



Robert Eaglestone

# CONTEMPORARY FICTION

A Very Short Introduction

OXFORD

Robert Eaglestone

CONTEMPORARY  
藏書 FICION

A Very Short Introduction

OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

# OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,  
United Kingdom

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford.  
It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship,  
and education by publishing worldwide. Oxford is a registered trade mark of  
Oxford University Press in the UK and in certain other countries

© Robert Eaglestone 2013

The moral rights of the author have been asserted

First Edition published in 2013

Impression: 1

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in  
a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the  
prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted  
by law, by licence or under terms agreed with the appropriate reprographics  
rights organization. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the  
above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the  
address above

You must not circulate this work in any other form  
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Data available

ISBN 978-0-19-960926-0

Printed in Great Britain by  
Ashford Colour Press Ltd, Gosport, Hampshire

## Contemporary Fiction: A Very Short Introduction

VERY SHORT INTRODUCTIONS are for anyone wanting a stimulating and accessible way in to a new subject. They are written by experts, and have been published in more than 25 languages worldwide.

The series began in 1995, and now represents a wide variety of topics in history, philosophy, religion, science, and the humanities. The VSI library now contains more than 300 volumes—a Very Short Introduction to everything from ancient Egypt and Indian philosophy to conceptual art and cosmology—and will continue to grow in a variety of disciplines.

