CONTEMPORARY
BRITISH
FICTION

Nick Bentley

Contemporary British Fiction

Nick Bentley

For Karla

Contents

Chronology

Date	Historical and Cultural Events	Publication of Novels
1975	Margaret Thatcher becomes Conservative Party Leader; Sex Discrimination Bill	David Lodge, *Changing Places*; Sam Selvon, *Moses Ascending*
1976	James Callaghan takes over from Harold Wilson as Prime Minister; Race Relations Act; Notting Hill riots; punk rock begins in Britain	Emma Tennant, *Hotel de Dream*
1977	Silver Jubilee of Elizabeth II	Angela Carter, *The Passion of New Eve*; John Fowles, *Daniel Martin*
1978	New Wave influences British Rock and Pop	Beryl Bainbridge, *Young Adolf*; A. S. Byatt, *The Virgin in the Garden*; Ian McEwan, *The Cement Garden*

Date	Historical and Cultural Events	Publication of Novels
1979	'Winter of Discontent'; Margaret Thatcher elected as Conservative Prime Minister	Angela Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*; John Le Carré, *Smiley's People*
1980	Riots in Bristol; Ronald Reagan elected President of US	Graham Swift, *The Sweet Shop Owner*
1981	British Nationality Bill; riots in Birmingham, Bristol, Liverpool, London, and Manchester	Alasdair Gray, *Lanark*; Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*; Graham Swift, *Shuttlecock*
1982	The Falklands War between Britain and Argentina	Pat Barker, *Union Street*
1983	Conservatives re-elected; Neil Kinnock takes over leadership of the Labour Party from Michael Foot	Salman Rushdie, *Shame*; Graham Swift, *Waterland*; Fay Weldon, *The Lives and Loves of a She Devil*
1984	The Miner's Strike; IRA bombing of Conservative Party Conference in Brighton	Martin Amis, *Money: A Suicide Note*; J. G. Ballard, *Empire of the Sun*; Julian Barnes, *Flaubert's Parrot*; Angela Carter, *Nights at the Circus*; Alasdair Gray, *1982 Janine*
1985	Riots in London and Birmingham	Peter Ackroyd, *Hawksmoor*; A. S. Byatt, *Still Life*; John Fowles, *A Maggot*; Doris Lessing, *The Good Terrorist*; Jeanette Winterson, *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*

Date	Historical and Cultural Events	Publication of Novels
1986	Wapping Print Workers' Strike	Kingsley Amis, *The Old Devils*
1987	Conservatives re-elected; 'Black Monday' – Stock Market Crash; storms cause heavy damage across Britain	V. S. Naipaul, *The Enigma of Arrival*; Ian McEwan, *The Child in Time*; Jeanette Winterson, *The Passion*
1988	Reform of the Education System; rave culture – Summer of Love	Doris Lessing, *The Fifth Child*; Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses*
1989	The Fall of the Berlin Wall; revolutions in Eastern Europe; end of the Cold War; 'Poll Tax' in Scotland; fatwa issued against Salman Rushdie	Martin Amis, *London Fields*; Julian Barnes, *A History of the World in 10½ Chapters*; Janice Galloway, *The Trick is to Keep Breathing*; Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day*; Jeanette Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry*
1990	'Poll Tax' in England and Wales; 'Poll Tax' riots in London; John Major takes over as Conservative Leader; President Mandela released from prison in South Africa; human gene experimentation began	A. S. Byatt, *Possession: A Romance*; Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*

Date	Historical and Cultural Events	Publication of Novels
1991	'First' Gulf War; end of apartheid in South Africa	Martin Amis, *Time's Arrow*; Pat Barker, *Regeneration*; Angela Carter, *Wise Children*; Caryl Phillips, *Cambridge*; Jane Rogers, *Mr Wroe's Virgins*; Iain Sinclair, *Downriver*
1992	Conservatives re-elected; Major's government forced to devalue the pound	Alasdair Gray, *Poor Things*; Nick Hornby, *Fever Pitch*; Ian McEwan, *Black Dogs*; Adam Thorpe, *Ulverton*; Jeanette Winterson, *Written on the Body*
1993	Stephen Lawrence murder; Bill Clinton elected President of US	Pat Barker, *The Eye in the Door*; Irvine Welsh, *Trainspotting*
1994	Tony Blair becomes Leader of the Labour Party; Church of England ordains first women priests	Jonathan Coe, *What a Carve Up!*; James Kelman, *How Late it Was, How Late*; A. L. Kennedy, *Now That You're Back*; Iain Sinclair, *Radon Daughters*
1995	Britpop at its height	Martin Amis, *The Information*; Pat Barker, *The Ghost Road*; Helen Fielding, *Bridget Jones's Diary*; Nick Hornby, *High Fidelity*; Hanif Kureishi, *The Black Album*; Salman Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh*

Date	Historical and Cultural Events	Publication of Novels
1996	IRA bombs in London Docklands and Manchester	Beryl Bainbridge, *Every Man for Himself*; A. S. Byatt, *Babel Tower*; Seamus Deane, *Reading in the Dark: A Novel*; John King, *The Football Factory*; Graham Swift, *Last Orders*
1997	Tony Blair elected as Labour Prime Minister; death of Princess Diana; the devolution process for Scotland and Wales begins	Bernard MacLaverty, *Grace Notes*
1998	Northern Ireland Peace Agreement	Julian Barnes, *England, England*; Alan Hollinghurst, *The Swimming Pool Library*; Ian McEwan, *Amsterdam*; Courttia Newland, *The Scholar*
1999	NATO military involvement in the War in Yugoslavia	Courttia Newland, *Society Within*
2000	George W. Bush elected President of US	Kazuo Ishiguro, *When We Were Orphans*; Will Self, *How the Dead Live*; Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*; Jeanette Winterson, *The.PowerBook*
2001	Labour re-elected; riots in Oldham, Bradford, Leeds and Burnley; 11 September attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon	Jonathan Coe, *The Rotters' Club*; Niall Griffiths, *Sheepshagger*; Nick Hornby, *How To Be Good*; Ian McEwan, *Atonement*; Iain Sinclair, *Landor's Tower*; Ali Smith, *Hotel World*

Date	Historical and Cultural Events	Publication of Novels
2002	US and British troops invade Afghanistan	Will Self, *Dorian*; Sarah Waters, *Fingersmith*
2003	Invasion of Iraq by US and British troops; Saddam Hussein's regime toppled; troops remain in Iraq	Martin Amis, *Yellow Dog*; Monica Ali, *Brick Lane*; J. G. Ballard, *Millennium People*
2004	Civil Partnership Act	Jonathan Coe, *The Closed Circle*; Alan Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty*; Andrea Levy, *Small Island*; David Mitchell, *Cloud Atlas*; Iain Sinclair, *Dining on Stones*
2005	7 July bomb attacks on London's transport system	Julian Barnes, *Arthur and George*; Diana Evans, *26a*; Ian McEwan, *Saturday*; Salman Rushdie, *Shalimar the Clown*; Zadie Smith, *On Beauty*
2006		Monica Ali, *Alentejo Blue*; J. G. Ballard, *Kingdom Come*; Will Self, *The Book of Dave*
2007	Gordon Brown takes over from Tony Blair as Prime Minister	Ian McEwan, *On Chesil Beach*

Introduction

This book is an introduction to British fiction written in the last thirty years or so and is aimed primarily at readers who are studying the subject or have a general interest in the area. Each of the sections takes a particular theme or trend identifiable in the period, and each chapter selects three novels that explore some aspect of that theme. I have worked with the assumption that readers will have already read the novels discussed in each chapter. As with most books of this type, it is not expected to be read cover to cover, and chapters and sections can be read independently. There is inevitably an amount of overlap and because of the range of issues they discuss some of the novels could have been included in different chapters.

