

The British Novel: 1930-now

**Crossroads
and
aesthetic supermarkets**

- **1971**: the novelist at the crossroad
 - One road = the “realistic novel”
 - ❖ 18th-century tradition
 - ❖ Victorian and Edwardian realism
 - ❖ Conventional writing
 - Second road = the modernist novel
 - ❖ avant-garde, radical, experimental, self-referential

Malcolm Bradbury, *The Novel Today* (1977)

- “polar distinctions “ between
 - “The novel’s propensity toward realism, social documentation and interrelation with historical events and movements”
 - “Its propensity toward form, fictionality, and reflexive self-examination”

- **1992**: novelist in an “aesthetic supermarket”
- facing endless shelves of styles, techniques and scenarios to be differently and freely combined
- No stark contrast between realism and modernism but just alternative forms of “realism”
- Hybridity as norm; a new sense of *Britishness*

From Modernism to 1971

- The road of the first post-modernists: impasse between language and reality, text/cotext and context; self-referentiality (novels about the telling of stories; “literature of exhaustion”)
 - Beckett's 1950s novels (e.g. *The Unnameable*) – focus on character's mind and the reality of language
 - B. S. Johnson's 1960s metafiction
 - Christine Brooke-Rose 1960s novels discarding traditional chronology

- The road of the **realists – counter-modernist** trend
- Focus on contemporary issues – post-war social change set in train by Labour Government, contempt for class distinctions and ethical norms, explosion of popular and mass-media culture, influence of American culture
- Style indebted to 19th-century classic realism (Thackeray, Dickens, Trollope) vs modernists' intellectual mannerisms
- Yet: vs G. Eliot's notion of the novel as a "mirror" to society's cultural and ethical values
- Characters against all form of authority but unable to offer alternative political and social agendas - "angry young men"
- Grotesques of society confronted with humour, irony, parody
- E.g. Kingsley Amis, Alan Sillitoe, David Storey, John Braine, Elizabeth Jane Howard

- “Outsiders” or “hesitators” at the crossroads, mainly from the 1950s – no specific precedent
- William Golding (blending realism and symbolism)
- Muriel Spark (detached observation and metafictional)
- Anthony Burgess (realism, dystopia, metafiction)
- Iris Murdoch (realistic settings and characters with strong symbolic values)
- Doris Lessing (modernist radicalism mixed with naturalistic and conservative elements)
- John Fowles (historical ventriloquism mixed with postmodern technique)

Wave of change from early 70s to early 90s

- 1970: Labour lose general election
- 1972: Miners' strike and "Bloody Sunday" in Northern Ireland
- 1973: Britain enters EEC
- 1974: Wilson Labour Government
- 1975: Thatcher as Conservative Party Leader; record level of inflation
- 1979: "Winter of discontent"; Thatcher wins election (in power till 1990), restricts unions and NHS, implements privatization

1970s: decisive historical shift

■ Economics

- Rise of speculative finance
- Spread of neoliberalism and free-market globalism; consumerism
- Collapse of welfare provisions

■ Ideology, culture and society

- Multiculturalism
- New identities and ethnicities
- Emergence of global telecommunications and I.T.
- Individualism, yet "Victorian values"

“We are reaping what was sown in the 1960s ... The fashionable theories and permissive claptrap set the scene for a society in which the old virtues of discipline and self-restraint were denigrated”

1979 *Granta* magazine

"The end of the English novel and the beginning of British fiction"

Wane of English dominance within the canon of contemporary British fiction

Triumph of the literature of
"global English"

- 1981: first PCs
- 1982: Falklands Conflict
- 1984: Miners' Strike; riots; IRA bombing
- 1989: Berlin wall torn down; end of Cold War; "poll tax" in Scotland
- 1990: Germany reunified; John Major new PM (till 1997); "poll tax" in England and Wales (repealed in 1993)
- 1991: Gulf War
- 1992: Creation of WWW; Clinton elected
- 1997: Scottish and Welsh Devolution Referendums (emergence of new fiction)

Crucial concerns in the novel now

- “Relocation” of British identity in the anglophone world
- Multiculturalism: a new concept of “British” writing
- Working-class oriented literature (mainly in Scotland and Wales)
- Seeing oneself as another
- Questioning of boundaries (national, sexual, cultural ...)
- Shifting “centres” under scrutiny: from England to US

- Integration of Novel (domestic events) and Romance (symbolic events)
- Refusal to acknowledge the distinction between normality and irregularity, art and actuality, fiction and truth
- Emergence of pop lit. ("lad lit." by Welsh, Hornby; "chick lit." by Fielding; children's lit by Rowling) side by side with "literary" novels