### Very Short Introductions available now:

ADVERTISING Winston Fletcher

AFRICAN HISTORY

John Parker and Richard Rathbone

AGNOSTICISM Robin Le Poidevin

AMERICAN HISTORY Paul S. Boyer

AMERICAN IMMIGRATION

David A. Gerber

AMERICAN POLITICAL PARTIES

AND ELECTIONS L. Sandy Maisel

AMERICAN POLITICS Richard M. Velely

THE AMERICAN PRESIDENCY

Charles O. Jones

ANAESTHESIA Aidan O'Donnell

ANARCHISM Colin Ward

ANCIENT EGYPT Ian Shaw

ANCIENT GREECE Paul Cartledge

ANCIENT PHILOSOPHY Julia Annas

ANCIENT WARFARE Harry Sidebottom

ANGELS David Albert Jones

ANGLICANISM Mark Chapman

THE ANGLO-SAXON AGE John Blair

THE ANIMAL KINGDOM

Peter Holland

ANIMAL RIGHTS David DeGrazia

THE ANTARCTIC Klaus Dodds

ANTI-SEMITISM Steven Beller

ANXIETY Daniel Freeman and

Jason Freeman

THE APOCRYPHAL GOSPELS

Paul Foster

ARCHAEOLOGY Paul Bahn

ARCHITECTURE Andrew Ballantyne

ARISTOCRACY William Doyle

ARISTOTLE Jonathan Barnes

ART HISTORY Dana Arnold

ART THEORY Cynthia Freeland

ATHEISM Julian Baggini

AUGUSTINE Henry Chadwick

AUSTRALIA Kenneth Morgan

AUTISM Uta Frith

THE AVANT GARDE David Cottington

THE AZTECS David Carrasco

BARTHES Jonathan Culler

BEAUTY Roger Scruton

BESTSELLERS John Sutherland

THE BIBLE John Riches

BIBLICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

Eric H. Cline

BIOGRAPHY Hermione Lee

THE BLUES Elijah Wald

THE BOOK OF MORMON

Terryl Givens

BORDERS Alexander C. Diener and

Joshua Hagen

THE BRAIN Michael O'Shea

BRITISH POLITICS Anthony Wright

BUDDHA Michael Carrithers

BUDDHISM Damien Keown

BUDDHIST ETHICS Damien Keown

CANCER Nicholas James

CAPITALISM James Fulcher

CATHOLICISM Gerald O'Collins

THE CELL Terence Allen and

Graham Cowling

THE CELTS Barry Cunliffe

CHAOS Leonard Smith

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Kimberley Reynolds

CHINESE LITERATURE Sabina Knight  
CHOICE THEORY Michael Allingham  
CHRISTIAN ART Beth Williamson  
CHRISTIAN ETHICS D. Stephen Long  
CHRISTIANITY Linda Woodhead  
CITIZENSHIP Richard Bellamy  
CIVIL ENGINEERING David Muir Wood  
CLASSICAL MYTHOLOGY  
Helen Morales  
CLASSICS Mary Beard and  
John Henderson  
CLAUSEWITZ Michael Howard  
THE COLD WAR Robert McMahon  
COLONIAL AMERICA Alan Taylor  
COLONIAL LATIN AMERICAN  
LITERATURE Rolena Adorno  
COMEDY Matthew Bevis  
COMMUNISM Leslie Holmes  
THE COMPUTER Darrel Ince  
THE CONQUISTADORS  
Matthew Restall and  
Felipe Fernández-Armesto  
CONSCIENCE Paul Strohm  
CONSCIOUSNESS Susan Blackmore  
CONTEMPORARY ART  
Julian Stallabrass  
CONTEMPORARY FICTION  
Robert Eaglestone  
CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY  
Simon Critchley  
COSMOLOGY Peter Coles  
CRITICAL THEORY Stephen Eric Bronner  
THE CRUSADES Christopher Tyerman  
CRYPTOGRAPHY  
Fred Piper and Sean Murphy  
THE CULTURAL  
REVOLUTION Richard Curt Kraus  
DADA AND SURREALISM  
David Hopkins  
DARWIN Jonathan Howard  
THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS Timothy Lim  
DEMOCRACY Bernard Crick  
DERRIDA Simon Glendinning  
DESCARTES Tom Sorell  
DESERTS Nick Middleton  
DESIGN John Heskett  
DEVELOPMENTAL BIOLOGY  
Lewis Wolpert  
THE DEVIL Darren Oldridge  
DICTIONARIES Lynda Mugglestone

DINOSAURS David Norman  
DIPLOMACY Joseph M. Siracusa  
DOCUMENTARY FILM  
Patricia Aufderheide  
DREAMING J. Allan Hobson  
DRUGS Leslie Iversen  
DRUIDS Barry Cunliffe  
EARLY MUSIC Thomas Forrest Kelly  
THE EARTH Martin Redfern  
ECONOMICS Partha Dasgupta  
EDUCATION Gary Thomas  
EGYPTIAN MYTH Geraldine Pinch  
EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY  
BRITAIN Paul Langford  
THE ELEMENTS Philip Ball  
EMOTION Dylan Evans  
EMPIRE Stephen Howe  
ENGELS Terrell Carver  
ENGINEERING David Blockley  
ENGLISH LITERATURE Jonathan Bate  
ENVIRONMENTAL  
ECONOMICS Stephen Smith  
EPIDEMIOLOGY Rodolfo Saracci  
ETHICS Simon Blackburn  
THE EUROPEAN UNION John Pinder  
and Simon Usherwood  
EVOLUTION Brian and  
Deborah Charlesworth  
EXISTENTIALISM Thomas Flynn  
FASCISM Kevin Passmore  
FASHION Rebecca Arnold  
FEMINISM Margaret Walters  
FILM Michael Wood  
FILM MUSIC Kathryn Kalinak  
THE FIRST WORLD WAR  
Michael Howard  
FOLK MUSIC Mark Slobin  
FORENSIC PSYCHOLOGY David Canter  
FORENSIC SCIENCE Jim Fraser  
FOSSILS Keith Thomson  
FOUCAULT Gary Gutting  
FREE SPEECH Nigel Warburton  
FREE WILL Thomas Pink  
FRENCH LITERATURE John D. Lyons  
THE FRENCH REVOLUTION  
William Doyle  
FREUD Anthony Storr  
FUNDAMENTALISM Malise Ruthven  
GALAXIES John Gribbin  
GALILEO Stillman Drake