Before proceeding, the category of *contemporary* fiction needs to be clarified both with respect to this book and the wider understanding of the term in literary studies. What do we mean when we describe certain literature as contemporary? In one sense the very idea of the contemporary in literature is problematic in that the term in common usage refers to the immediate present, and once a book is published it inevitably becomes part of a literary history. In this book, contemporary refers to the period 1975–2005. The first date is chosen for reasons that will be explained in a moment, the latter date is simply related to the year in which the latest references to fiction appear. The fact that this period of literary history tends

to be called 'contemporary' has to do with the way in which literature is periodized generally in literary studies. Until fairly recently, literature of the second half of the twentieth century tended to be called post-war literature, referring to the Second World War as the starting point for this literary-historical category. There are a number of problems with this nomenclature, one of which is that there have now been a number of wars in which Britain has been involved. Secondly, the period is becoming too large for the post-war categorization to be useful. It seems to make more sense now to split this category into an earlier and later period.

Contemporary fiction, then, tends to be defined as the period from the mid-1970s to the present. This is somewhat of an arbitrary division, but has precedents in a number of recent books.[1] The main factor in choosing 1975 is that it is the year that saw the election of Margaret Thatcher as the leader of the Conservative Party and marks a key moment of transition in the politics of Britain, and by extension the social, economic and cultural climate. From the end of the Second World War, a politics of consensus was established in Britain whereby an unwritten cross-party agreement accepted the basic systems of the government, such as the welfare state and a mixed economy of state owned and private industry. This represented a balance of socialist and capitalist policies that was based broadly on the economic theories of John Maynard Keynes.[2] Thatcherite monetarist policies, which aimed to dismantle the framework of state owned industry, to break the power of the Trades Unions and to significantly reform the main bodies of the Welfare State, effectively ended this consensus and signalled a period in which British politics became an ideological stand-off between clearly demarcated Left and Right wings. In hindsight, then, the mid-to-late seventies heralded a period of political, social and cultural change that divides some of the fundamental characteristics of contemporary Britain from the end of the Second World War onwards. The novel is traditionally a form of literature that has responded symbiotically with social and political movements and fiction in the contemporary period has continued in that vein.

Another problem concerning the coverage of this book is how to define the term British, or rather how to decide which writers have been or want to be labelled with a national tag that in some sense

determines the way in which their work is read. Salman Rushdie, for example, was born in India, moved to Pakistan at a young age then moved to Britain, and at the time of writing lives in New York. It is somewhat problematic, therefore, to call him straightforwardly British. He has, however, most often been categorized in those terms and even though the novel discussed in depth in this book is mainly set in Pakistan it does not seem unreasonable to include him in a book about recent British fiction. The decision of which writers and which of their novels to include was a difficult one, but generally I have tried to offer a representative range by choosing texts that are recognized as being part of an emerging canon of contemporary British fiction. I have not included writers from the Republic of Ireland – contemporary Irish literature warrants a book in its own right – despite many Irish novelists, such as John Banville, having a direct relationship with contexts and themes in British writing.

One of the target readerships for this book is students of literature in higher education studying courses in contemporary fiction, so I have tried to include several writers that tend to be found on university and college syllabuses. I have, however, tried to cover some less canonical writers such as Courttia Newland and, to a certain extent, Iain Sinclair.[3] The issue of canonicity will be addressed in the conclusion, and the particular difficulties associated with identifying a canon of contemporary British fiction, given that the range of novels being produced in this field is, by definition, continually increasing. In the Student Resources section at the end of the book I have included a list of further recommended fiction that fits well with the main themes of each chapter. This list is not meant to be exhaustive, but offers a good representation of other novels that address similar themes to the ones analyzed.

Before moving on to discuss individual writers and novels, it would be useful to have a sense of some of the important contexts informing them. In what follows I give a brief overview of some of these over the last thirty years (and where relevant longer), and provide some examples of their influence in the fiction of the period. This is divided into five sections: (1) Politics; (2) Class; (3) Gender and Sexuality; (4) Postcolonialism, Multiculturalism and National Identity; and (5) Youth and Subcultures.

POLITICS

If we take a long view of the political history of Britain from the mid seventies to the middle of the first decade of the twenty-first century then it is a story of the move from a politics of ideological opposition to one of broad consensus between the major political parties. In the winter of 1978–79, the Labour government faced a series of industrial relations crises that saw some of the bigger Trade Unions campaigning for higher wage deals. The so-called 'winter of discontent' resulted in power cuts, rubbish piling up on London streets and a serious rift between British labour and those who had traditionally represented their interests in parliament. This stand-off continued to dog Left wing and Labour politics until the mid-1990s.

It was partly due to the turmoil on the Left of British politics that Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government gained power in the 1979 general election. This heralded a series of economic and social policies that radically challenged some of the foundations of the British system as it had been established by the first Labour government in the period after the end of the Second World War. The development of Thatcherism rested fundamentally on policies that shifted responsibility for social welfare from the state to the individual. On the surface Thatcherism produced an ideology of individual success and the accumulation of wealth. Thatcher famously stated in an interview with *Woman's Own* magazine that 'There is no such thing as society', and this off-the-cuff remark came to represent the focus on individualism at the heart of Thatcherism.[4] State services such as the National Health Service became the targets for so-called rationalization, which in practice meant the loss of many jobs and the imposition of management teams charged with the job of cutting down the national health bill as much as possible. As part of this outlook Britain was stripped of its nationalized assets in a series of sell-offs of companies such as British Rail, British Telecom, British Gas and British Petroleum, which saw similar 'rationalizations', and the accumulation of large profits by some of those who bought up the under-priced shares.

