

The Post-millennial British Novel

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Bentley, Nick, Nick Hubble, and Leigh Wilson, eds. *The 2000s: A Decade of Contemporary British Fiction*. The Decades Series 4. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015. 297 pages. ISBN 9781441112156. Pbk. £85.

Developed out of several workshops organized by the Brunel Centre for Contemporary Writing (BCCW) located in the School of Arts at Brunel University, London, this volume—the fourth in The Decades Series—offers a broad spectrum of essays on dominant trends in novel writing in the first decade of the twenty-first century. In the introduction, the editors argue that the rise of the “contemporary” can be partly explained by the exhaustion of postmodernist aesthetics, so popular in the literary climate of the second half of the twentieth century. As all contributors agree, however, the contemporary novel’s relation to the past cannot be simply described as dismissive. On the contrary, despite employing different perspectives and methodological tools, the main idea emerging from the essays is that post-millennial British fiction can be viewed as an attempt at revisiting the past, and not a radical turn-away from or denial of literary tradition.

Critics argue that the contemporary British novel, partly in response to the changing socio-political climate of the twenty-first century—the growing threat of terrorism and financial crisis—reflects a conscious attempt to reinterpret the center from the point of view of the marginal(ized). In the first chapter of the volume, Martyn Colebrook explores how Britain’s fragmentation is presented in the regional fiction of the period. His chosen texts investigate the representation of four sidelined areas (Ireland, Yorkshire, Wales, and West London) in selected works by Patrick McCabe, David Peace, Niall Griffiths, and Gautam Malkani. The novels, Colebrook claims, present characters’ attempts to question and resist the oppressive forces of the globalized center. Malkani’s controversial novel, *Londonstani* (2006), for example, achieves the challenging of stereotypes through the use of language, which operates “as an agent for differentiating and thus preserving identity” among members of a West London gang, formed by South Asian young people (45). The deployment of a minor language as a form of substitution for Standard English, however, is depicted in the novel as learnt behavior, an act of performance subjected to various socio-cultural factors, such as media, fashion, and music. The underlying performativity of Malkani’s language is

best captured in dialogue, which reflects “the fiercely vibrant and kinetic patter that his protagonists employ” (45).

Nick Bentley’s essay examines the fictional representation of the marginalized Other from the perspective of youth subcultures. He is interested in the role that fiction has played in the construction of subcultural identity, as well as in the ways in which other cultural forms, such as music and fashion, have influenced the depiction of subcultural personhood in the contemporary novel. In a strikingly similar vein to Colebrook’s argument, in his interpretation of Malkani’s *Londonstani*, Bentley also puts forward the idea that identity is not an inherently authentic form of existence or the evident result of belonging to a certain group, but a set of learnt attitudes and modes of expression. Although the texts analyzed by both Colebrook and Bentley are concerned with the position of the sidelined other, the critics emphasize that what makes these novels the objects of critical acclaim is that they do not undermine the mainstream but rather present an alternative perspective which, in its own way, is not exempt from critical scrutiny and interrogation.

In “Postcolonial and Diasporic Voices,” Lucienne Loh argues for the ongoing importance of postcolonial theory in the 2000s. She claims that the aim of postcolonial criticism is to provide ways of resisting repression and prejudice against minorities, which have been affected to different degrees by 9/11. By looking into Martin Amis’s short story “The Last Days of Mohammad Atta” (2006) and Ian McEwan’s *Saturday* (2005), Loh asserts that these texts depict white middle-class concerns about the potential dangers terrorism might represent for bourgeois material welfare. Against these two works of fiction she sets Nadeem Aslam’s *Maps for Lost Lovers* (2004) and Leila Aboulela’s *Minaret* (2005), which focus on immigrant women’s experience in Britain, for whom the Muslim community spirit creates a sense of safety amid racist threats. In her analysis of McEwan’s *Saturday*, Loh interprets Henry Perowne’s attitude toward Baxter as the manifestation of the comfortable upper-middle class neurosurgeon’s contempt for the uneducated working-class man. Loh goes as far as to draw a parallel between Baxter and the figure of the terrorist, “or the cosmopolitan from below who objects to global bourgeois entitlement,” and she claims that Perowne’s behavior illustrates the prevailing prejudices that nourish Islamist “fervour” (134). Though *Saturday* is undoubtedly concerned with materialism on various levels, such a straightforward parallelism between Perowne’s confrontation with Baxter, and western civilization’s relation to Islamism seems not only ungrounded but also highly reductive. The protagonist is indeed anxious to defend his material wealth from both the working-class Baxter and terrorists in

general—as his ambivalent attitude to the impending Iraq war suggests—but his concerns are far from being strictly materialistic, as Laura Salisbury argues in her excellent essay, “Translating Neuroscience: Fictions of the Brain in the 2000s.”