- GAME THEORY Ken Binmore  
 GANDHI Bhikhu Parekh  
 GENIUS Andrew Robinson  
 GEOGRAPHY John Matthews and  
     David Herbert  
 GEOPOLITICS Klaus Dodds  
 GERMAN LITERATURE Nicholas Boyle  
 GERMAN PHILOSOPHY  
     Andrew Bowie  
 GLOBAL CATASTROPHES Bill McGuire  
 GLOBAL ECONOMIC  
     HISTORY Robert C. Allen  
 GLOBAL WARMING Mark Maslin  
 GLOBALIZATION Manfred Steger  
 THE GOTHIC Nick Groom  
 GOVERNANCE Mark Bevir  
 THE GREAT DEPRESSION AND  
     THE NEW DEAL Eric Rauchway  
 HABERMAS James Gordon Finlayson  
 HEGEL Peter Singer  
 HEIDEGGER Michael Inwood  
 HERODOTUS Jennifer T. Roberts  
 HIEROGLYPHS Penelope Wilson  
 HINDUISM Kim Knott  
 HISTORY John H. Arnold  
 THE HISTORY OF  
     ASTRONOMY Michael Hoskin  
 THE HISTORY OF LIFE Michael Benton  
 THE HISTORY OF  
     MATHEMATICS Jacqueline Stedall  
 THE HISTORY OF  
     MEDICINE William Bynum  
 THE HISTORY OF TIME  
     Leofranc Holford-Strevens  
 HIV/AIDS Alan Whiteside  
 HOBBS Richard Tuck  
 HUMAN EVOLUTION Bernard Wood  
 HUMAN RIGHTS Andrew Clapham  
 HUMANISM Stephen Law  
 HUME A. J. Ayer  
 IDEOLOGY Michael Freedon  
 INDIAN PHILOSOPHY Sue Hamilton  
 INFORMATION Luciano Floridi  
 INNOVATION Mark Dodgson and  
     David Gann  
 INTELLIGENCE Ian J. Deary  
 INTERNATIONAL  
     MIGRATION Khalid Koser  
 INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS  
     Paul Wilkinson
- ISLAM Malise Ruthven  
 ISLAMIC HISTORY Adam Silverstein  
 ITALIAN LITERATURE  
     Peter Hainsworth and David Robey  
 JESUS Richard Bauckham  
 JOURNALISM Ian Hargreaves  
 JUDAISM Norman Solomon  
 JUNG Anthony Stevens  
 KABBALAH Joseph Dan  
 KAFKA Ritchie Robertson  
 KANT Roger Scruton  
 KEYNES Robert Skidelsky  
 KIERKEGAARD Patrick Gardiner  
 THE KORAN Michael Cook  
 LANDSCAPES AND  
     GEOMORPHOLOGY  
     Andrew Goudie and Heather Viles  
 LANGUAGES Stephen R. Anderson  
 LATE ANTIQUITY Gillian Clark  
 LAW Raymond Wacks  
 THE LAWS OF THERMODYNAMICS  
     Peter Atkins  
 LEADERSHIP Keith Grint  
 LINCOLN Allen C. Guelzo  
 LINGUISTICS Peter Matthews  
 LITERARY THEORY Jonathan Culler  
 LOCKE John Dunn  
 LOGIC Graham Priest  
 MACHIAVELLI Quentin Skinner  
 MADNESS Andrew Scull  
 MAGIC Owen Davies  
 MAGNA CARTA Nicholas Vincent  
 MAGNETISM Stephen Blundell  
 MALTHUS Donald Winch  
 MAO Delia Davin  
 MARINE BIOLOGY Philip V. Mladenov  
 THE MARQUIS DE SADE John Phillips  
 MARTIN LUTHER Scott H. Hendrix  
 MARTYRDOM Jolyon Mitchell  
 MARX Peter Singer  
 MATHEMATICS Timothy Gowers  
 THE MEANING OF LIFE Terry Eagleton  
 MEDICAL ETHICS Tony Hope  
 MEDICAL LAW Charles Foster  
 MEDIEVAL BRITAIN John Gillingham  
     and Ralph A. Griffiths  
 MEMORY Jonathan K. Foster  
 METAPHYSICS Stephen Mumford  
 MICHAEL FARADAY Frank A. J. L. James  
 MODERN ART David Cottington