Culturally, these policies revealed new fears of the two nations idea of Britain. On the one hand there was a rise in the

unembarrassed spectacle of conspicuous consumption in certain quarters that saw the rise of the so-called Yuppies (young and upwardly mobile). Equally it saw a high rise in unemployment due especially to the shift from older primary industries such as coal, steel and shipbuilding. This led to the development of an impoverished working class, and consequently to the development of resistance movements amongst many sections of the population that were excluded from, or refused to buy into, the new culture of individualism. The lack of a viable political opposition to the Tories, meant that popular political movements such as the Miner's Strike and the Campaign against the Poll Tax took to the streets, often ending in scenes of violence where a police force began to take on the look of a government-led militia. In 1981 in particular, there were a series of spontaneous riots in some of the underprivileged inner city areas of Britain who took the brunt of the economic policies pursued by Thatcherism, and often fuelled by claims of racist intimidation by the police. Such riots were seen in St. Paul's in Bristol in 1980, Chapeltown in Leeds, Handsworth in Birmingham, Toxteth in Liverpool, Moss Side in Manchester and Brixton in London. Part of the Thatcherite agenda was to break the power of the Unions, who some felt were holding British companies to ransom with the threat of industrial action for increasing pay rises. This policy culminated in the bitter Miner's Strike of 1984–85, in which the National Union of Mineworkers led by Arthur Scargill attempted to challenge the attempt by the Conservatives to close several collieries. The striking miners were eventually defeated by the overwhelming forces of the state resulting in the decimation of many mining communities, especially in Wales and the north of England.

The ideological entrenchment of the 1980s gradually gave way to a form of consensus politics in the mid to late 1990s, mainly due to the reform of the Labour Party led initially by Neil Kinnock and continued by John Smith and Tony Blair which resulted in 'New Labour', a reworking of the party that claimed to hold on to traditional Labour values, whilst at the same time accepting many of the policies that the Tories had introduced in the 1980s. The resulting victory of Labour in the 1997 election under Blair meant that British politics had, as perhaps always, been fought out on the issue of which party most successfully presented itself as

representing the centre ground. Culturally, however, there was a marked shift in the late 1990s where conspicuous consumption came to be viewed as somewhat passé and a new politics of conscience, often centred on environmental issues, began to replace the left-wing politics of the previous generation (not to say that those groups disappeared or that the economic problems that they were reacting against went away).

These political issues have been addressed in differing ways by contemporary novelists. Iain Sinclair, for example, has continued to produce fiction that is critical of the Thatcher government's policies. Jonathan Coe has been critical of both Thatcherism in his *What a Carve Up!* (1994) and New Labour in his 2004 novel *The Closed Circle* which includes a cameo of Tony Blair. Alan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (2004) includes the other major political figure of the period; in one scene Margaret Thatcher appears at a party and dances with the novel's main character. Hollinghurst is more ambivalent in his treatment of Thatcher, nevertheless the narrative details the personal consequences of the kind of excess and lack of social responsibility her policies caused, a similar approach to that taken by Will Self in his novel *Dorian* (2002), set mainly in the 1980s.

One of the successes of the New Labour government was to begin the peace process in Northern Ireland, a situation that had dogged British politics since the end of the 1960s. The history of Northern Ireland over the past four decades is complex and has seen the most conspicuous acts of violence from both sides of the dispute on mainland Britain since, arguably, the Civil War. Certain notable events stand out and have been addressed in some of the fiction of the period. On Sunday, 30 January 1972, the British Army opened fire on a mostly peaceful demonstration of Irish Catholics in the Bogside area of Derry, resulting in the death of fourteen people. Bloody Sunday, as it came to be known, marked a transition in the relations between Irish Republicans and the British government and saw an escalation of violence by paramilitaries on both sides of the sectarian divide. The extension of the IRA's campaign to Britain in the mid-1970s resulted in several high profile bombings including the Birmingham pub bombings in 1974. In Jonathan Coe's novel *The Rotters' Club* (2001) two of the characters are

present in 'The Tavern in the Town', one of the pubs targeted, when the bomb goes off, and Coe evokes the sense of outrage the event caused in Birmingham at the time, as well as the backlash against innocent Irish people then settled in England. The 'Troubles', as they came to be known, were effectively halted by the Irish Peace Process, ushered in by Blair's newly elected Labour government after 1997. This was part of a broader policy of devolution that saw the creation of the Welsh assembly and the Scottish parliament in the late 1990s, which although only having certain powers have formed a focus for debate on the issue of national identity amongst the separate countries of the United Kingdom. In Northern Ireland, the main literary response to the Troubles has been in drama, although the novels of Seamus Deane and Bernard MacLaverty are notable exceptions.[5] There has been a renaissance in Scottish writing in the last forty years or so with such notable figures as Janice Galloway, Alasdair Gray, James Kelman, A. L. Kennedy, Ali Smith, Alan Warner and Irvine Welsh.

There have been a number of key international events that have impacted on Britain over the last thirty years and have been used as source material for British writers. At the beginning of the period the ongoing Cold War between communism and capitalism led to the amassing of armaments by the Soviet Union and the US-led Western Powers. The anxieties caused cast a significant shadow over British culture, often articulated as fear for an impending, nuclear Third World War. This has formed a significant topic in fiction by writers such as Martin Amis, J. G. Ballard and Graham Swift, and most notably in the spy novel series produced by John le Carré.[6] The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, followed by the series of revolutions across Eastern Europe, effectively ended the Cold War. Again a number of novels have used these events as a backdrop. Ian McEwan's novel *Black Dogs* (1992), for example, takes the fall of the Berlin Wall as the starting point for an exploration of violence that goes back to the Second World War, and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000), a novel that maps the impact of certain key events during the period, has a passage that describes the mixed reaction by a number of characters to the events in Berlin in 1989.[7]

Perhaps the most significant event of the last thirty years or so, in terms of its consequences, was the attack on the World Trade Center

and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001 and such a historic event was bound to find itself addressed in fiction written after that event. In Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* (2003), the event is observed on television by the main character, and the novel describes the impact it has on the multiethnic area in which the main character lives in East London.[8] Ian McEwan in his 2005 novel *Saturday*, uses the context of 9/11 in the observation early in the novel of an airliner on fire flying over London: 'Everyone agrees, airliners look different in the sky these days, predatory or doomed'.[9] The context of terrorism and the political and ethical questions it raises is also a key feature in J. G. Ballard's novels *Millennium People* (2003) and *Kingdom Come* (2006).[10] The consequences of 9/11 are still being played out in Afghanistan, Iraq and in acts of terrorism in Britain and other parts of the world, and it is likely that these will continue to produce subject matter for much fiction produced in Britain in the coming years.

CLASS

The ideological divisions of the 1980s and early 1990s represented by the political differences of the Labour and Conservative Parties were primarily based on issues of social class. The Labour Party, since its origins at the turn of the twentieth century, had traditionally strove to represent the interests of the British working class; whilst the Conservatives had developed in their long history from being the party of the landed aristocracy to being increasingly appealing to the middle classes (especially since the decline of the Liberal Party from the end of the First World War onwards). That is not to say, however, that class has always determined voting patterns. Not all eligible working-class voters necessarily support the Labour Party; the electoral successes of the Tories in 1979, 1983, 1987 and 1992 relied, in part, on a significant amount of support amongst the working class. Similarly, a large section of the middle classes, especially intellectuals, creative artists and professionals have tended to support left-wing political causes throughout the period.

