Contemporary British Novelists

Nick Rennison

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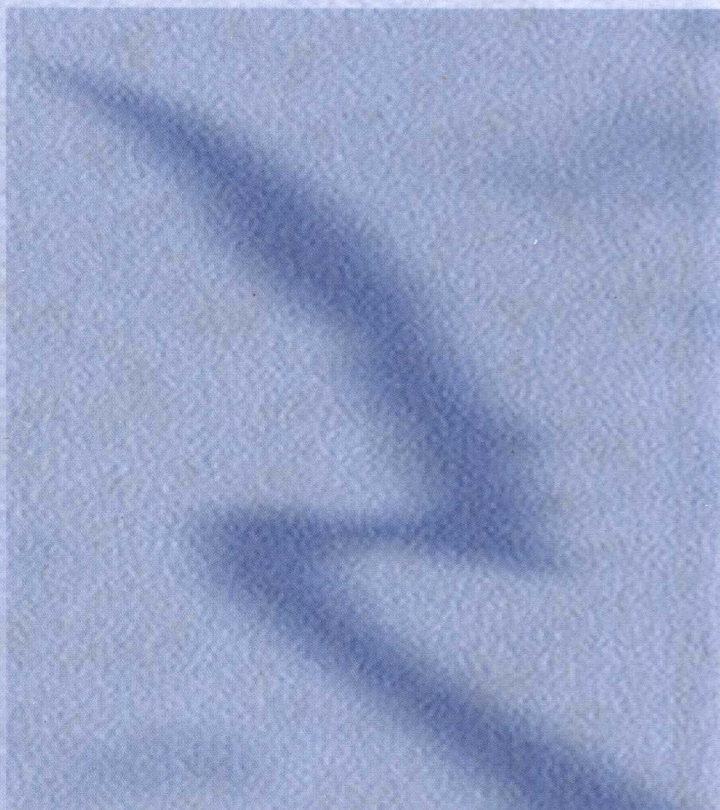

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CONTEMPORARY BRITISH NOVELISTS

Presenting the life and work of fifty of the most influential novelists in Britain today, this collection of review essays offers an excellent guide to the contemporary literary scene.

It covers a vast range of talents, styles and themes, from the gritty urban world of *Trainspotting* to the magic realism of *Midnight's Children* and the wartime drama of the *Ghost Road* trilogy.

Featured writers include:

- Martin Amis
- Louis de Bernières
- Sebastian Faulks
- Nick Hornby
- Ian McEwan
- Caryl Phillips
- Salman Rushdie
- Will Self
- Rose Tremain
- Sarah Waters
- Irvine Welsh
- Jeanette Winterson

Engaging and stimulating, this is the ideal guide for students, reading groups and anyone interested in contemporary British fiction.

Nick Rennison is a freelance writer, editor and bookseller.

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Contemporary British Novelists
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PREFACE

The novel in Britain, we are confidently and regularly told, is not what it once was. Whenever commentators attempt to assess the current state of the English novel, nostalgia for some presumed golden age is almost certain to appear at some point in the discussion. One of the most enduring, if not endearing, characteristics of English cultural criticism appears to be the belief that nothing written in the present can possibly match what was written in the past. In an essay published in the mid-1930s, George Orwell felt that 'it hardly needs pointing out that at this moment the prestige of the novel is extremely low' and that 'the novel is visibly deteriorating'. In the seventy years since, his views have been echoed in a thousand articles and think-pieces heralding the Death of the Novel, a demise that has either just taken place or is, inevitably, just about to take place. If readers of British fiction are not being invited to look to the past for glories no longer attainable, they are being pointed in the direction of other countries (usually America) as the home of mind-stretching, expansive novels that put our own parochial narratives, limited and unambitious as they are, into the shade. If the message is not 'they did this better fifty years ago', it is likely to be 'they do this better 5,000 miles away'. The argument that the contemporary British novel is a poor relative of its historical and geographical counterparts is so familiar that it has become an unexamined truism. It's easy to forget that there is an alternative case to be made. It's easy to forget that at the time Orwell penned his jeremiad about the novel Virginia Woolf was still alive, D. H. Lawrence had been dead for less than a decade and Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, Anthony Powell, Jean Rhys and Christopher Isherwood (to name only a few) were all launched upon their careers. The vast majority of novels published in America are no more ambitious and startling than the average British novel. Orwell's pessimism was not justified in the 1930s and any unthinking, downbeat dismissal of British fiction in the last twenty years is similarly misguided. Nor need we look across the Atlantic with

shamefaced embarrassment. There is actually far less need for British critics to adopt an immediate position of cultural cringe when faced by American fiction than there was, say, in the 1950s or early 1960s.