MODERN CHINA Rana Mitter  
MODERN FRANCE Vanessa R. Schwartz  
MODERN IRELAND Senia Pašeta  
MODERN JAPAN  
Christopher Goto-Jones  
MODERN LATIN AMERICAN  
LITERATURE  
Roberto González Echevarría  
MODERNISM Christopher Butler  
MOLECULES Philip Ball  
THE MONGOLS Morris Rossabi  
MORMONISM Richard Lyman Bushman  
MUHAMMAD Jonathan A. C. Brown  
MULTICULTURALISM Ali Rattansi  
MUSIC Nicholas Cook  
MYTH Robert A. Segal  
THE NAPOLEONIC WARS  
Mike Rapport  
NATIONALISM Steven Grosby  
NELSON MANDELA Elleke Boehmer  
NEOLIBERALISM Manfred Steger and  
Ravi Roy  
NETWORKS Guido Caldarelli and  
Michele Catanzaro  
THE NEW TESTAMENT  
Luke Timothy Johnson  
THE NEW TESTAMENT AS  
LITERATURE Kyle Keefer  
NEWTON Robert Iliffe  
NIETZSCHE Michael Tanner  
NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITAIN  
Christopher Harvie and  
H. C. G. Matthew  
THE NORMAN CONQUEST  
George Garnett  
NORTH AMERICAN  
INDIANS Theda Perdue and  
Michael D. Green  
NORTHERN IRELAND  
Marc Mulholland  
NOTHING Frank Close  
NUCLEAR POWER Maxwell Irvine  
NUCLEAR WEAPONS  
Joseph M. Siracusa  
NUMBERS Peter M. Higgins  
OBJECTIVITY Stephen Gaukroger  
THE OLD TESTAMENT  
Michael D. Coogan  
THE ORCHESTRA D. Kern Holoman  
ORGANIZATIONS Mary Jo Hatch

PAGANISM Owen Davies  
PALESTINIAN-ISRAELI  
CONFLICT Martin Bunton  
PARTICLE PHYSICS Frank Close  
PAUL E. P. Sanders  
PENTECOSTALISM William K. Kay  
THE PERIODIC TABLE Eric R. Scerri  
PHILOSOPHY Edward Craig  
PHILOSOPHY OF LAW Raymond Wacks  
PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE  
Samir Okasha  
PHOTOGRAPHY Steve Edwards  
PLAGUE Paul Slack  
PLANETS David A. Rothery  
PLANTS Timothy Walker  
PLATO Julia Annas  
POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY David Miller  
POLITICS Kenneth Minogue  
POSTCOLONIALISM Robert Young  
POSTMODERNISM Christopher Butler  
POSTSTRUCTURALISM  
Catherine Belsey  
PREHISTORY Chris Gosden  
PRESOCRATIC  
PHILOSOPHY Catherine Osborne  
PRIVACY Raymond Wacks  
PROBABILITY John Haigh  
PROGRESSIVISM Walter Nugent  
PROTESTANTISM Mark A. Noll  
PSYCHIATRY Tom Burns  
PSYCHOLOGY Gillian Butler and  
Freda McManus  
PURITANISM Francis J. Bremer  
THE QUAKERS Pink Dandelion  
QUANTUM THEORY  
John Polkinghorne  
RACISM Ali Rattansi  
RADIOACTIVITY Claudio Tuniz  
RASTAFARI Ennis B. Edmonds  
THE REAGAN REVOLUTION Gil Troy  
REALITY Jan Westerhoff  
THE REFORMATION Peter Marshall  
RELATIVITY Russell Stannard  
RELIGION IN AMERICA Timothy Beal  
THE RENAISSANCE Jerry Brotton  
RENAISSANCE ART  
Geraldine A. Johnson  
RHETORIC Richard Toye  
RISK Baruch Fischhoff and John Kadvany  
RIVERS Nick Middleton