This leads to one of the problems with the terms of definition in which class has traditionally been understood. The division of society into the three broad economic classes of working, middle

and upper relies heavily on social and economic theories developed by those on the Left, and in particular those influenced by Marxist theory (although Marx tended to identify just two classes: the ruling class and the proletariat, the former being an amalgamation of middle and upper classes). In Britain, these clear class divisions owed much to the legacy of the social problems of the 1930s imported into the very different world that began to emerge after the Second World War. The categorization of such a complex beast as the nature of social division is fraught with problems. There have been more recent attempts to offer classification of social groups in terms of economic wealth such as Thompson and Hickey's five level class model, however, this still retains an element of simplifying the situation.[11] Nevertheless, it is still useful, in certain circumstances, to identify social groups in terms of class, if only because it makes it easier to develop a sense of class consciousness from which political resistance movements may be formed.

One other problem with class as a system by which to categorize people, and one that is particularly relevant to the role of literature and fiction in society, is the shift that occurred in some quarters in the 1950s about the way class was understood. This shift, broadly speaking, involved a rethinking of class in cultural rather than economic terms. This process was led in Britain by cultural critics and writers such as Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, E. P. Thompson and Stuart Hall, and resulted in the emergence of what came to be known in universities as Cultural Studies. One of the premises behind this movement was that class could be identified as a cultural phenomenon, rather than purely along economic lines. Pioneering work by Hoggart on the cultural pursuits of the working class served to redefine the term itself, and similarly by Williams on literature and Thompson with respect to political and cultural movements historically.[12]

This shift has problematized the way in which class has been understood in the last forty years or so. For example, identifiable cultural pursuits and practices of the working class in the 1950s and into the 1960s such as popular music, film and television, football and 'pub' culture can hardly be claimed now as the pursuits of this section of society alone. The immense cultural shifts that have taken place since the fifties mean that the old categories of class are

far more difficult to identify. This is not to say that the differences in wealth between the richest and poorest elements do not continue to have a significant effect on the way British society is organized, and the way people are represented in cultural terms. The recent media invention of the so-called 'chavs' is based on older class prejudices recycled in a new form that allows it to circulate in society without the charge of classism that it clearly relies on.

One recurring theme throughout the period from the 1950s onwards is the claim that Britain is becoming (or has become) a classless society. A series of Prime Ministers from both the major parties have made this claim from Macmillan in the 1950s, Thatcher in the 1980s through to Major and Blair in the 1990s and into the new century. This tends to be a political move that in some way bolsters the justification of a political agenda, rather than being based on actual statistics about the wealth distribution of people in Britain. There are, however, contexts in which the claim holds weight especially in the policies championed by the Thatcher government (and continued by New Labour) that contributed to this blurring of the lines between the classes, such as the move to increase home ownership and the rise in the number of people gaining a university education.

This continued debate and confusion over the subject of class has provided a rich source for much of the fiction produced during period covered by this book. The field is still dominated by what could be broadly called middle-class writers such as Monica Ali, Kingsley Amis, Martin Amis, J. G. Ballard, Julian Barnes, A. S. Byatt, Jonathan Coe, Margaret Drabble, Alan Hollinghurst, Nick Hornby, Kazuo Ishiguro, Ian McEwan, Jane Rogers, Salman Rushdie and Sarah Waters. There has been, however, a rise in the number of novels that are set in working-class locations or engage with working-class issues. The literary context for this again goes back to the 1950s (and earlier). That decade saw an increase in the number of novels that were concerned to record and represent working-class experience in fiction, a medium that had traditionally been the enclave of the middle classes. Writers such as Alan Sillitoe, Keith Waterhouse, John Braine and David Storey produced novels that were situated in working-class life and as writers could claim to be a part of that social group. The 'working-class' novel as it came to be known, has become a staple of

British fiction from the 1950s onwards, although, significantly the tag itself has become unfashionable. Writers such as Monica Ali, Pat Barker, Julie Burchill, Angela Carter, Alasdair Gray, James Kelman, John King, Courttia Newland, Zadie Smith, Alan Warner, Sarah Waters, Irvine Welsh and Jeanette Winterson have all produced novels that could be described as working-class in terms of the primary cultural setting. As can be seen from this list, however, what might in the 1950s have been described as working-class fiction tends to get identified more with other social categories such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity, national identity and youth.

GENDER AND SEXUALITY

In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir published *The Second Sex*, a text which can be identified as a founding moment of second wave feminism. One of the central theses of the book was summed up by the line, 'I am not born a woman I become one'.[13] This position recognized that although individuals are born as male or female, the development of masculinity and femininity is not determined at birth, but is learned through the process of socialization. Femininity and masculinity, therefore, are a series of artificial constructs or codes of behaviour that are maintained and reproduced by the dominant ideas and practices in society. It was also shown that the prevailing constructs of gender change historically. Identifying these codes as constructed and historically contingent, and not natural or essentialist, made it possible to argue for a resistance to the way in which society had conventionally demarcated roles for men and women. This fundamental proposition underpinning many of the ideas in new wave feminism allowed for the political campaigns during the 1960s and especially the seventies that coalesced under the banner of the Women's Liberation Movement. Feminism, however, was far from a monolithic movement and several, often competing, strands emerged in the later 1960s and 70s. In America, Betty Friedan, one of those involved in the development of the new wave, advocated a form of feminism based on equal rights for women and a sharing of the roles that society currently divided between the genders. In her important 1963 book,

The Feminine Mystique, she challenged the way in which women had been designated certain roles which kept them subjugated, and advocated the development of a society where women could enter into public and professional life on an equal footing with men. This form of feminism, however, tended to focus on women in middle-class and upper-class environments and developed into ideas that came to be referred to as liberal feminism. In Britain, feminist writers and activists were often closely associated with socialist political movements and tended to see women's rights as part of a wider social agenda that included class. Sheila Rowbotham, for example, tried to argue in an influential pamphlet published in 1968 'Women's Liberation and the New Politics', that women's liberation was an economic as well as cultural issue.[14] In the British context there was also a strong literary element to the Women's Liberation Movement including notable figures such as playwright Michelene Wandor and literary critic Germaine Greer.[15]

With respect to literary criticism, the feminist movement developed in the 1970s in two main directions: the first was led by critics such as Kate Millett and tended to identify sexist and often misogynist positions in male-authored literature of the past; the second by writers such as Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, Ellen Moers and Elaine Showalter, who tried to establish an alternative canon of women's literature, a body of writing sometimes referred to as gynocriticism.[16] The influence of feminism on British fiction has been profound, to the extent that today, contemporary women novelists are just as likely to gain major literary awards and to be included on contemporary fiction syllabuses as men. This is certainly not the case if you look at any other period of British literature (with the possible exception of the Victorian novel). Many British women writers emerged (or were already established) in the late 1960s and 1970s who were keen to engage with feminist issues such as A. S. Byatt, Angela Carter, Margaret Drabble, Janice Galloway, Doris Lessing, Emma Tennant and Fay Weldon.

