



A COMPANION TO
THE *BRITISH*
AND *IRISH NOVEL*
1945 – 2000

EDITED BY BRIAN W. SHAFFER



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Publishing

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Preface

In this sea are situated two very large islands, the so-called British Isles, Albion and Ierna, which are greater than any which we have yet mentioned . . .

(pseudo-Aristotle, *De mundo* c.iv)

{P}rose art presumes a deliberate feeling for the historical and social concreteness of living discourse . . . a feeling for its participation in historical becoming and in social struggle; it deals with discourse that is still warm from that struggle and hostility . . .

(Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*)

The subject of this work, the British and Irish novel between the close of World War II and the turn of the millennium, is as vast as it is rich and heterogeneous. This volume concerns novelists of that half-century who are indigenous to Britain or Ireland or who have emigrated to one of these “two very large islands” (usually but not invariably settling in greater London) and who have written novels of acclaim that have significantly engaged with and influenced the indigenous literary culture.

Collectively, the essays that follow implicitly (and at points also explicitly) test and explore the meaning of the term “novel” and gauge the pressures on the form brought about by extraliterary developments in the publishing industry, in critical and cultural theory, in film and video, and in literary credentialing (e.g. the rise of the literary prize phenomenon). Whatever we might mean by “novel,” the ideas of “expansiveness” and “newness” (engagement with the present) seem to be central to it. In *Aspects of the Novel* (1927), for example, E. M. Forster addresses the first point by calling “expansion” an “idea the novelist must cling to.” “Not completion,” Forster adds; “Not rounding off but opening out” (quoted in Danow 1991: 43). And M. M. Bakhtin, a leading twentieth-century theorist of the novel, addresses the second point by claiming that the novel – because it is oriented toward the here and now and is characterized by its “evolutionary nature, its spontaneity, incompleteness and inconclusiveness, by its ability and commitment to rethink and reevaluate” – is “the

quintessential register of society's attitudes toward itself and the world" (Danow 1991: 50, 43). In contrast to the epic, which presents itself as "completed, conclusive and immutable," the novel "is a genre that is ever questing, ever examining itself and subjecting its established forms to review"; it is the genre with the most "contact with the present (with contemporary reality) in all its openendedness" (Bakhtin 1981: 17, 39, 11). One might conceive of Bakhtin's perhaps overly neat "epic/novel" distinction in terms of a series of dichotomies – "centrifugal" versus "centripetal," "becoming" versus "being," and "dialogic" versus "monologic" – that collectively make the case for the potentially liberating energies of prose fiction. Akin to Bakhtin's distinction between "epic" and "novel" is Frank Kermode's distinction between "myth" and "fiction." In *The Sense of an Ending* (1967) Kermode argues that while "myths" presuppose definitive answers and "total and adequate explanations of things" as they are and were, "fictions" exist for the purpose of "finding things out":

they change as the needs of sense-making change. Myths are the agents of stability, fictions the agents of change. Myths call for absolute, fictions for conditional assent. Myths make sense in terms of a lost order of time . . . ; fictions, if successful, make sense of the here and now. (1967: 39)

In the spirit of Forster, Bakhtin, and Kermode, then, the present volume approaches the novel of the period as an open-ended, engaged, exploratory genre, one that challenges and stretches the conventions of perception, subjectivity, and literary representation in its attempts to probe and depict an evolving contemporary reality.

In this spirit too one might view the British and Irish novel of the period as a battleground on which competing artistic, philosophical, social, and political agendas wage war (for Bakhtin, a novel's discourse is "still warm from that struggle and hostility" (1981: 331)). Although it is all but impossible to draw a neat circle around the immensely varied novels treated in this volume and summarize what makes them distinctive as a group in time or place, a few generalizations, all pertaining to the relationship of fiction and history, do present themselves. First, however different these various novels are to each other, they collectively suggest that it is no longer possible to affirm, with James Joyce's Gabriel Conroy, that "literature" is "above politics" (Joyce 1993: 171) – that it inhabits a separate ontological status. Although Joyce may have been ironic in giving this thought to his protagonist in "The dead," Gabriel's wish attests to the currency of this notion in early twentieth-century fiction as an ideal worth upholding. The idea that art can function as an escape from worldly power struggles (and the violence and strife these entail) finds expression, in different ways, in many modern novels, from Forster's *A Room with a View* (1908), to Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1914), to Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). By contrast, the novels of the second half of the twentieth century, almost without exception, attest to the inescapability of the sociopolitical fray – and to the inescapability of history. To quote a Joycean protagonist once again, this time Stephen Dedalus in *Ulysses* (1922), the idea that "History" is

“a nightmare” from which one might hope “to awake” (Joyce 1986: 28) – the idea that one can shake off one’s national and cultural history – is all but ruled out in novels of this later period. As different as Lowry’s *Under the Volcano*, Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Golding’s *Lord of the Flies*, Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, Spark’s *The Prime of Miss Jean Brody*, Lessing’s *Golden Notebook*, Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day*, Swift’s *Waterland*, Byatt’s *Possession*, and McCabe’s *The Butcher Boy* are from each other, each of these works attests to the inescapability of the past and to the inter-animation, indeed to the blurring, of “fiction” and “history.” Moreover, the novels of this period may be said to obsess over history, whether in the sense of being preoccupied with historical events or in the sense of thematizing history itself and of musing on historiography. It is difficult to overlook the explicit meditations on history – the inescapably fictive nature of history and the inescapably historical nature of fiction – in so many of the novels discussed in this volume.