Salisbury investigates the “neuronovel,” a new subgenre of the twenty-first century, which appeared as a response to changing conceptions of the mind in contemporary science and medicine. She claims that the neurological turn in British fiction represents a turn-away from earlier psychoanalytic discourses of the mind, with neuromaterialism attempting to base subjectivity in (brain)matter, thus distancing itself from modernist and postmodernist abstraction. Nevertheless, she argues that despite their emphasis on concrete material reality, the three novels published in 2005, McEwan’s *Saturday*, Sebastian Faulks’ *Human Traces*, and Tom McCarthy’s *Remainder*, demonstrate that mental activity and personhood cannot be reduced to brain functions; instead, they emerge from the individual’s phenomenological experience and affective interaction with their environment. Thus, Salisbury’s reading of *Saturday* offers a more nuanced interpretation of the role of materiality than Loh’s. Salisbury suggests that “material containers” in the novel, such as the protagonist’s luxury car, family house, or scientific understanding itself, though incomplete and subject to violent intrusions, serve the function of “keep[ing] the violence in Perowne’s immediate world within bearable limits” (105).

In another fascinating essay, Leigh Wilson discusses the emergence of the historical novel as a dominant, prize-winning genre in the 2000s, which has reconsidered its connection to previous literary traditions, such as realism, modernism, and postmodernism. While postmodern texts have privileged story over history, the contemporary historical novel attempts “to smuggle realism in by the back door,” though its relation to reality remains complex (147). By employing Roland Barthes’s concept of “reality effect” in her close readings of McEwan’s *Atonement* (2001), Hilary Mantel’s *Wolf Hall* (2009) and *Bring Up the Bodies* (2012), and David Peace’s *Red Riding Quartet* (1999-2002), Wilson identifies certain modernist techniques reused by contemporary novelists as the new reality effects. While modernist authors dwelt upon characters’ interior subjectivity in order to interrogate the outside reality, in the post-millennial historical novel the internal point of view serves the purpose of strengthening the real. Through the focalization of the protagonist, Thomas Cromwell’s interior consciousness, *Wolf Hall* suggests that the individual mind’s perceptions represent the most reliable link to reality. In her close reading of *Atonement*—another text that engages with

modernism in both formal and thematic terms—Wilson argues that, in contrast with Mantel, for McEwan the reality effect is not the familiar mind of a focalizing character but the “controlling and ordering effected by the author,” though this does not change the novel’s emphasis on the significance of realist settings and techniques in forging plausible connections to the historical past (159).

The contemporary novel’s uneasy engagement with earlier literary traditions represents the topic of Daniel Weston’s chapter, in which he argues that writers of the Noughties have set out to move beyond the strict divisions of realism and experimentalism. He debates Zadie Smith’s 2008 essay, “Two Paths for the Novel,” and her interpretation of the contemporary novel as a divergence between “lyrical realism” and the rejection of realist forms for innovation. Through the analysis of a wide range of contemporary texts, from McEwan’s *Atonement* to Smith’s *On Beauty* (2005), Weston demonstrates that realist and self-reflexive modes of writing are intricately intertwined in the post-millennial novel.

The final two chapters, titled “International Context,” examine the status of the contemporary novel from the perspective of American literary criticism and the representation of multiculturalism in fiction, respectively. Ann Marie Adams points out the shortcomings of US critical writing, which treats contemporary British authors as “singular postmodern stars,” and fails to put under critical scrutiny their engagement with the literary past (217). In the concluding chapter, Ulrike Tancke suggests that contemporary fiction’s approach to multiculturalism differs from ideas propagated in politics in that the former treats violence as an inherent part of human nature and resists immigrants’ identification as victims.

The essays in this volume outline a thorough and detailed map of the various directions that the novel of the twenty-first century has taken. Particularly noteworthy, as well as less known texts are discussed by different scholars and with different methodological premises, creating an impressive intertextual—and international—dialogue. Except for some typos (in Weston’s chapter the name of Cecilia Tallis, a character in *Atonement*, appears as Cecelia) and editing errors (Tancke’s chapter does not analyze Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* as announced in the Introduction but Sunjeev Sahota’s *Ours Are The Streets*), the book is a wide-ranging and rigorously written scholarly work that will be of invaluable interest to students and academics working in the field of literary studies.