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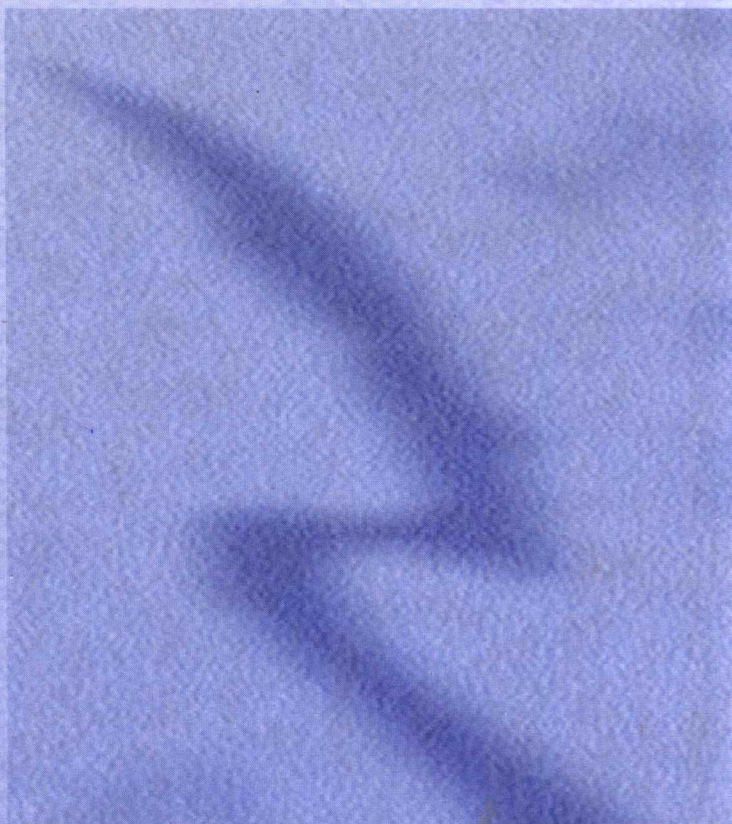

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Contemporary Fiction

'This is a very valuable book, particularly for undergraduate literature majors wishing to deepen their own understanding of their literary and cultural moment. An interesting, worthwhile and challenging study.'
Mark Willhardt, Monmouth College, Illinois.

'Well structured, informative, and written in a lively, easy style . . . the book ranges widely over its material, including a good variety of authors, books and ideas.'
Tim Woods, University of Wales, Aberystwyth.

The past twenty-five years have seen an explosion of new developments in the English language novel. Because of its enormous diversity, however, the field of contemporary fiction studies can appear fragmented and confusing.

Jago Morrison's *Contemporary Fiction* provides a much-needed accessible account of this vital evolving field. He enables readers to navigate the subject by introducing the key areas of debate and offers in-depth discussions of many of the most significant texts. Writers examined include:

Ian McEwan, Maxine Hong Kingston, Jeanette Winterson, Toni Morrison, Salman Rushdie, Angela Carter, Hanif Kureishi, Buchi Emecheta and Alice Walker.

Tackling issues such as history, time, the body, race and ethnicity, this book will be essential reading for those approaching the area for the first time, and represents an important contribution to the understanding of contemporary fiction.

Jago Morrison is a principal lecturer in English at University College Chichester.

To Alison

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

After the end of the novel

For several decades after the end of the Second World War, the novel appeared to be dead. As a vehicle for literary experimentation, on the one hand, it had been taken to the limits by modernists like Joyce, Woolf and Beckett. And, on the other hand, beset by the mass media of film, television and computers, book fiction could not hope to survive as a form of entertainment. For many commentators in the 1960s, fiction's fate seemed sealed. In 1962 the American theorist Marshall McLuhan caught the mood of many with his study *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, arguing that new electronic media were the future for human communication. The printed book itself, with its conformity, linearity and traditions of elitism, was about to be made obsolete by the technologies of a new, postliterate age.