I intend this Companion to function both as a reference guide and as an extended introduction to the field, for scholars, teachers, and students alike. This volume makes no pretensions to being a definitive literary history of the period. Rather, these inter-linked essays that concern texts, topics, and controversies of the last five decades of the twentieth century seek to stimulate the study of the contemporary British and Irish novel and to demonstrate the vitality and diversity of the critical and contextual lenses by which this recent fiction is being viewed and understood.

I have divided the volume into two sections, in the hope of making it more easily navigable for a variety of different readers with a variety of different scholarly needs and agendas. The essays in Part I, “Contexts for the British and Irish Novel, 1945–2000,” focus on overarching sociocultural and literary movements and trends, and on the impact that such sociocultural developments have had on the novelistic production of the period. These chapters situate the British and Irish novel of the half-century within a number of contexts to which it responded, among these: the elitist orientation of literary modernism; the rise and fall of European fascisms and, later, of the Cold War; the decline and demise of the British empire; the post-1968 explosion in critical theory and the rise of postmodernism; the literary prize phenomenon and developments in the publishing industry and in film and video; the effect on “British” and “English” literature by Irish and Scottish national identities; and the challenge posed to male-dominated and ethnically British literary traditions by feminist and black-British authors, among others.

These and other informing frames of reference are also used to illuminate the specific novels (and novelists) discussed at greater length, and in more focused treatments, in the second part of the volume. The essays in Part II, “Reading Individual Texts and Authors,” probe key texts, figures, and sub-genres of the period. Included here are discussions of “canonical” works by authors long familiar to readers (Samuel Beckett, Evelyn Waugh, George Orwell, Graham Greene, William Golding, Iris Murdoch, and Jean Rhys); more recent works by authors currently on the scene (Margaret Drabble, V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Julian Barnes, Kazuo Ishiguro,

Ian McEwan, Graham Swift, A. S. Byatt, and Pat Barker); and works by authors with popular or even “cult” followings that continue to animate our literary culture in significant ways (Malcolm Lowry, C. S. Lewis, J. R. R. Tolkien, and Kingsley and Martin Amis). Separate chapters on the campus satire subgenre, the Scottish “new wave,” and the Irish novel after Joyce attend to topics of interest that embrace numerous authors. The primary objective of this section is to “read” individual works and authorial careers that continue to inform and energize literary culture today, on both sides of the Atlantic and beyond.

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Contents

<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xvi
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xx
 PART I <i>Contexts for the British and Irish Novel, 1945–2000</i>	 1
1 The Literary Response to the Second World War <i>Damon Marcel DeCoste</i>	3
2 The “Angry” Decade and After <i>Dale Salwak</i>	21
3 English Dystopian Satire in Context <i>M. Keith Booker</i>	32
4 The Feminist Novel in the Wake of Virginia Woolf <i>Roberta Rubenstein</i>	45
5 Postmodern Fiction and the Rise of Critical Theory <i>Patricia Waugh</i>	65
6 The Novel and the End of Empire <i>Reed Way Dasenbrock</i>	83
7 Postcolonial Novels and Theories <i>Feroza Jussawalla</i>	96
8 Fictions of Belonging: National Identity and the Novel in Ireland and Scotland <i>Gerard Carruthers</i>	112

9	Black British Interventions <i>John Skinner</i>	128
10	The Recuperation of History in British and Irish Fiction <i>Margaret Scanlan</i>	144
11	The Literary Prize Phenomenon in Context <i>James F. English</i>	160
12	Novelistic Production and the Publishing Industry in Britain and Ireland <i>Claire Squires</i>	177
13	The Novel and the Rise of Film and Video: Adaptation and British Cinema <i>Brian McFarlane</i>	194
14	The English Heritage Industry and Other Trends in the Novel at the Millennium <i>Peter Childs</i>	210
	PART II <i>Reading Individual Texts and Authors</i>	225
15	Samuel Beckett's <i>Watt</i> <i>S. E. Gontarski and Chris Ackerley</i>	227
16	George Orwell's Dystopias: <i>Animal Farm</i> and <i>Nineteen Eighty-Four</i> <i>Erika Gottlieb</i>	241
17	Evelyn Waugh's <i>Brideshead Revisited</i> and Other Late Novels <i>Bernard Schweizer</i>	254
18	Modernism's Swansong: Malcolm Lowry's <i>Under the Volcano</i> <i>Patrick A. McCarthy</i>	266
19	<i>The Heart of the Matter</i> and the Later Novels of Graham Greene <i>Cedric Watts</i>	278
20	William Golding's <i>Lord of the Flies</i> and Other Early Novels <i>Kevin McCarron</i>	289
21	Amis, <i>Father and Son</i> <i>Merritt Moseley</i>	302
22	Dame Iris Murdoch <i>Margaret Moan Rowe</i>	314
23	Academic Satire: The Campus Novel in Context <i>Kenneth Womack</i>	326