

The background of the entire cover is an aerial photograph of a city, likely New York City, showing a dense grid of streets and buildings. Overlaid on this is a complex, colorful, abstract pattern that resembles a mosaic or a stylized map. The colors include various shades of red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple, creating a vibrant, almost surreal effect. The pattern seems to follow the general layout of the city but with significant artistic distortion and color manipulation.

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO



# AMERICAN FICTION AFTER 1945

*Edited by John N. Duvall*

CAMBRIDGE

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COMPANION TO  
AMERICAN FICTION  
AFTER 1945

EDITED BY  
JOHN N. DUVALL  
*Purdue University, Indiana*



CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,  
Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)  
Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9780521123471](http://www.cambridge.org/9780521123471)

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First published 2012

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*

The Cambridge companion to American fiction after 1945 / [edited by] John N. Duvall.

p. cm. – (Cambridge companions to literature)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-521-19631-4 – ISBN 978-0-521-12347-1 (pbk.)

I. American fiction – 20th century – History and criticism.

I. Duvall, John N. (John Noel), 1956–

PS379.C26 2012

813'.5409–dc23 2011038182

ISBN 978-0-521-19631-4 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-12347-1 Paperback

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## CHRONOLOGY

- 1936 Iowa Writers' Workshop is founded at the University of Iowa, the first creative writing program in America
- 1945 President Franklin Delano Roosevelt dies on April 12; Vice President Harry S. Truman assumes the Presidency. August 6 and 9 the US Air Force drops atomic bombs over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, causing mass civilian casualties. On August 15, Japan surrenders to the Allied Powers, ending World War II  
Richard Wright, *Black Boy*
- 1946 Carson McCullers, *The Member of the Wedding*  
Robert Penn Warren, *All the King's Men*
- 1947 In response to hearings by the House Un-American Activities Committee, Hollywood blacklists suspected communists  
James A. Mitchner, *Tales of the South Pacific*
- 1948 James Gould Cozzens, *Guard of Honor*  
Gore Vidal, *The City and the Pillar*
- 1949 On August 29, the Soviet Union successfully detonates its first atomic bomb  
Eudora Welty, *The Golden Apples*  
Nelson Algren, *The Man with the Golden Arm*
- 1950 Senator Joseph McCarthy claims that fifty-seven known communists work for the US State Department  
William Faulkner is awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature
- 1951 J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*  
Herman Wouk, *The Caine Mutiny*
- 1952 Dwight D. Eisenhower elected President  
Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*  
Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea*
- 1953 James Baldwin, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*  
Saul Bellow, *The Adventures of Augie March*  
John Cheever, *The Enormous Radio and Other Stories*



# CHRONOLOGY

- 1954 Ernest Hemingway is awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature  
William Faulkner, *A Fable*
- 1955 Flannery O'Connor, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*
- 1956 John Barth, *The Floating Opera*  
James Baldwin, *Giovanni's Room*  
Saul Bellow, *Seize the Day*
- 1957 Soviet Union launches *Sputnik*, first orbiting satellite, initiating  
the space race  
Jack Kerouac, *On the Road*
- 1958 Bernard Malamud, *The Magic Barrel*  
Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*
- 1959 William S. Burroughs, *Naked Lunch*  
Philip Roth, *Goodbye, Columbus*
- 1960 Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*  
Flannery O'Connor, *The Violent Bear It Away*  
John Updike, *Rabbit, Run*
- 1961 Joseph Heller, *Catch-22*  
Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer*
- 1962 William Faulkner dies on July 6  
September–October: Cuban Missile Crisis  
Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*
- 1963 President John F. Kennedy assassinated in Dallas, Texas,  
November 22  
Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*
- 1964 Flannery O'Connor dies on August 3  
Saul Bellow, *Herzog*
- 1965 United States begins saturation bombing and a major troop  
build-up in Vietnam  
Donald Barthelme, *Snow White*  
Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood*
- 1966 Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*
- 1967 Associated Writing Programs (AWP), a professional organization  
of creative writing programs, is founded. (Name later changed  
to the Association of Writers & Writing Programs.)  
William Styron, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*
- 1968 Martin Luther King, Jr., is assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee,  
on April 4  
Norman Mailer, *Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the  
Novel as History*  
John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse*  
N. Scott Momaday, *House Made of Dawn*