Perhaps understandably, throughout this period the defensiveness of fiction writers is palpable. It is with a brittle irony that the postmodernist John Barth describes himself in 1967 as a 'print-oriented bastard', referring to the attacks of McLuhanites on the novel and novelists in general. In his famous essay 'The Literature of Exhaustion' Barth admits to a suspicion that the time of the novel may be up. In the same way that, in earlier eras, great forms such as classical tragedy, grand opera or the sonnet sequence had eventually succumbed to exhaustion, perhaps the novel had reached the end of its useful life.

In a book that reads like an obituary, a similar assessment is offered by Leslie Fiedler in *Waiting for the End: The American Literary Scene* (1965). According to Fiedler, the deaths of Hemingway and Faulkner at the beginning of the 1960s marked the end of the great age of US fiction. Little remained for contemporary writers but to fiddle amongst the ruins:

> There are various ways to declare the death of the novel: to mock it while seeming to emulate it, like Nabokov, or John Barth; to reify it into a collection of objects like Robbe-Grillet; or to *explode* it, like

> William Burroughs; to leave only twisted fragments of experience and the miasma of death. The latter seems, alas, the American Way.
> (p. 170)

Contemporary fiction, it seemed, had been overcome with 'the nausea of the end' (p. 171). Its readership was in terminal decline. Writers had become 'shrill and unconvincing . . . obvious and dull' (p. 177). 'Perhaps narrative will not continue much longer to be entrusted to print and bound between hard covers,' Fiedler speculates. 'There is always the screen, if the page proves no longer viable' (p. 177).

In Britain in the early 1970s, we see a similar scene of decline. From the most influential critics, such as Bernard Bergonzi (1970), David Lodge (1971) and Malcolm Bradbury (1973), there is little sense of vibrancy or fresh development. Instead, the concern of academics is to protect what is left of the 'English novel' from the threat of corruption and dissolution. As late as 1980, commentators like Chris Bigsby reflect a prevalent view of the novel in Britain as 'a cosily provincial, deeply conservative, anti-experimental enterprise, resistant to innovation' (p. 137). Frederick Bowers' essay of the same period, symptomatically entitled 'An Irrelevant Parochialism' (1980), corroborates this impression. All that is striking about the contemporary British novel is 'its conformity, its traditional sameness, and its realistically rendered provincialism. Shaped only by its contents, the British novel is the product of group mentality: local, quaint, and self-consciously xenophobic' (p. 150).

Looking back with the benefit of hindsight, therefore, it seems extraordinary just how misguided this 'death of the novel' thesis turned out to be. In fact, contemporary fiction was to undergo a renaissance over the next twenty years, re-establishing itself as the pre-eminent literary form by the turn of the twenty-first century. In terms of popularity, film and television did not deprive new fiction of its audience. Indeed, as Richard Todd (1996) shows from extensive publishing data, there is little evidence that any of the newer information and communication technologies have eroded fiction's reputation or readership. The repeated claims of a crisis in publishing are similarly difficult to sustain. As Todd shows, during the 1990s between 4,500 and 7,000 Booker-eligible or 'literary' fiction titles were being published annually in Britain and Commonwealth countries. If we add to their number the extensive range of fiction published in the United States, we can estimate that over 10,000 works are now published as 'literary' fiction in English every year. As far as the novel is concerned, therefore, on aesthetic and intellectual levels, as well as on the level of pure production and consumption, McLuhan's prediction of the death of the book has been comprehensively debunked.

One of the main reasons for fiction's resurgence as a literary form has been the range of new developments in the forms and concerns of the novel, many of which are explored in this book. It is these which provide the definitive refutation of the 'death of the novel' thesis. The period I discuss is one in which black and Asian American women writers like Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and Maxine Hong Kingston have transformed the literary mainstream in the United States. Formerly colonised nations such as Nigeria have comprehensively asserted themselves on the global literary scene. On the level of technique, South American postmodernists like Jorge Luis Borges have provided a generation of experimental writers with a whole new toolbox to work with. Post-feminist writers such as Angela Carter and Jeanette Winterson have pushed the narrative representation of gender to conclusions inconceivable in the work of Iris Murdoch or even Doris Lessing. Writers like Salman Rushdie, working from self-consciously postcolonial and migrant positions, have challenged the novel's traditional relation to nationhood and identity.