- ROBOTICS Alan Winfield  
 ROMAN BRITAIN Peter Salway  
 THE ROMAN EMPIRE  
     Christopher Kelly  
 THE ROMAN REPUBLIC  
     David M. Gwynn  
 ROMANTICISM Michael Ferber  
 ROUSSEAU Robert Wokler  
 RUSSELL A. C. Grayling  
 RUSSIAN HISTORY Geoffrey Hosking  
 RUSSIAN LITERATURE Catriona Kelly  
 THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION  
     S. A. Smith  
 SCHIZOPHRENIA  
     Chris Frith and Eve Johnstone  
 SCHOPENHAUER Christopher Janaway  
 SCIENCE AND RELIGION  
     Thomas Dixon  
 SCIENCE FICTION David Seed  
 THE SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTION  
     Lawrence M. Principe  
 SCOTLAND Rab Houston  
 SEXUALITY Véronique Mottier  
 SHAKESPEARE Germaine Greer  
 SIKHISM Eleanor Nesbitt  
 THE SILK ROAD James A. Millward  
 SLEEP Steven W. Lockley and  
     Russell G. Foster  
 SOCIAL AND CULTURAL  
     ANTHROPOLOGY  
     John Monaghan and Peter Just  
 SOCIALISM Michael Newman  
 SOCIOLOGY Steve Bruce  
 SOCRATES C. C. W. Taylor  
 THE SOVIET UNION Stephen Lovell  
 THE SPANISH CIVIL WAR  
     Helen Graham
- SPANISH LITERATURE Jo Labanyi  
 SPINOZA Roger Scruton  
 SPIRITUALITY Philip Sheldrake  
 STARS Andrew King  
 STATISTICS David J. Hand  
 STEM CELLS Jonathan Slack  
 STUART BRITAIN John Morrill  
 SUPERCONDUCTIVITY  
     Stephen Blundell  
 SYMMETRY Ian Stewart  
 TERRORISM Charles Townshend  
 THEOLOGY David F. Ford  
 THOMAS AQUINAS Fergus Kerr  
 THOUGHT Tim Bayne  
 TOCQUEVILLE Harvey C. Mansfield  
 TRAGEDY Adrian Poole  
 THE TROJAN WAR Eric H. Cline  
 TRUST Katherine Hawley  
 THE TUDORS John Guy  
 TWENTIETH-CENTURY BRITAIN  
     Kenneth O. Morgan  
 THE UNITED NATIONS  
     Jussi M. Hanhimäki  
 THE U.S. CONGRESS Donald A. Ritchie  
 THE U.S. SUPREME COURT  
     Linda Greenhouse  
 UTOPIANISM Lyman Tower Sargent  
 THE VIKINGS Julian Richards  
 VIRUSES Dorothy H. Crawford  
 WITCHCRAFT Malcolm Gaskill  
 WITTGENSTEIN A. C. Grayling  
 WORK Stephen Fineman  
 WORLD MUSIC Philip Bohlman  
 THE WORLD TRADE  
     ORGANIZATION Amrita Narlikar  
 WRITING AND SCRIPT  
     Andrew Robinson

Available soon:

MANAGEMENT John Hendry  
 FOOD John Krebs  
 MODERN WAR Richard English

SOCIOLINGUISTICS John Edwards  
 FRACTALS Kenneth Falconer

For more information visit our website  
[www.oup.com/vsi/](http://www.oup.com/vsi/)

*To Poppy and to my friends*

# Acknowledgements

I want to thank many, many friends and colleagues for talking with me about fiction, especially: Eva Aldea, Matt Broadbent, Poppy Corbett, Jo Cottrell, Doug Cowie, Nemonie Craven, Elizabeth English, Malcolm Geere, Geraldine Glennon, Simon Glendinning, Sophie Goldsworthy, Judith Hawley, Nick Hoare, Henry Little, Kristen Krieder, Lynette Lukes, Ben Markovits, Martin MacQuillan, Judith Meddick, Kaye Mitchell, Adam Roberts, Dan Rebellato, Gavin Stewart, Danielle Sands, Hilary Sanders, Dan Stone, Richard Tennant, Carole Tonkinson, Emma Townshend, Nadia Valman.