Alongside the Anglo-American tradition in feminist literary criticism, certain British novelists have been more influenced by the French feminists: Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva. This body of work tended to engage more with poststructuralist theories of language. Hélène Cixous, for example, argues that the

whole basis of Western language and philosophy has been based on 'dual, hierarchical systems' such as Activity/Passivity, Sun/Moon, Culture/Nature and Man/Woman that place the female in either a position of inferiority or invisibility: 'Either woman is passive or she does not exist'.[17] Her own writing seeks to rectify this imbalance by creating a new type of writing that combines literary creation with criticism in an attempt to represent female experience through the use of language and syntax. This experiment with writing and language, labelled *écriture féminine*, identifies gender difference in the very understanding of, and relationship between, words. This was not entirely new in a British context, as Virginia Woolf had speculated some years earlier on the way in which sentence structure could be gendered. In 'To Cambridge Women' she identifies what she calls a 'man's sentence' as 'unsuited for a woman's use', and implicitly advocates that women should try to develop a style of writing that distanced itself from the male tradition.[18] Contemporary British writers such as Jeanette Winterson and Janice Galloway have experimented with language in a way that evokes this kind of gendered writing.

One of the problems associated with this line of thinking, however, is that the kinds of sentence that are designated as female tend to be loose, rambling, resist making a firm point and value expression over logic. This, of course, could be construed as reproducing the very characteristics that had traditionally been associated with femininity in a patriarchal discourse. A different approach was the taking over by women of those characteristics normally associated with masculinity and a figure that we have already encountered looms large here. Margaret Thatcher has in many ways become an unlikely icon of this kind of feminism, unlikely because she openly disagreed with the main arguments put forward by feminists in the 1970s and 80s. She was, however, a visible example of the way in which women could achieve top positions of power in the 1980s. To do so, however, often involved her taking on what many regarded as masculine characteristics. This fact in itself, though, suggested that gender signification was independent of biological sex. To cite Thatcher as a feminist icon is misleading in many ways, as the make-up of parliament in the 1980s was overwhelmingly male, as was the demographic of the leading figures in British industry and public services. Nevertheless, a certain amount of the success of the

arguments put forward by feminism in the 1980s and into the 1990s can be attributed to the fact that Britain had, for the first time in its history, a female Prime Minister.

The success that feminism achieved in the 1970s and 1980s in changing cultural perceptions of the accepted roles for men and women in society began to be more noticeable in the 1990s, to the extent that some cultural commentators and theorists began to talk of a *post*-feminist situation. The concept of post-feminism can be understood in two senses. Firstly, it can refer to the fact that most of the main aims of second wave feminism from the 1960s to the 1980s had been achieved and consequently were no longer relevant in the 1990s. Secondly, and in contradiction to this argument, post-feminism could refer to the sense that although successes had been achieved in equal rights, the most powerful and highly paid positions in Britain were still predominately occupied by men. This form of post-feminism recognized that the original objectives of the Women's Liberation Movement were still legitimate areas for political campaigning despite the successes that had already been achieved. Associated with the idea of post-feminism, the 1990s saw the rise of significant popular cultural movements and trends. One of these was the so-called 'ladette' culture, a form of social behaviour that advocated the pleasures and codes of practice that had previously been the enclave of young men, such as heavy drinking, clubbing, and active pursuance of sexual partners. This popular movement was led by phenomena such as the success of the Spice Girls, who presented themselves as a kind of post-feminist gang, who used sexuality on their own terms. The main spokesperson of the band, Geri Halliwell, a fan of Mrs Thatcher, advocated a culture where young women had the confidence to tell you what they 'really, really want', and were able to get it.

The successes of feminism also affected the way in which masculinity was re-assessed during the period. One of the original tenets of feminism was that men were as conditioned by prevailing gender codes as women; as Betty Friedan put it: 'Men weren't really the enemy – they were fellow victims suffering from an outmoded masculine mystique'.[19] In the 1980s the idea of the New Man began to circulate, which referred to a male (usually heterosexual) that was in touch with his feminine side and who broadly agreed with the

idea of women's equality. Many male writers began to explore the new gender frameworks that were emerging due to the successes and visibility of feminism and how this had developed new definitions of masculinity. Writers such as Martin Amis and Julian Barnes in the 1980s and Nick Hornby, Tony Parsons and John King were interested in what constituted masculinity in the 1990s, and how that had changed since their fathers' generation.

The emergence of new genres of popular fiction given the provocative titles of chick lit and lad lit reflected this concern with the new parameters of femininity and masculinity and how individuals growing up in contemporary society are forced to negotiate these new constructs. Chick lit novelists like Helen Fielding and Jane Green produce coming of age narratives in which female protagonists attempt to find their place in the world, usually in heterosexual partnerships with men who appear to effortlessly combine the benefits of both older and newer forms of masculinity: new men, who are not too new.[20]

The years from the end of the 1960s also saw a sea change in attitudes towards homosexuality, which has also found its place in British fiction in the last quarter of the twentieth century. In many ways the Gay Liberation Movement that emerged in North America and Western Europe in the late 1960s ran parallel with the Women's Liberation Movement, and their interests and agendas often overlapped.

In a British context, the Sexual Offences Act of 1967 decriminalized homosexuality for consenting adults over the age of 21 in England and Wales.[21] However, continued inequalities in the law, everyday prejudice and acts of violence against homosexuals necessitated the formation and continuation of Gay and Lesbian rights movements in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s. One of the major international events that had influence in Britain was the riot at the Stonewall Inn, a lesbian and gay club in New York City, in May 1969. The riot was a response to the unjustified but repeated raids on the bar made by police during this period. These events served to bring to popular attention the injustices carried out against the gay and lesbian community generally, and served to strengthen resistance against this kind of prejudice in both Britain and the States. Various pieces of legislation have been passed from the

sixties onwards that have, due in no small part to the efforts of sexual politics campaigners, redressed some of the inequalities in Britain with respect to homosexuality, most recently in Britain in the Civil Partnership Act of 2004, which grants same-sex couples the same rights and responsibilities as a civil marriage.

In terms of the theoretical approaches to sexuality, 'queer theory' developed amongst intellectuals in the late 1980s and 1990s and aimed to disrupt the way in which sexual and gender identities are constructed in society. Like French feminism, it was highly inflected with ideas from poststructuralist theory, and in particular the seminal work produced by Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (1976).[22] Part of the aim was to champion aspects of gay culture as a response to the sense in which it was still regarded as a form of tolerated deviance in many parts of mainstream culture. 'Queer' had previously been used as a term of abuse against homosexual men and women, but this body of theory reclaimed the word and gave it positive connotations. Theorists such as Teresa de Lauretis, Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick produced important work in this field in the 1990s, the latter two in the area of literary studies.

Recent British fiction has been a rich source for the exploration of gay, lesbian and bisexual relationships, and as a cultural space in which to raise political and social issues around sexuality. The increasing acceptance of gay and lesbian fiction is in part a reflection of the successes of the Gay Rights Movement of the 1970s and 80s and there has been mainstream success for what a couple of decades ago would have been marginalized as gay fiction, for example in the work of Julie Burchill, Hanif Kureishi, Alan Hollinghurst, Adam Mars-Jones, Jeanette Winterson and Sarah Waters.