# CHRONOLOGY

- 1969 July 20, first moon landing  
*Saturday Evening Post* ceases publication because of declining readership  
 Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five; or The Children's Crusade*
- 1970 Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*  
 Joan Didion, *Play It as It Lays*
- 1971 E. L. Doctorow, *The Book of Daniel*  
 John Updike, *Rabbit Redux*
- 1972 Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*
- 1973 October: Arab oil embargo causes gas prices to rise  
 Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*
- 1974 Richard Nixon resigns his Presidency on August 8
- 1975 In April, the United States ends all military and financial support to South Vietnam. South Vietnam falls to communist North Vietnam  
 William Gaddis, *J R*
- 1976 America celebrates its Bicentennial on July 4  
 Jimmy Carter elected President  
 Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*
- 1977 Robert Coover, *The Public Burning*  
 Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*  
 Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*
- 1978 Michael Herr, *Dispatches*  
 John Irving, *The World According to Garp*
- 1979 Joan Didion, *The White Album*  
 Norman Mailer, *The Executioner's Song*
- 1980 Ronald Reagan elected President  
 Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping*  
 Joyce Carol Oates, *You Must Remember This*  
 John Kennedy Toole, *A Confederacy of Dunces*
- 1981 John Updike, *Rabbit is Rich*
- 1982 Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*
- 1983 Raymond Carver, *Cathedral*  
 William Kennedy, *Ironweed*
- 1984 Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street*  
 William Gibson, *Neuromancer*  
 Louise Erdrich, *Love Medicine*
- 1985 Don DeLillo, *White Noise*  
 Bobbie Ann Mason, *In Country*

# CHRONOLOGY

- 1986 Kathy Acker, *Don Quixote*  
Richard Ford, *The Sportswriter*
- 1987 Paul Auster, *The New York Trilogy*  
Toni Morrison, *Beloved*
- 1988 Raymond Carver dies on August 2  
George Bush elected President  
Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*
- 1989 Amy Tan, *The Joy Luck Club*
- 1990 Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*  
Charles Johnson, *Middle Passage*  
John Updike, *Rabbit at Rest*
- 1991 January–February: US-led coalition invades Iraq  
December: the Soviet Union officially dissolves  
Gish Jen, *Typical American*
- 1992 William Jefferson Clinton elected President  
Dorothy Allison, *Bastard out of Carolina*  
Cormac McCarthy, *All the Pretty Horses*  
Denis Johnson, *Jesus' Son*
- 1993 Toni Morrison is awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature  
Annie Proulx, *The Shipping News*  
Philip Roth, *Operation Shylock*
- 1994 William Gaddis, *A Frolic of His Own*  
David Guterson, *Snow Falling on Cedars*
- 1995 Sherman Alexie, *Reservation Blues*  
Chang-rae Lee, *Native Speaker*
- 1996 Joyce Carol Oates, *We Were the Mulvaney*s  
David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*
- 1997 Don DeLillo, *Underworld*
- 1998 President Clinton impeached by US House of Representatives  
Toni Morrison, *Paradise*  
Thomas Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon*  
Barbara Kingsolver, *The Poisonwood Bible*
- 1999 Ralph Ellison dies on April 16  
Ha Jin, *Waiting*
- 2000 December 12, US Supreme Court decides five to four in *Bush v. Gore* to stop the Florida vote recount; George W. Bush elected to the Presidency  
Michael Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*  
Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves*

## CHRONOLOGY

- 2001 September 11: terrorists attack the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon, killing 2,996; United States begins bombing Afghanistan in October  
Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections*
- 2002 Jeffrey Eugenides, *Middlesex*
- 2003 United States invades Iraq on March 23  
Edward P. Jones, *The Known World*
- 2004 Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*  
Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America*
- 2005 Saul Bellow dies on April 5  
William T. Vollman, *Europe Central*
- 2006 Richard Ford, *The Lay of the Land*  
Thomas Pynchon, *Against the Day*
- 2007 Norman Mailer dies on November 10  
Don DeLillo, *Falling Man*  
Junot Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*
- 2008 Barack Obama elected President  
Toni Morrison, *A Mercy*
- 2009 John Updike dies on January 27  
Colson Whitehead, *Sag Harbor*  
Sherman Alexie, *War Dances*
- 2010 According to AWP, 336 graduate programs in creative writing exist in the United States (116 MA, 184 MFA, and 36 PhD)  
Jonathan Franzen, *Freedom*

## CONTENTS

<i>List of figures</i>	page vii
<i>Notes on contributors</i>	viii
<i>Chronology</i>	xii

Introduction: A story of the stories of American fiction after 1945	I
JOHN N. DUVALL	

### PART I POETICS AND GENRES

1 Postmodern metafiction	15
AMY J. ELIAS	
2 Contemporary realism	30
ROBERT REBEIN	
3 New journalism and the nonfiction novel	44
STACEY OLSTER	
4 Science fiction	56
PHILLIP E. WEGNER	
5 The short story	68
SUSAN LOHAFFER	

### PART II HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXTS

6 African American fiction	85
KEITH BYERMAN	
7 American Indian fiction	99
NANCY J. PETERSON	

## CONTENTS

8	Multiethnicities: Latino/a and Asian American fiction A. ROBERT LEE	114
9	American Jewish fiction VICTORIA AARONS	129
10	Feminist fiction JANE ELLIOTT	142
11	Southern fiction MARTYN BONE	154
12	Fiction and the Cold War ALAN NADEL	167
13	Fiction and 9/11 JOHN N. DUVALL	181