I also want to thank Kerstin Demata, Emma Ma, Luciana O'Flaherty, the very helpful anonymous readers of the manuscript, and everyone at Oxford University Press.

Whatever the most up-to-date technology, the best way to find new fiction is at a really good bookshop that has interested and thoughtful staff, so I'd like to thank everyone at the wonderful Clapham Books for all their help and suggestions over many years. Independent bookshops need all the support they can get, so please use them if you can.

Most of all, I'd like to thank the students on my 'Ideas in Contemporary Fiction' course: I learned more than I taught.

# List of illustrations

- 1 Page from *The Rings of Saturn*, by W. G. Sebald **20**  
Image taken from DIE RINGES DES SATURN by W. G. Sebald Copyright © 1995, Eichborn Ves Lag, Used by permission of The Wylie Agency (UK) Limited
- 2 Amazon warehouse **26**  
© Macduff Everton/Corbis

# Contents

Acknowledgements xiii

List of illustrations xv

- 1 Saying everything 1
- 2 Form, or, what's contemporary  
about contemporary fiction? 6
- 3 Genre 25
- 4 The past 37
- 5 The present 60
- 6 The future 85
- 7 Conclusion: 'Hey everyone, look at that  
beautiful thing' / 'Yes, but...' 100

References 106

Further reading 109

Index 111

# Chapter 1

## Saying everything

Literature thinks.

Literature is where ideas are investigated, lived out, explored in all their messy complexity. Sometimes these ideas look quite simple: What if you fell in love with someone who seems quite unsuitable for you? What happens if there is a traitor in your spy network? Sometimes they might appear more complicated: How can I reconstruct my memory of an event I can't recall? Perhaps, too, 'think' is not the right word: 'think' is too limiting a description of the range of what a novel can do with ideas. In any event, the way literature thinks is bound up with what it's like to be us, to be human. Literature is how we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves. And contemporary fiction matters because it is how we work out who we are now, today.

I believe the novel is the best way of doing this. Of all the arts, the novel is the most thoughtful, the closest, the most personal. Unlike the visual arts or architecture or music or computer games, the novel uses only language. Nearly every one of us is an expert user of language and, more importantly, nearly everyone is an expert creator in language. Every day we use words to express ourselves and to tell stories, to make patterns out of our reality. We all share and thrive in language: we are much more intimate

with the novel's medium than we are with theatre or film. Unlike much poetry or painting, fiction has narrative, sometimes in complex ways. We share this with the novel, too, because each of us, in the stories we tell every day, is a skilled author and weaver of narrative. We can all judge a novel by the high and demanding standards of our own use of words and stories and by our own patterns of reality. Because it takes longer to read a novel than it does to see a film or to listen to a piece of music and because novels demand more time and energy, they are more immersive. This is the origin of phrases like 'losing yourself in a book' or 'the book speaks to me', as if a novel was more than just ink on a page or words on a screen. We *live in* novels more than in any other art form, and after reading them, they stay with us (an 'after-reading'). The novel is still the art form most deeply and directly engaged with us.