POSTCOLONIALISM, MULTICULTURALISM AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

On the 15 August 1947 the new sovereign nation of India was born as it gained independence from Britain. India was always the jewel in the crown of the British Empire and its loss represented a key moment in British history. Perhaps more importantly it signalled the beginning of the gradual dismantling of most of the Empire

over the next fifty years or so. The legacy of colonialism has been one of the most far reaching influences both on the former colonies and also on Britain itself, both in terms of its position in the new world order after 1945, and also in the changing nature of its home population. The term postcolonialism has been coined to define this new state of affairs and a series of theories and discourses has arisen in many fields to explain and assess the impact of this enormous shift in the political organization of the world. Britain has continued to maintain links with many of the former colonies through the establishment of the Commonwealth, which is an association of many of the countries that used to be ruled by Britain. This continued association has also affected the pattern of migration and has been a significant feature of Britain's population demographic in the years following the Second World War.

From the 1950s onwards Britain has developed into a multicultural nation as groups of people moved from parts of the Caribbean, South East Asia and Africa (as well as other parts of the world) and settled in Britain, often in communities that gathered together in Britain's urban areas. This series of diasporas has changed the face of British society and culture in profound ways, but has not always been a smooth process. Many of the areas that the new arrivals settled in were often deprived, where the older populations were themselves suffering social and economic adversity. There has always been resistance in certain quarters to the development of communities from other parts of the world, often exacerbated by successive governments playing the so-called 'race card' – rhetoric designed to create unnecessary fear amongst the established British population with images of being invaded and swamped by immigrants. Enoch Powell, for example, in 1968 delivered his now infamous 'rivers of blood' speech warning against the dangers of immigration.[23] In reality, immigration has been gradual over the period, and in fact, people from minority ethnic groups have never made up more than 8 per cent of the British population.

Political attitudes to immigration have vacillated over the period, and tend to shift from the idea that wholesale assimilation into a sense of Britishness is the preferred outcome, to a model of multiculturalism, whereby immigrant communities retain a sense of their original cultures whilst adapting to the cultural make-up of Britain. In

practice the immigrant experience tends to involve a mixture of assimilation and multiculturalism, which is often dependent on other issues such as class, gender and religion. Alongside this process there have been periods that have seen the increase in tensions between ethnic communities, most often seen in inner city areas, for example, in the riots that occurred in Brixton, Chapeltown, Toxteth, and Moss Side in the early 1980s, and in Bradford, Burnley and Oldham in the early 2000s. To blame these outbreaks of popular violence on issues of race alone is to overlook the range of complex factors related to class, social deprivation and community relations with figures of authority such as the police. Nevertheless, the grievances of groups that coalesce around ethnic identities and the presence of right-wing political parties such as the National Front in the 1970s and 1980s and the British National Party over the last two decades have exacerbated underlying tensions within such communities. As discussed in Chapters 2 and 5 (respectively), both Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* and Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990) detail the kinds of racially motivated violence meted out to innocent members of ethnic minorities.

British literature has been a cultural space in which the experiences of immigrants and broader political issues associated with these experiences have been articulated. There has, necessarily, been a certain amount of negotiation of the tradition of the English novel involved here. One of the dilemmas of postcolonial fiction is the attitude the colonized writing takes towards the literary paradigms and values of the colonizing nation. As Edward Said has shown, literature is far from a neutral form of discourse in the processes that were involved in the building and maintaining of Empire. Said's model of orientalism shows how a range of discourses including literature served to define a 'positional superiority' of the West in relation to the peoples and cultures of the orient, and this theory can be applied to a range of colonized nations extending across the Empire.[24] One of the aims of postcolonial literature has been to readdress the way in which ethnic minorities have been constructed in British literature. In the context of this book, this has found particular resonance in the development of what has come to be called 'Black British' fiction. It needs to be stressed at the outset that there are obvious problems with lumping together a range of very different writers such as Monica Ali, Hanif

Kureishi, Courttia Newland, Caryl Phillips, Salman Rushdie and Zadie Smith under such a heading. Nevertheless the novels they have produced have addressed, in different ways, issues associated with the multiethnic nature of contemporary Britain. One of the ways in which this has been achieved is through attention to language. For the postcolonial writer, as Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin have noted, English is in one sense the language of the oppressor and many of the writers mentioned above have been forced to negotiate this fact. In Salman Rushdie's *Shame* (1983) for example, the narrator speaks of 'this Angrezi [English] in which I am forced to write' whilst Zadie Smith has one of her characters note that 'only the immigrants speak Queen's English these days'.[25]

One of the other key factors affecting national identity is the devolution of power within Britain, especially in the years since 1997. Scotland has its own parliament, Wales and Northern Ireland have their own assemblies all with a certain amount of legislative power. The new sense of national identity that these political changes have wrought, did not, of course, begin in 1997, and in some ways devolution was in response to the strong sense of separateness from England felt by many in those nations. The issues raised by colonial and postcolonial identity could, therefore, be extended to include the nations within the United Kingdom. To a certain extent, writers from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have found themselves to be in a similar 'postcolonial' position in that distinct national literatures have sought to distinguish themselves from both English and the imposition of a homogenous 'British' culture. In a Scottish context, writers such as James Kelman and Irvine Welsh have foregrounded the use of types of Scottish vernacular to distance the narrative from any collective sense of a British identity. Take, for example, the following passage from James Kelman's *How Late it Was, How Late* (1994):

> There wasnay much he could do, there wasnay really much he could do at all. No the now anyway. Nayn of it was down to him.[26]

Here, the disruption of conventional syntax and the use of words to convey dialect corresponds with one of the aims of postcolonial

writing as identified by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin: 'The crucial function of language as a medium of power demands that postcolonial writing define itself by seizing the language of the centre and re-placing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized space'.[27] In Kelman's case, demotic language is used to distance the text, linguistically and culturally from English, whilst re-placing it in a Scottish context. Writing, in this way becomes political in its very syntax and word choice. This issue has also been dealt with in the context of some recent Welsh and Northern Irish writing. Niall Griffiths, for example, addresses the idea of contemporary Welshness in his novel *Sheepshagger* (2001), the title of which aggressively reverses one of the ways in which the English (in particular) have prejudiced and mocked the Welsh. Much contemporary fiction, then, has been keen to engage with the shifting positions of national identity over the last thirty years and I will return to this issue in Chapter 5, especially in the discussion of the representation of Englishness in Julian Barnes's novel *England, England* (1998).

The complexity of the internal make-up of the United Kingdom in addition to its engagement with a series of other national identities has made the issue of ethnicity extremely complex in contemporary Britain. As Richard Bradford notes, 'It would seem that within these islands the permutations upon identity, separateness, conflict and division are almost without limit'.[28] Certain ideas arising from postcolonial theory, however, have been useful in attempting to analyse these differences. One of these is Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity and what he calls the third space.[29] Hybridity refers to the way in which two or more cultures combine in colonial and postcolonial relationships, but in doing so, refuse to privilege any one of the constituent parts. Thereby, the power relationship assumed in typical hierarchies between the colonized and the colonizer are avoided. This can be taken at the level of racial identity, whereby children of 'mixed-race' marriages could be described as hybrid, but more importantly in a cultural sense, whereby the idea of a 'third space' identifies a location of culture that rejects the binary oppositional framework in which race and the idea of ethnic origin has often operated. The third space is a new hybrid, but also contains the sense of the dual heritages that have contributed to its formation.

