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TWENTIETH-CENTURY BRITISH AND IRISH FICTION

VOLUME I



General Editor
Brian W. Shaffer

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The Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Fiction

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Preface to *The Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Fiction*

Salman Rushdie, that most “international” of novelists, has famously remarked that “the novel has never been a more international form.”¹ This is particularly true of fiction written in the English language within the last several decades. Feroza Jussawalla and Reed Way Dasenbrock elaborate upon this point:

The single most important development in literature written in English over the past century has been its increasingly international – indeed, global – nature. Once the language of a few million people on a small island on the edge of Europe, English is now spoken and written on every continent and is an important language inside at least one-quarter of the world’s one hundred sixty countries. As English has become an important international language, it has also become an important international literary language.²

It is no mystery why this shift occurred. World War II helped accelerate the break-up of the British Empire (and further rise of American prestige), and Britain’s abortive intervention in the Suez crisis of 1956 marked the decline of British imperial standing. If London dominated 25 percent of the earth’s surface at the turn of the nineteenth century, with control of nearly four million square miles, this dominance, in the three decades following World War II, would shrink to a tiny fraction of that figure. As one observer remarked, Britain’s “major historical experience” in the twentieth century, other than the two World Wars, was “the final flourishing,

later decline and eventual loss of the Empire.”³

Britain’s political empire – in Africa, South Asia, and the West Indies – may be gone, but its “linguistic empire” is stronger than ever. As Jussawalla & Dasenbrock observe, “The Sun may now have set on the British empire, but that empire, in establishing English as a language of trade, government, and education in that sizable part of the world ruled by the British, helped create what may be a more enduring ‘empire’ of the English language.”⁴ Rushdie casts this linguistic dominance in yet more favorable terms. While it is true that English is *the* global language as “a result of the physical colonization of a quarter of the globe by the British,” Rushdie eschews viewing this language as an unwanted imposition of formerly colonized peoples, instead regarding it as “a gift of the British colonizers,” a legacy that in any case “ceased to be the sole possession of the English some time ago.”⁵

Rushdie’s point, coupled with the reality of a “globalized” world in which English-language authors on different continents so readily read and respond to each other’s works, provides the rationale for a major reference text such as *The Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Fiction*, which brings together the major English-language fiction, figures, debates, rubrics, and movements of the period from around the world. Novelists and short story writers are currently transcending geographical boundaries in their work; research tools are therefore called for which transcend these

same boundaries. *The Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Fiction*, with its total of more than 550 entries, accomplishes this very goal. The work provides a convenient and authoritative point of departure for undergraduate and graduate student research, teachers and scholars preparing course syllabi, and general readers in search of reliable, up-to-date bibliographies and filmographies. Indeed, *The Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Fiction*, which in separate volumes covers British and Irish fiction; US fiction; and world fiction in English (from Africa, Australia/New Zealand, Canada, South Asia, the West Indies, and East and Southeast Asia) is the most comprehensive single-resource mapping of this vast, rich, spectacularly heterogeneous field yet undertaken. The three volumes treat not only key authors and texts from the period but also crucial aesthetic and cultural, socioeconomic and political, and national and supranational contexts out of which the novels, novellas, and short fictions emerged. Put simply, *The Encyclopedia of Twentieth-Century Fiction* aims to elucidate the most important texts and contexts of twentieth-century fiction – novels, novellas, and short fiction – in English. It is also the most technologically sophisticated work of its kind in that it is being published both in print and in electronic formats, the latter of which allows for advanced cross-referencing between and among entries and for the periodic updating of entries.

A word on the division of twentieth-century fiction in English into three volumes is merited. The authors have been divided up across the volumes of the encyclopedia, with very few exceptions, based on their place of geographical origin rather than on their national and ethnic affiliations, cultural influences, or

place(s) of residence (as practicing writers of fiction). Without this guiding principle of organization, it would have been difficult to decide where to place the large number of authors of the last century who traversed standard cultural, geographic, and/or ethnic boundaries (Kazuo Ishiguro, Jean Rhys, Henry James, V. S. Naipaul, Malcolm Lowry, and Salman Rushdie, for example, might have fitted in either of two volumes). The three volumes of the encyclopedia are nevertheless designed to speak to each other and be consulted together; the boundaries between them – as they are between the various authors and movements covered within – are porous rather than absolute. In this spirit, entries in all three volumes are cross-referenced, as appropriate, to entries both within their own volume and in the other two volumes of the encyclopedia. Cross-referenced entries are designated as either (BIF), (AF), or (WF) – corresponding to British and Irish Fiction, American Fiction, or World Fiction – in order to make it instantly clear to readers in which volume the listed entry can be found.

As far as the content of the volume's entries are concerned, those entries devoted to individual authors address the author's life, literary milieu, influences, key prose works, and reception. These entries conclude with a bibliography of major primary texts, critical works, and, where appropriate, film and video adaptations of the fictions in question. Entries on broad topics – movements, debates, rubrics, and the like – by necessity must be even more surgical in focus. They are nevertheless intended to provide a substantial, reliable, engaging overview of the topic in question and to point the reader in the direction of major primary works and recommended secondary reading. Many of these broader subject entries

also implicitly advance an argument about the topic in question, although never at the expense of coverage and balance. All of the entries strive to communicate the richness and depth of their subjects as fully and clearly as possible given the necessary constraints of space.

Contributors to these volumes come from both sides of the Atlantic and be-

yond and have been chosen in accordance with their expertise. It is logical that an encyclopedia with a genuinely global scope would attract a global scholarly authorship. Collectively, the contributors demonstrate the vitality and diversity of the critical and contextual lenses through which the field of twentieth-century fiction in English is being explored and mapped today.

Notes

- 1 Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991* (London: Granta, 1991), p. 20.
- 2 Feroza Jussawalla & Reed Way Dasenbrock, "Introduction," in *Interviews with Writers of the Post-Colonial World* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1992), p. 3.
- 3 Randall Stevenson, *A Reader's Guide to the Twentieth-Century Novel in Britain* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1993), p. 126.
- 4 Jussawalla & Dasenbrock, "Introduction," p. 4.
- 5 Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*, pp. 64, 70.

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a tedious editorial process into a welcome voyage of intellectual discovery: I learned much from them about the fiction we all prize during the preparation of these volumes. At Rhodes College, my capable research assistant, Molly Ryan, provided much appreciated organizational and editorial assistance. I am grateful as well to many faculty colleagues, in particular Jennifer Brady, for their friendship and encouragement during my work on this project, and to the Dean of the Faculty, Michael Drompp, for his support. Members of my family – my wife Rachel, daughters Hannah and Ruth, and mother Dorothy – make everything possible and worthwhile, and so I wish to thank them, as always, for their inspiration and example. Finally, a word of thanks to my brother-in-law and fellow malt advocate David for “talking books” with me during the years in which this project was taking shape.

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