Certainly there are tasks for which the novel in Britain may no longer be suited. To attempt to use the novel as a means of undertaking a grand, sweeping analysis of society and its ills, for example, is a temptation to which British novelists continue to succumb, but the results are never very successful. In theory the undertaking should be a valuable one. No one could deny that the 1980s and 1990s saw enormous changes and upheavals in British society, from the social deconstruction of the Thatcherite years to the emergence of New Labour. Traditionally, fiction has provided a prism through which such change can be reflected and refracted. The great Victorian 'state of the nation' novels such as *Middlemarch*, *Our Mutual Friend* and Trollope's *The Way We Live Now* stand as permanent reminders that writers once felt able to embrace the largest of subjects, to offer a microcosmic reflection of a macrocosmic reality. 'There was a time', as V. S. Naipaul has lamented, 'when fiction provided discoveries about the nature of society, about states, which gave those works of fiction a validity over and above the narrative element'. Yet the nature of society and the state in the last twenty years have proved mostly beyond the reach of fiction's grasp. Britain in the last twenty years of the twentieth century and the first few years of a new millennium has shown itself too diverse, too protean to fit within the straitjackets of fictional forms that have outlived their usefulness. Some novelists, still wedded to the fictional ambitions of the past, have tried to conduct the kind of grand analysis that was once common, self-consciously writing their own versions of the 'state of the nation' novel, but the fiction that has emerged has been dead on the page, its contemporaneity transmuted into the *passé* in the short time between writing and publication.

Many of the best novelists of the last twenty years, aware of the growing impossibility of providing the kind of discoveries to which Naipaul alludes, have turned to the past as a means of obliquely reflecting the present. One of the commonest criticisms directed at recent British fiction is that it is obsessed by the past. Just as our 'heritage' society has an unhealthy obsession with departed glories, so our novelists turn away from today's realities to wallow in nostalgia and the literary equivalent of retro-chic. Some of the criticism is undoubtedly justified. There are historical novels that look back to the supposed simplicities of the past in order to avoid the messy demands of the present. For many novelists, however, the backwards

gaze becomes liberating, freeing their imaginations to refashion experience in ways that a blinkered concentration on the contemporary would not allow. Historical narratives of all kinds – and they are far more various than the standard criticism suggests – use the past not as some kind of literary security blanket but as a mirror in which their narratives catch reflected glimpses of the present and the competing circumstances that have formed it. In *Chatterton* and *Hawksmoor*, Peter Ackroyd, using his own versions of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century prose with mimetic brilliance, draws readers into narrative mazes which lead them eventually to climactic revelations of the bonds between the centuries. Rose Tremain takes court life in Charles II's England (*Restoration*) and seventeenth-century Denmark (*Music & Silence*) as the setting for richly orchestrated stories that explore very contemporary ideas about love and power and the value of art.

Novels like Robert Edric's *The Book of the Heathen* and Barry Unsworth's *Sacred Hunger* use events from colonial history to illuminate issues of oppression and exploitation which are no less relevant in a post-colonial world. In *The Passion* and *Sexing the Cherry* Jeanette Winterson invents her own idiosyncratic versions of the past that can encompass both the real and the fantastic. These are all very different novels, often using very different narrative techniques, but they do have one thing in common. They are fiercely resistant to any idea of the past as a playground for those seeking the cosy pleasures of rose-tinted retrospection. All of these novels, and very many more described in this book, engage with the contemporary through the historical rather than evade it.

To argue that the 'state of the nation' novel no longer provides a viable template for contemporary fiction and that the past has often proved more amenable to fictional analysis than the present is not, of course, to argue that the best novels of the last two decades have turned away from social and political questions entirely. (Such a retreat would not be possible, in any case. Novels necessarily reflect the society in which they are written. Even the most apparently uncomplicated fantasy fiction has some kind of disguised relationship with social reality.) For British novelists in the last two decades the dramatic changes in politics and society have demanded some response but the response has best been made in a dialogue with changes in specific cultural arenas. The first is gender. It was in the 1970s that the renascent women's movement began to find new voices in fiction, but it was in the 1980s that these voices began to move closer to centre-stage. The 1970s saw the rediscovery of voices from the past (the