A second theory that has proved useful in this context is Stuart Hall's concept of new ethnicities. Hall identifies two trends in the historical development of racial politics, the first being when 'black' became an important signifier of cultural identity and allowed for a politics of resistance against racism in Britain. This involved challenging the use of black stereotypes in mainstream literature and culture, a process that gained ground from the 1950s onwards. It also championed the development of what became recognized as 'Black British' art and literature. The second context developed from the first and recognized that, in practice, there is a range of marginalized positions, a fact that complicates the idea of a unified 'black' subject in opposition to a 'white' subject. In 'New Ethnicities', Hall writes of the need to recognize that, ' "black" is essentially a politically and culturally *constructed* category', and that 'the immense diversity and differentiation of the historical and cultural experience of black subjects [. . .] inevitably entails a weakening or fading of the notion [of] "race" '.[30] This leads to what Hall identifies as a range of new ethnicities that not only relate to issues of race but also to class, gender, sexuality and youth. In addition, the 'black' subject is itself subject to a variety of different positions and particular histories. As Hall notes, it is no longer accurate or useful to talk of monolithic categories of race such as black and white when in practice much of Britain's ethnicity is made up of a series of identities that negotiate each of these categories.

A number of writers who have immigrated to Britain from former colonies or are the children of such immigrants have been producing novels since the 1950s that have articulated this experience, and have to differing degrees addressed some of the issues raised by Bhabha and Hall. The list is a long one, but includes such writers as Sam Selvon, Edward Brathwaite, V. S. Naipaul, Wilson Harris, Salman Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi, Courttia Newland, Zadie Smith and Monica Ali.

YOUTH AND SUBCULTURES

One significant theme in contemporary British fiction is the representation of youth and the experience of growing up in Britain. The

coming of age narrative, or the *Bildungsroman* has been a staple of the British novel since the birth of the form in the early eighteenth century, and it is a form that aids the combination of a narrative plot line with the description of the social and cultural environments through which the main protagonist moves. Formally, either through the use of first-person or third-person narratives, the coming of age story allows for the workings of society to be described as if from a fresh perspective, and through the technique of defamiliarization, a cultural critique can be produced of some of the practices of contemporary society encountered for the first time by the protagonist.

In this book there are several novels that engage with the *Bildungsroman* form, although in some cases a parody of the nineteenth century model is often produced, for example, in the fantastic adventures experienced by the central character in Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* (1977). Other examples discussed in this book include, Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985), Nick Hornby's *Fever Pitch* (1992), Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001), A. S. Byatt's *Possession: A Romance* (1990), Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* and Julian Barnes's *England, England*, whilst Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Alasdair Gray's *Poor Things* (1992) also include coming of age narratives within their broader framework.

Within the genre of the *Bildungsroman* a more specific trend in fiction has developed since the 1950s that could be described as subcultural fiction. These are novels that set out to explore the inner world of certain youth cultures that have their own codes of practice, fashion and artistic styles and are usually identified by a particular style of music. This kind of fiction can perhaps be traced to one novel produced in the late 1950s, Colin MacInnes's *Absolute Beginners* (1959), which set out to describe, through the eyes of its teenage hero, the emerging youth cultures of the later half of the 1950s that included Teds, jazz fans (both traditional and modern) and the emergence of a group of sharp-dressed teenagers that later came to be known as Mods.[31] Within this framework, MacInnes explored postwar British society in terms of the legacies of Empire and the emergence of new ethnic subcultures in London, culminating in a fictional account of the actual 'race' riots in Notting Hill in 1958.

MacInnes's book set the model for a development of similar sub-cultural fictions throughout the 1960s and 1970s including Nik Cohn's rock'n'roll fiction and Richard Allen and Stewart Home's series of Skinhead novels.[32] In the 1980s and 1990s this trend continued through a range of different youth subcultures, especially in the 'club culture' narratives of the late eighties. These texts explored the world of alternative subcultural spaces such as illegal raves and gatherings and the use of drugs and other forms of criminality. The writers in this genre that emerged during this period include Irvine Welsh and Nicholas Blincoe.[33] Perhaps the most well known of these novels is Welsh's *Trainspotting* (1993) which dealt with the heroin-charged drug scene in Edinburgh in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The main characters in the novel, Renton, Sick-Boy and Begbie, represent a kind of subcultural manifestation of Thatcher's Britain in that they are imbued with a selfish self-preservation that is an inverted reflection of the Yuppie culture of the period. This is made evident in Renton's decision to betray the rest of the group at the end of the novel. Within this narrative, Welsh is able to produce a critique of the society that has influenced contemporary working-class life in Scotland especially for youth from deprived areas of Edinburgh.

The representation of youth subcultures in fiction has fed off work done in cultural studies. The British New Left in the 1950s became increasingly interested in the sociological and political factors behind the rise of youth culture, although tended on the whole to produce negative images of youth as followers of an Americanized 'shiny barbarism', a term coined by Richard Hoggart, one of the members associated with this group.[34] Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel's book *The Popular Arts* (1964) took a more open view of the place of popular cultural forms in the early 1960s including television, fashion and pop music styles.[35] Much work done by the Contemporary Centre for Cultural Studies at Birmingham University centred on youth culture, with sociologists and cultural commentators such as Phil Cohen, Paul Willis, Angela McRobbie, Jenny Garber and Gary Clarke.[36] Dick Hebdige's seminal 1979 book *Subcultures: The Meaning of Style* introduced an analysis based on semiotics to the study of subcultural fashions, and in particular the *bricolage* style adopted by the then new phenomenon of punk.[37]

Subcultural influences can be seen to affect several characters in the novels discussed in this book, including the younger characters in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, and perhaps most significantly in Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*, which in part, takes the transition of subcultural styles from hippies to glam rock to punk as one of the narrative threads in the novel.