In view of these developments, it is particularly ironic that Bigsby's and Bowers' essays on the redundancy and exhaustion of contemporary fiction, quoted above, were published in the very same issue of the literary periodical *Granta* that carried the first draft of Rushdie's groundbreaking *Midnight's Children*. Indeed, this coincidence gives a useful clue as to how to read the 'death of the novel' thesis of the 1960s and 1970s. In retrospect, the perception of fiction as exhausted and provincial in that period often reflects little more than the critical assumptions and reading habits which underpinned dominant critical opinion. In well-regarded studies such as Bernard Bergonzi's *The Situation of the Novel* (1970), for example, there is no recognition of the importance of new African American fictions emerging in the United States, fictions which were to change and enervate the American literary scene profoundly. Instead, disparaging reference is made to a descent into 'genre fiction' such as 'the Negro novel'. In the established view which Bergonzi reflects, such developments seemed to offer little to our assumed task – understanding the 'Englishness' of English fiction. Similarly, it is symptomatic that contemporary works by such figures as Chinua Achebe, one of the most innovatory and important voices in West African fiction in English, warrant no mention here at all.

Speaking of his experience at Cambridge in the 1970s, the theorist and critic Henry Louis Gates Jr confirms the same impression. For him, a narrowness of reading habits at the heart of the literary establishment at that time was the major barrier to the recognition of new developments in the novel. Even at postgraduate level, as Gates says in his study *Figures in Black* (1987), an interest in new literatures was unwelcome in all of the dominant schools of literary criticism.

Even in the literature departments of universities in formerly colonised countries, a culture of disdain for new Asian, African and South American writing in particular survived well into the 1970s and beyond. As the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1993) comments, 'the English department at Makerere, where I went for my undergraduate studies, was probably typical of all English departments in Europe or Africa at that time. It studied English writing of the British Isles' (p. 7).

In the United States, there is a similar picture of conservatism and ethnocentrism, even in universities where black scholars had gained a significant number of faculty positions. As Houston A. Baker Jr and Patricia Redmond (1989) argue, in this period it was necessary for black scholars and critics to collaborate strenuously simply to combat 'the academy's indifference or hostility to their work' (p. 3). Indeed, as late as the early 1990s, when the study of 'new literatures' had begun to successfully entrench itself in the curricula of British universities, and when leading publishers such as Heinemann had begun to market postcolonial writing with vigour, Toni Morrison (1992) still refers to the habitual 'silence and evasion' characterising the treatment of black writing by the American literary establishment:

> Like thousands of avid nonacademic readers, some powerful literary critics in the United States have never read, and are proud to say so, *any* African American text . . . It is interesting, not surprising, that the arbiters of critical power in American literature seem to take pleasure in, indeed relish, their ignorance of African American texts.
>
> (Morrison, 1992, p. 13)

At the same moment that leading white critics were bemoaning the exhaustion and parochialism of the novel, then, it is clear that much of the most interrogative contemporary writing in English was being ignored or bypassed unrecognised.

If, on both sides of the Atlantic, writers and scholars encountered a generalised resistance to much of the most interrogative literature of the period, moreover, this was not merely coincidental. Rather, it undoubtedly reflected a reluctance to revise traditional notions of what might constitute 'English Literature', and what the goals of studying it might be. In their study *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin bear witness to this tendency. As they suggest, the emergence of a whole range of new literatures in English in the post-war period represents a challenge to any notion of literary studies based on a parochial and traditional canon. Against the perception of the novel as an ailing, threatened form, the general posture of the literary establishment for several

decades after the Second World War was one of defensiveness. In Britain particularly, laments for the death of the novel reflected, above all, a misapprehension about where new developments in fiction were likely to come from, and what kinds of rebirths for the novel might be possible.

Over the past two and a half decades, that scene has changed profoundly. Post-war literary studies has split in a number of directions, each pursuing distinct developments. Post-colonial studies has brought a new set of conceptual frameworks with which to address the contemporary renaissance in anglophone writing. Questions of ethnicity, gender and sexuality have become central to academic literary debate in Britain and the United States. The theoretical movements of structuralism and poststructuralism in the 1970s and 1980s have fed through into a range of critical perspectives and techniques.