## PART III MAJOR AUTHORS

14	Ralph Ellison NICOLE A. WALIGORA-DAVIS	195
15	Flannery O'Connor JAY WATSON	207
16	Thomas Pynchon BRIAN JARVIS	220
17	Toni Morrison LINDEN PEACH	233
18	Don DeLillo LAURA BARRETT	244
	Conclusion: Whither American fiction? JESSICA PRESSMAN	256
	<i>Index</i>	265

## FIGURES

- 1 Screenshot from YHCHI's Flash animation *Close Your Eyes*.  
Used with permission from the artists. page 258
- 2 Close-up of screenshot from the online hypertext *Marginalia  
in the Library of Babel* by Mark C. Marino. Used with  
permission from the author. 261

JOHN N. DUVALL

## Introduction: A story of the stories of American fiction after 1945

This may well be the last volume ever to survey American fiction from 1945 to the present. That is not because scholarship on this body of narrative is waning. Far from it. There is a more pragmatic reason for my prediction: the period is getting a little long in the tooth. The Victorian Era will never exceed sixty-four years. Modernism is often dated from 1890 to 1945 (a solid fifty-six-year run), but the post-1945 period (which until recently we simply called “postmodernism”), if a person, could now be collecting Social Security. It is only a matter of time before the profession decides that, if for nothing more than curricular reasons (after all, there is only so much one can teach in a semester), we need to close off the postwar period in some definitive fashion. Certainly, no one in 2045 will be teaching a course in contemporary American fiction from 1945 to the present.

Not surprisingly, because the postwar period has been left openended for so long, there have been generational shifts, so that post-1945 fiction looks quite different now than for earlier critics. One of the earliest attempts to make sense of American fiction following World War II occurs in John Aldridge’s *After the Lost Generation* (1951), which saw contemporary novelists falling short of the achievement of American modernist writers. Except for Norman Mailer, Truman Capote, and Gore Vidal, however, the postwar novelists on whom Aldridge bases his assessment have largely been relegated to the ash heap of history: Robert Lowry, John Horne Burns, Alfred Hayes, Merle Miller, and Vance Bourjaily. In 1971, Tony Tanner published his magisterial study of postwar American fiction, *City of Words*, one that was certainly among the dominant narratives of this period when I began my graduate studies in 1978. Tanner tells a compelling story about postwar fiction, arguing that American novelists thematize a paranoid fear of deterministic systems, problematize identity, use language in a unique way that calls attention to itself, but are often trapped by their own verbal performances. For Tanner the typical fictional hero searches for a freedom that is not amorphous and wants “to establish an identity that is not a prison.”



The protagonist's quest is in a sense a double for the author's: "Can he find a *stylistic* freedom which is not simply a meaningless incoherence, and can he find a stylistic form which will not trap him inside the existing forms of previous literature?"<sup>1</sup>

Tanner based his study on twenty-two writers: Ralph Ellison, Saul Bellow, Joseph Heller, James Purdy, William S. Burroughs, Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut, John Hawkes, John Barth, Walker Percy, Sylvia Plath, Susan Sontag, William H. Gass, John Updike, Philip Roth, Frank Conroy, Bernard Malamud, Norman Mailer, Ken Kesey, William Gaddis, Donald Barthelme, and Richard Brautigan. Of Tanner's novelists, only nine remain relevant to the conversation today, if we base our sense of the canonical on that venerable institution of American pedagogy, the seventh edition of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, vol. E (Literature since 1945): Malamud, Ellison, Bellow, Vonnegut, Gass, Barthelme, Updike, Roth, and Pynchon. Plath appears in the anthology but only for her poetry. Gass perhaps should not fully count because he is represented only by an essay he wrote about fiction, not by any of his fiction.

In terms of who matters in contemporary American fiction, 1971 was a very different world from ours. Some of the omissions from Tanner's list can easily be explained by this date. Toni Morrison and Don DeLillo were unknown: DeLillo's first novel was published the same year as Tanner's study, while Morrison's first had appeared just a year earlier. But more striking from a contemporary perspective is the gender and racial imbalance: twenty men, two women, one African American. Tanner wrote his book before the rise of academic feminism and African American (as well as other ethnic) studies.

A scholar of contemporary American fiction today reads multiculturally or not at all, and in the world of literature anthologies (which can only contain so many pages and cost only so much), John Barth must make way for Toni Cade Bambara; Joseph Heller for Amy Tan; Ken Kesey for Sherman Alexie. But such decisions by anthology editors necessarily reduce the complexity of literary history. One purpose of this volume is to tell a fuller story of the breadth and nuance of American fictional production since 1945.

One story that explains part of the post-1945 landscape has been told by people as various as the Marxist critic Fredric Jameson and the metafictionist John Barth. It is the story of postmodernist experimentation, which Amy Elias explores more fully in Chapter 1. As Jameson puts it, postmodernism "is most often related to notions of the waning or extinction of the hundred-year-old modern movement (or to its ideological or aesthetic repudiation)"; for fiction, this means that "final forms of representation in the novel" have been spent and the new forms of fiction are aggressively nonmimetic.<sup>2</sup>