A NOTE ON THEORY

One of the key contexts in which contemporary fiction is studied at university is in relation to what has been seen as the explosion of literary and cultural theory from the 1950s onwards. For most of the early twentieth century and after the war, literary criticism was a mixture of author-centred criticism, which tended to determine the meaning of texts through reference to the author's life, and literary-historical criticism, which tried to place an author's text with respect to the literary period in which they were working. In the mid-twentieth century, this was accompanied by a series of approaches that were gathered under the heading of formalism. This included Russian formalism, which generally adopted a linguistic approach to literature and was interested in what gave literature its literariness. This loose grouping includes such figures as Mikhail Bakhtin and Viktor Skhlovsky and introduced concepts such as heteroglossia and defamiliarization.[38] In an American context, critics like Cleanth Brooks, William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley developed a different kind of formalism. Brooks was interested in the way poetry worked by setting up linguistic oppositions and paradoxes, whilst Wimsatt and Beardsley rejected the author's intention as a useful source for trying to determine the meaning of a text, and encouraged an approach that concentrated on the organization of the words on the page and how meaning was produced independently from the author.[39] This New Criticism distinguished itself from author-centred approaches as did two influential British literary theorists in the mid decades of the twentieth century, I. A. Richards and F. R. Leavis. Richards encouraged a form of analysis that had

allegiances with the American New Critics and advocated 'practical criticism' which involved the 'close reading' of texts.[40] The New Critics and Richards tended to focus on poetry, as their attention to detail could be sustained more easily with relatively shorter texts. F. R. Leavis, on the other hand, wrote significantly on the English novel. Leavis imbued literary criticism not only with an evaluative critical faculty, but also with a sense of morality. He made bold claims for the novel arguing that in the greatest examples of the form it produced a philosophical and ethical investigation into the human condition, and that criticism of such novels necessitated a corresponding seriousness from the critic.[41]

Each of these approaches has relevance in the practical analysis of contemporary British fiction, however, from the 1960s onwards, this fairly straightforward range of critical positions exploded in a number of different directions too numerous to cover in detail here. For the study of contemporary British fiction it is a great advantage to know a little of the following 'schools' or loose groupings of literary and critical theory: Marxism, feminism (and post-feminism), structuralism, poststructuralism (including deconstruction), reader-response criticism, postmodernism, queer theory, postcolonialism, ecology and theories developed from cultural studies. The following chapters will introduce some of the main points related to these theories as and when they are relevant to the particular novels under discussion. Many of the writers covered in this book, such as Martin Amis, Julian Barnes, A. S. Byatt and Salman Rushdie, have a knowledge of the recent developments in literary and cultural theory and often refer to these ideas in their novels. There are a number of very good introductions and guides to literary theory and in the reading list at the end of this book there is a list of the most useful.

SUMMARY OF KEY POINTS

- Both 'contemporary' and 'British' are problematic categories that need to be addressed when discussing the fiction produced over the last thirty years.

- Sexual politics, including feminism and gay and lesbian rights movements, have had an influential effect on British fiction.
- The break up of the Empire and the multicultural nature of contemporary Britain have provided a rich source of subject matter for fiction.
- Much of contemporary British fiction has been interested in the role of youth and subcultures as distinct forms of identity.
- Questions of class, gender, ethnicity and age often interrelate in contemporary British fiction.

NOTES

1. See, for example, James Acheson and Sarah C. E. Ross (eds), *The Contemporary British Novel* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005); Richard Bradford, *The Novel Now: Contemporary British Fiction* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007); Jago Morrison, *Contemporary Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2003); Philip Tew, *The Contemporary British Novel* (London: Continuum, 2004).
2. John Maynard Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, [1936] 1997).
3. Iain Sinclair is a British writer who would certainly be part of any emerging canon of contemporary British literature, however, perhaps because of the perceived difficulty of his fiction, he does not appear on many undergraduate courses.
4. Douglas Keay, 'Aids, Education and the Year 2000', in *Women's Own* 31 October 1987, pp. 8–10.
5. Seamus Deane, *Reading in the Dark: A Novel* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1996); Bernard MacLaverty, *Grace Notes* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1997).
6. See Martin Amis, *Einstein's Monsters* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1987); J. G. Ballard *Empire of the Sun* (London: Gollancz, 1984); Graham Swift, *Waterland* (London: Picador, [1984] 1992); and John le Carré, *Smiley's People* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980).

7. Ian McEwan *Black Dogs* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992); Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, [2000] 2001).

8. Monica Ali, *Brick Lane* (London: Black Swan, [2003] 2004), pp. 365–8.

9. Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005), p. 16.

10. J. G. Ballard, *Millennium People* (London: Flamingo, 2003); and *Kingdom Come* (London: Fourth Estate, 2006).

11. See William Thompson and Joseph Hickey, *Society in Focus* (Boston, MA: Pearson, 2002).

12. See, for example, the following seminal texts in the foundation of British Cultural Studies: Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, [1957] 1958); Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780–1950* (London: Hogarth, [1957] 1987), and *The Long Revolution* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1961); and E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working-Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, [1963] 1968).

13. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, ed. and trans. H. M. Parshley (London: Jonathan Cape, [1949] 1953).

14. Sheila Rowbotham, *Women's Liberation and the New Politics* (London: Virago, [1970] 1983).

15. Germaine Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1970).

16. Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York: Doubleday, 1970); Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979); Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977); Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (London: Women's Press, 1978).

17. Hélène Cixous, 'The Newly Born Woman', in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, 2nd edn, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 348–54, p. 348

18. Virginia Woolf, 'To Cambridge Women', in *Literature in the Modern World: Critical Essays and Documants*, 2nd edn, ed. Dennis Walder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 91–6, p. 95.

19. Betty Friedan, *The Christian Science Monitor*, 1 April 1974; see also *The Feminine Mystique* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963).

20. Helen Fielding, *Bridget Jones's Diary* (London: Picador, 1996); Jane Green, *Straight Talking* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, [1997] 2002), *Jemima J: A Novel About Ugly Ducklings and Swans* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1998).

21. Homosexuality remained illegal in Scotland until the Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act 1980, and in Northern Ireland until the Homosexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 1982.

22. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume I*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, [1976] 1990).

23. Enoch Powell, *Freedom and Reality* (Farnham: Elliot Right Way Books, 1969).

24. Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, [1978] 1991).

25. Salman Rushdie, *Shame* (London: Picador, [1983] 1984), p. 38.

26. James Kelman, *How Late It Was, How Late* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1994), p. 29.

27. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 38.

28. Bradford, *The Novel Now*, p. 160.

29. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

30. Stuart Hall, 'New Ethnicities' in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 441–9, p. 443.

31. Colin MacInnes, *Absolute Beginners* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, [1959] 1964).

32. Nik Cohn, *Pop* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1969); Richard Allen, *Suedehead* (London: New English Library, 1971); Stewart Home, *Pure Mania* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1989).

33. Irvine Welsh, *Trainspotting* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1993); Nicholas Blincoe, *Acid Casuals* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1995).

34. Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy*, p. 193

35. Stuart Hall and Paddy Whannel, *The Popular Arts* (London: Pantheon, 1964).

36. Phil Cohen, 'Subcultural Conflict and Working-Class Community', in *The Subcultures Reader*, ed. Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 90–9; John Willis, *Learning to Labour* (Aldershot: Saxon House, 1977); Angela McRobbie and Jenny Barber, 'Girls and Subcultures: An Explanation', in *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Postwar Britain*, ed. Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson (Birmingham: Hutchinson, 1975), pp. 209–22; Gary Clarke, 'Defending Ski-Jumpers: A Critique of Theories of Youth Subcultures', in Gelder, *The Subcultures Reader*, pp. 175–80

37. Dick Hebdige, *Subcultures: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1979)

38. M. M. Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M.Bakhtin*, ed. and trans. Carl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 259–422; Viktor Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique', in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, 2nd edn, ed. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 15–21.

39. Cleanth Brooks, *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1947); W. K. Wimsatt Jr, *The Verbal Icon* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1954).

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41. See, for example, F. R. Leavis *The Great Tradition* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1947).