More than this, the contemporary novel is the best way of thinking about who we are now because fiction is also the freest of all the arts. Despite many attempts to create one, there is no real, watertight definition of fiction. It's not simply 'made up', it doesn't just tell a story. Originally, 'definition' meant the setting of bounds or limits: it's not at all clear what the limits of fiction are, or indeed if there are any. The controversial French philosopher Jacques Derrida, who thought and wrote a great deal about this, described literature as a 'strange institution' and argued that the 'institution of fiction... gives in principle the power to say everything, to break free of the rules'. He defines fiction as a form of writing that has no definition, no limits in what it can say. The most important consequence of this is that a novel can respond to any aspect of the world that the writer is interested in, can be about anything, and can take any form or forms it chooses. The world is multiple and complex: so is the novel. There are no hard and fast rules for reading (or writing) fiction. A novel might go absolutely anywhere or do anything. This is the idea, this excitement, this freedom of the contemporary novel, that underlies this book.

This unbound freedom of fiction in combination with the huge number of novels published every year (too many each year for any one person to read in a lifetime) also means that, in contemporary fiction, there can be no real experts in the conventional sense: who, anyway, could be an expert on flowing quicksilver that can go anywhere? But thinking about novels in this way, thinking about how they think, does offer ways of avoiding common pitfalls. For example, what a novel thinks is not the same as what an author thinks. Some book reviewers and journalists, perhaps inadvertently, suggest that we can only appreciate a novel in the context of a writer's life (and some writers play up to this). Often, this means that we pay attention to the correlation between two stories: the story of the novel (or a bad summary of the novel) and the story of the writer's life. Or, in the case of contemporary fiction, we can listen to the author her- or himself tell you what a book is about. Both of these mean that we no longer pay attention to the actual novel itself, which is surely why we were interested in the first place. One, very excusable, reason for this phenomenon is that it is actually hard to make out what 'knowing about' a novel actually means: knowing the plot? knowing what it means while knowing that it means very different things to very different people? knowing that it made you cry or smile? In the face of this uncertainty, turning to the story of an author's life or opinions gives a sense of security that some real fact is being told or some real 'knowing about' is happening. This seems to me quite wrong-headed. Knowing that a book makes you weep, or that it was boring, seems to me to be a fine subjective sort of knowledge. Knowing how it seems to fit into some bigger picture, finding its place in a larger constellation, seems to me to be a better, if more provisional, form of knowledge. And paying attention to its 'thinking', what a novel seems to be saying, seems to me to be the best form of knowing about contemporary fiction. But none of these is 'expertise' as the word is usually understood.

This freedom of the novel also makes the question of 'how we work out who we are' very demanding. 'We' is quite a complicated



word, not least because it includes and excludes simultaneously. Who 'we' are, the communities of which each of us feels a part, is central to understanding the contemporary novel. The question is: who is the 'we' made intelligible by a novel's thinking? The novel used to be seen as a place where a national tradition revealed and reinforced a community, a 'we'. However, modern novels have become increasingly global, they cross and mix traditions and cultures, travel, and are translated. The idea of a national tradition of, say, the English or American or Kenyan novel has been bypassed by globalization. Optimistically, the 'post-national' novel might suggest that readers could learn about each other's differences, hopes, and fears and that our 'we' could be infinitely enlarged. 'We' might all become intelligible to each other. Pessimistically, some novels are ignored, misunderstood, or simply marketed as exotic novelties, and in the face of the whole world, our communities may become more defensive and less outgoing. Either way, the novel, like the human species, is now global and the form is still coming to terms with this deep and recent change.

A further symptom of this unboundedness and of the 'globalization' of the novel is that there is no real agreement about when the contemporary is. We know the contemporary ends in the present, but when does it start? Traditionally, literary periods take their dates from watershed historical moments. In Western Europe, for example, the period of the contemporary might begin in 1945. Yet, even within Europe, there are differences: in Spain, the contemporary might begin with the death of Franco in 1975; in Germany with the end of the Cold War in 1989 or reunification in 1990. Outside Europe things are very different again: contemporary might mean the end of the USSR in 1991 in Russia or independence from Britain in 1947 in India. Different communities have different senses of 'when' they are living, when the current moment began. More, the rapid historical and technological change through which we are living not only makes the past recede faster, it also weakens the very historical communities that define themselves by these sorts of dates,