53.)