

Contemporary and Beyond?

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Acheson, James, ed. *The Contemporary British Novel Since 2000*. Edinburgh UP, 2017. 214 pages. ISBN 978 1 4744 0375 7. epub. £80.00.

In today's on-going expansion of contemporary literature in which, according to *The Guardian's* interview series, first-time British authors debut every spring and well-established authors reveal their newest books in autumn, James Acheson sets out to complete a strenuous task in selecting the most prominent contemporary British writers in his collection. Acheson, former Senior Lecturer in English at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, New Zealand, edited two predecessors of this volume on British fiction; building on this well-established tradition, Acheson includes eighteen authors in the latest volume of this much needed series.

He bases his selection on four principles viewed as pivotal to "serious" fiction: literary prizes won, being taught at educational institutions both in Britain and worldwide, the number of copies bought by public libraries, and familiarity of the reading public with the given works of an author. He justifies excluding particular authors with shortage of space and he confesses that no contemporary collection can ever be completely inclusive due to the ever-expanding scope of fiction; nevertheless, the growing number of women writers is reflected in the selection of authors as more than half of them are female, contributing to their expanding canonization. The main selection criterion rests on works published after or right before the new millennium. Acheson notes in his introduction how "an increasingly complex contemporary world has given rise to increasingly complex contemporary novels" (1), hence

this collection aims to highlight the manifold nature of current British fiction through the leitmotifs of the turn of the century: globalization, lies, trauma, and borders.

As is often the case with such edited volumes—even though Acheson claims the contributions were specifically written for this collection—the editor’s attempt at trying to pull together disparate studies often results in somewhat underdeveloped connections among the thematic sections. In the Introduction, instead of following the book’s structure closely, Acheson uses the four individual chapters in the first thematic part entitled “Four Voices for the New Millennium” to foreshadow the upcoming parts through the mention of thematic junctures, realism, postmodernism, historical fiction, and postcolonialism. This witty self-introductory device functions as a way to contextualize all but one of the parts of the volume; nevertheless, it seems to result in confused reasoning regarding the inclusion of the respective authors in “Four Voices.” There is no clear argument for including two well-established (Ian McEwan and Hilary Mantel) and two well-known but new writers (Zadie Smith and David Mitchell)—other than the justification just given—making this editorial choice on its own debatable but in relation to the entire collection beneficial.

Minuscule as it might seem, the naming of parts deserves comment as well. The repeated use of the word “beyond” in the titles of four parts out of five highlights the framework Acheson creates around the chapters, while also pinpointing that the novels analyzed seem to exceed the terms “realist,” “postmodernist,” “historical,” and “postcolonialist” (2). This repetition makes these titles cliché-like, however, especially considering that most of the respective sections could more profoundly explore how the texts examined live up to the “beyondness” of terms as promised in the section titles.

One of the common interests in the essays contained in the first part is the concern with the “general unreliability of language” (17) and rewritings of deceptive history. Evoking Jean-François Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition* (1997), David Punter examines

McEwan's post-2000 novels, claiming that "the struggle with what truth means and what value and power we can, or should, attach to it remains the driving force in these novels" (26). The question of truth is further explored in Brian Finney's reading of Mitchell's works, where dreams and miscommunication represent the ontological anxieties in our globalized world. While Lisa Fletcher examines how Mantel's fiction has turned from historiographic metafiction into conventional realist novels, Gretchen Gerzina demonstrates the way Zadie Smith's fiction represents a multicultural Britain without postcolonial undertones.

Susan Strehle's "Realism and Beyond," the introductory essay of Part II, offers an insightful analysis of Maggie O'Farrell's six novels by studying how she "updates" realism with "psychological depth" (61). Sue Vice then acknowledges postmodern reverberations in Sarah Hall's novels but argues for a different generic marker as the novels draw "on lyrical and fantastic effects in order to construct a new kind of poetic realism" (77). Alison Lumsden claims that A. L. Kennedy's three twenty-first century novels "follow a similar trajectory" to John Barth's journey, "moving from an end-of-millennium angst to a reaching out through the power of words" (86). Alan Riach observes the path in Alan Warner's novels "from the mere rejection or abandonment of 'grand narratives' as unquestionably reliable" to "a return to fundamental realities" (94).