women writers published and championed by Virago, for example), the first novels of writers like Michèle Roberts and Sarah Maitland, and influential work by Angela Carter and other female fabulists. The 1980s saw the consolidation of writing careers and a proliferation of ongoing debates in fiction about the status of women in society and the dynamics of sexual relationships. In the 1990s the pendulum may have seemed to have swung back towards the kind of gender stereotyping that characterised fiction in the past. The media obsession with the artificially created sub-genre of 'chick lit', novels filled with young female protagonists almost entirely defined by their relationships with men, may have waned slightly in the last two years but any cursory examination of the features pages of the broadsheet papers shows that it still exists. Yet there is no going back to the old unreconstructed images of masculinity and femininity. Many of the concerns of women writers who felt themselves culturally marginalised in the 1960s and 1970s have now filtered into the mainstream. Writers as diverse as Pat Barker, Sarah Waters and Helen Dunmore have produced novels that revisit subjects and issues raised in earlier decades while seeing their works given a level of attention in prizes and media coverage that they would not have had as little as fifteen years previously. Acclaimed male writers, at the heart of the literary 'establishment', have addressed themes that would, in earlier decades, have escaped their notice. A major part of Ian McEwan's literary project, certainly in his work of the late 1980s and early 1990s, has been a series of attempts to answer his own question, posed in the libretto for a Michael Berkeley oratorio he wrote in 1983: 'Shall there be womanly times or shall we die?' There may be no more place for those 1970s and 1980s novels memorably dismissed by the critic and novelist D. J. Taylor as books in which 'the cast sits around having contrived discussions about the nature of patriarchy', but the finest British novelists of the 1980s and 1990s, male and female, have woven more subtle explorations of feminist concerns into their work. The danger that was suggested by Michèle Roberts when she expressed the hope that eventually there will be 'male writers and female writers, rather than as at present "feminist writers" and "writers" ' still exists. Pigeonholed and typecast, the 'feminist' novelist still runs the risk of being sidelined, but the voices of a wide variety of women writers are heard more clearly than at any earlier period in the history of British fiction.

The idea of the all-inclusive 'state of the nation' novel may have been consigned to the dustbin by the best British novelists but, paradoxically, the geographic range of British fiction has, in one sense, expanded. Voices other than those of the once-dominant metropo-

litanism are increasingly heard. The belief that nothing much of sufficient value to be memorialised in fiction ever happens outside London may still lurk in the hearts of many novelists but it now remains unspoken. Just as the political arena has seen devolution and, in the late 1990s, the creation of new parliaments for both Scotland and Wales, so in literature there has been a resurgence in fiction set outside the narrow ambit of London and its satellite states (North Oxford, Tuscany, the Home Counties). The 1970s saw the decline of the kitchen-sink realism that, in the late 1950s and 1960s, provided new voices, often speaking with northern accents. As these have faded, their successors have arrived without the same media fanfare, but the very absence of this is suggestive. The value of non-metropolitan fiction is now so immediately acknowledged that it merits no arm-waving demands for attention.

Some of the most exciting and challenging fiction in the last ten years, in particular, came not just from outside London but from outside England. In Wales writers as different as John Williams (noir crime fiction set in Cardiff), Niall Griffiths (deracinated twenty-somethings in pursuit of connection to the world) and Trezza Azzopardi (familial dysfunction among an immigrant community in South Wales) have emerged to expand ideas of what Welsh fiction might be. In Scotland, always the home of a rich tradition of fiction, there has been a remarkable renaissance in the last two decades. The ur-text of this Scottish renaissance was Alasdair Gray's *Lanark*, but the sons and daughters of *Lanark* have proved a diverse family. Irvine Welsh has been the most visible of the new Scottish writers and his work, from *Trainspotting* onwards, has spotlighted a generation which earlier novelists ignored, but Alan Warner, Janice Galloway, A. L. Kennedy, James Kelman, Jeff Torrington and others have also made important contributions to the renewal of fictional vitality in Scotland.

Perhaps most significantly of all, British fiction has finally woken up to the realities of the post-colonial world, to the ongoing fallout from the dissolution of empire. In most instances it is forty, fifty, even sixty years since independence was granted to the colonies of the British Empire, but the political and economic consequences of this continue to shape Britain and the wider world. In the last twenty years the realisation that Britain is a multicultural society has finally been fully acknowledged by the book industry and by the publishing trade. There have been black writers and Asian writers responding to their experience of Britain since, at least, the 1950s (Samuel Selvon, for example), but it is only in the last twenty years that novelists like Caryl Phillips and Hanif Kureishi have been able to stake their claims in the

mainstream of British fiction. Both of these writers (and others who have appeared in the last few years, like Andrea Levy, Hari Kunzru, Monica Ali and Zadie Smith) have given a voice to multicultural Britain. Other writers, most notably Salman Rushdie, have fused the storytelling traditions, the mythologies and the popular cultures of East and West into narratives that are as adventurous and imaginative as any being written in the rest of the world.