Contemporary fictions are anything but homogeneous. On the contrary, they are interesting precisely for their ability to locate themselves in the interstices – the spaces between national cultures, genders and histories. In contemporary criticism this diversity of strategy is well reflected. Accordingly, in contrast to older studies which attempt to provide a summative account of 'the state of the novel', the assumption of this book is that the range and variety of contemporary writing demands similar variation in critical approach. In the four chapters that comprise Part I, I outline four contextual frameworks through which it is useful to read contemporary fiction, with changing emphases across different texts. In chapter 1, the representation of history is explored, with reference to the multi-dimensional transitions of the post-war period and claims in the late twentieth century of the 'End of History' itself. Chapter 2 moves on to the connected question of time, and the variety of responses in contemporary fiction to the radical rethinking of time in the New Physics, in philosophy and elsewhere. Chapter 3 is concerned with the disciplining of the flesh, exploring the provocative ways in which genders and bodies are re-imagined in recent writing. Chapter 4 turns then to the problem of 'race', examining the roots of race-thinking, its train of atrocities, and the ways in which writers have dealt with the legacy of both.

What is necessarily true of all contemporary fiction, like all literature, is that it needs to be read as a product of the cultural conditions from which it emerges. The past half century has been a period of massive, multi-dimensional cultural change. Major shifts and dislocations have occurred to older notions of racial and sexual identity. The fabric of history, collective memory and social time within which, a century ago, fiction could comfortably locate itself, has been subject to profound interrogation and transformation. As I have suggested, the purpose of the first part of this book is to outline some of the key frameworks within which contemporary fiction

can be related to these processes of change. In Part II, individual writers are addressed using a range of (often hybrid) critical strategies. For reasons of usefulness and accessibility, much of my discussion is geared towards those texts in a writer's *œuvre* which have been most widely read and studied. Frequently, though, I do introduce less well-known texts for discussion and comparison. None of these discussions purports to be exhaustive. In many of the areas I touch on, there is already a substantial body of critical and theoretical writing. In others, a huge amount of work remains to be done. In each case, the readers' guide at the end of the book suggests directions for further exploration of the writers and issues raised.

1 History and post-histories

In an important way, the 'death of the novel' thesis of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s reflects an anxiety in that period about the possibility of adequately addressing contemporary historical concerns in fiction. The scale of violence in the Second World War, the Nazi genocide, the atom bombing of Japan and, after them, the paranoiac politics of the Cold War – with a global nuclear conflagration held in suspense only by the promise of 'mutually assured destruction' – all of this seemed to have rendered fiction too flimsy a medium for history. Indeed, as early in the post-war period as 1946, in his essay 'The Future of Fiction', the British writer V. S. Pritchett was already warning that the capacities of the novel had been overcome by the events of recent times. Writers, by their very disorientation, had 'become the historian(s) of the crisis in civilization'. In subsequent decades, concerns have turned to the resurgence of nationalisms and racisms in multiple forms around the globe, and the apocalyptic stand-offs of the Cold War superpowers have already faded from the surface of collective memory. What has not faded from the minds of writers, however, is the problem of framing contemporary history in fiction.

In texts which deal with the most difficult themes of recent times, especially the Nazi Holocaust, the problem of writing history asserts itself particularly severely. As we will see, Holocaust fiction reflects the strategies of much contemporary fiction in this respect, frequently abandoning realistic representation in favour of sometimes tortuous techniques of deferral and disjunction. Memory, the most crucial resource of the novelist, becomes a difficult and painful process, counterpointed by thematics of amnesia.

In D. M. Thomas' controversial *The White Hotel* (1981), for example, the Nazi massacre at the Babi Yar gorge in Kiev is approached in a circling, gradual way. Genocide is figured not through memories but through premonitions, those of a psychiatric patient in Vienna twenty years before the war. As Thomas recognises, with material of this extreme kind, direct narration often becomes inadequate or impossible. As a result, the text