The shift from Part II (realism) to Part III "Postmodernism, Globalisation and Beyond" is mirrored in Daniel Bedgood's discussion of Kazuo Ishiguro's transformation from a realist writer to a postmodern one through his "development of unreliable first-person narrative traits, [and] his manipulations of generic expectation and development" (109). With the exception of Vijay Mishra's paper, Part III appears the most balanced and well-written section of the collection. Mishra's contribution seems to fit less smoothly into the theoretical framework of Part III, especially considering that it deals with archival modernism in Salman Rushdie's post-millennial novels. Mishra does address the topic of postmodernism, yet does

so rather indirectly, through discussing Rushdie's use of postmodern techniques, pastiche, and references to popular culture, without a single mention of the term, "postmodern." A concise paragraph would have been welcome to bridge the seeming inconsistency in the otherwise well-constructed and cohesive Part III.

Nevertheless, Part III can exhibit what "beyondness" means in relation to postmodernism and the effects of globalization it suffered. For instance, Monica Germanà argues that Ali Smith's fiction unambiguously demonstrates a move away from postmodernism with not only "innovative narrative techniques, but [it] also combines formal experimentation with a strong ethical commitment to distinctly contemporary concerns" (100). Another potential "beyond" the postmodern is a "less obvious" postmodern experimentation with structure, as Glenda Norquay views Kate Atkinson's latest novels, and her focus on "plotting" to "encompass the larger questions about how self might be understood in terms of past, present and future" (127).

In Part IV, Dominic Head discusses Adam Foulds's engagement with realism in his novels, with a special emphasis on the "examination of his literary influences and inheritance" (143). Susana Onega argues that Sarah Waters's historical novels show "a striking generic hybridity, with elements of the sensational novel, the historical romance, the war novel, the London novel and the trauma novel, among others" (153). The closing essay by Cairns Craig might puzzle the reader by its lack of an introduction proper and a contextualization of James Robertson and his works. Craig states that the author's novels "are poised between the unverifiable truth of history and the interpretive multiplicity of literature," whereas his characters can either create the truth of history or choose literature's alternative narratives to escape (172).

In the final group in the series of essays entitled "Postcolonialism and Beyond," arguably one of the most exciting sections in the book, Janet Wilson introduces the works of

Pakistani-born Mohsin Hamid that explore “the impact of changing post-imperial US politics, economics and educational opportunity upon the transnational youth of Pakistan” (177). Sue Thomas discusses how Andrea Levy’s shift to historical fiction makes use of recollection as a counter-memory of British history and national memory to probe the interconnected legacies of British imperialism and the West Indies. The last essay by Françoise Lionnet and Jennifer MacGregor focuses on Aminatta Forna’s stylistic blending of British realism, postcolonial narratives, and local traditions of the former Yugoslavia and Sierra Leone with a thematic focus on “the vital links that tie women’s agency and experience to their national histories, echoing but also transforming European as well as postcolonial understandings of nationalism and feminism” (200).

Despite minor shortcomings, such as the occasional loose connection among the essays, the reiteration of the word “beyond” in the titles, and one essay lacking an introduction, the major merit of this volume is that it grasps what the British novel has achieved in the past fifteen years and it does so by grouping the texts on the basis of common motifs. The essays vary between less theoretically driven writing, rather of an introductory nature, and more complex analyses, and there is a useful and comprehensive index, while each chapter suggests further critical readings—underscoring the use of *The Contemporary British Novel Since 2000* as a university textbook. The high quality of the individual essays makes it a significant addition to literary criticism. Acheson’s edited volume will prove invaluable for a wide audience including the erudite reader, students, and teachers of contemporary British fiction, as well as research scholars in this field. This work of diverse contributions is especially significant at a time when British society is changing, when multiculturalism seems to be challenged by a migration crisis, racialism, and radicalism, constantly re-forming British identity and beyond that: literature.

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Work Cited

“Introducing Our 10 Best Debut Novelists of 2020.” *The Guardian*, 26 Jan. 2020. Web. 31 May 2020.

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