In the last twenty-five years the older idea of the British Novel (or, more often, the English Novel), carefully capitalised in its spelling and drawing on a recognised historical tradition, has disintegrated and fragmented. In truth, the monolithic notion of the British Novel was always something of a mythical beast. Even as the tradition was being constructed, there were other voices – those in righteous rebellion against it – that demanded to be heard. Certainly, in 2004 there is no such strange creature as the British Novel (or English Novel). Making sweeping generalisations about British fiction or about the alleged decline of British fiction has always been a perilous pastime, but now it seems more than ever counterproductive. There is no great tradition of the English novel any longer. There are only individual novels.

It is in this context that the fifty novelists discussed in this book have been chosen. The criteria I have used in choosing them have been simple, some might even say simplistic. The first defining parameter has been one of time. Any starting point for a survey like this is necessarily arbitrary, but early in the process of writing I settled on 1980 as my opening year. We like the capricious demarcations that decades provide, however misleading they can sometimes be, and this gave me two such chunks of time, the 1980s and the 1990s, to consider, as well the first few years of not only a new decade but a new millennium. Choosing 1980 as a starting point does not mean that all the books described were published after that date. All fifty of the novelists have produced their best and most characteristic work in the years since 1980, but a significant proportion of them had published fiction before that date and any general assessment of the work of these writers needed to include their earlier books. The result is that some of the novelists here categorised as contemporary were born in the 1930s, some in the 1960s. The majority of those included are of the generation born in the late 1940s and 1950s, those writers who began publishing in the years between 1975 and 1985. The youngest writers are Nicola Barker and Sarah Waters, both born in 1966. Other, younger writers (Zadie Smith, Trezza Azzopardi, Andrew Greig) might press claims to inclusion and I am sure that any future editions will need to find room for them, but I wanted each of the fifty to have

a significant body of work behind them. I decided, again with an unavoidable arbitrariness, that the requirement was three full-scale novels. Only a few have that minimum requirement. Most, whatever their age, have written more than three novels.

The second parameter was provided by the (often artificial) boundaries of genre. There can be no doubt that in terms of commercial success, influence and media attention some of the most significant novels of the past twenty-five years have been books that have been categorised (with varying degrees of descriptiveness or dismissiveness) as 'genre' fiction. In addition, the barriers erected between genre fiction and 'mainstream' fiction have become more permeable in the last quarter of a century. Writers like Iain Banks move easily and uncontentiously between science fiction and 'literary' fiction. Crime novelists and thriller writers are reviewed on the same pages as more overtly 'literary' novelists and their works judged by the same critical standards. There is a case to be made that the most significant writers of fiction in the last decade have been two novelists (J. K. Rowling and Philip Pullman) whose works would in the past have been twice sidelined. Not only are they fantasy, but they are fantasy aimed, at least primarily, at children. Despite all these caveats, I believe that a worthwhile distinction can still be made between 'genre' fiction and what is usually described as 'literary' fiction. Writers of crime fiction and science fiction work within different conventions and traditions to the novelists in this book. Genre fiction has its own pleasures and its own validity but I wanted to resist any temptation, open to the accusation of tokenism, of casting a handful of crime novelists and a handful of SF novelists into the mixture. They deserve their own, separate guidebooks.

This introduction to contemporary novelists nonetheless reveals the diversity of British fiction in the last two and a half decades. The British novel is not dead, despite the attempts of many commentators to place it in its grave. There is much to celebrate in contemporary British fiction. Any art form that includes works as different as the biliously satirical novels of Martin Amis, the offbeat and laconic fiction of Beryl Bainbridge, the tangled conflations of history, mythology and philosophy written by Lawrence Norfolk, Alan Hollinghurst's witty comedies of gay manners and mores, the seductive and sensuously lyrical explorations of sexual relationships by Helen Dunmore and the subtle, understated narratives of Kazuo Ishiguro must still be alive and well. The fifty novelists whose works are briefly surveyed in this book provide the proof that both nostalgia for an indeterminately defined

golden age of British fiction and an automatic assumption that the novel thrives better in other climes are equally misplaced.

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