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# Introduction: A story of the stories of American fiction after 1945

This may well be the last volume ever to survey American fiction from 1945 to the present. That is not because scholarship on this body of narrative is waning. Far from it. There is a more pragmatic reason for my prediction: the period is getting a little long in the tooth. The Victorian Era will never exceed sixty-four years. Modernism is often dated from 1890 to 1945 (a solid fifty-six-year run), but the post-1945 period (which until recently we simply called "postmodernism"), if a person, could now be collecting Social Security. It is only a matter of time before the profession decides that, if for nothing more than curricular reasons (after all, there is only so much one can teach in a semester), we need to close off the postwar period in some definitive fashion. Certainly, no one in 2045 will be teaching a course in contemporary American fiction from 1945 to the present.

Not surprisingly, because the postwar period has been left openended for so long, there have been generational shifts, so that post-1945 fiction looks quite different now than for earlier critics. One of the earliest attempts to make sense of American fiction following World War II occurs in John Aldridge's *After the Lost Generation* (1951), which saw contemporary novelists falling short of the achievement of American modernist writers. Except for Norman Mailer, Truman Capote, and Gore Vidal, however, the postwar novelists on whom Aldridge bases his assessment have largely been relegated to the ash heap of history: Robert Lowry, John Horne Burns, Alfred Hayes, Merle Miller, and Vance Bourjaily. In 1971, Tony Tanner published his magisterial study of postwar American fiction, *City of Words*, one that was certainly among the dominant narratives of this period when I began my graduate studies in 1978. Tanner tells a compelling story about postwar fiction, arguing that American novelists thematize a paranoid fear of deterministic systems, problematize identity, use language in a unique way that calls attention to itself, but are often trapped by their own verbal performances. For Tanner the typical fictional hero searches for a freedom that is not amorphous and wants "to establish an identity that is not a prison."

The protagonist's quest is in a sense a double for the author's: "Can he find a *stylistic* freedom which is not simply a meaningless incoherence, and can he find a stylistic form which will not trap him inside the existing forms of previous literature?"[1]

Tanner based his study on twenty-two writers: Ralph Ellison, Saul Bellow, Joseph Heller, James Purdy, William S. Burroughs, Thomas Pynchon, Kurt Vonnegut, John Hawkes, John Barth, Walker Percy, Sylvia Plath, Susan Sontag, William H. Gass, John Updike, Philip Roth, Frank Conroy, Bernard Malamud, Norman Mailer, Ken Kesey, William Gaddis, Donald Barthelme, and Richard Brautigan. Of Tanner's novelists, only nine remain relevant to the conversation today, if we base our sense of the canonical on that venerable institution of American pedagogy, the seventh edition of the *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, vol. E (Literature since 1945): Malamud, Ellison, Bellow, Vonnegut, Gass, Barthelme, Updike, Roth, and Pynchon. Plath appears in the anthology but only for her poetry. Gass perhaps should not fully count because he is represented only by an essay he wrote about fiction, not by any of his fiction.

In terms of who matters in contemporary American fiction, 1971 was a very different world from ours. Some of the omissions from Tanner's list can easily be explained by this date. Toni Morrison and Don DeLillo were unknown: DeLillo's first novel was published the same year as Tanner's study, while Morrison's first had appeared just a year earlier. But more striking from a contemporary perspective is the gender and racial imbalance: twenty men, two women, one African American. Tanner wrote his book before the rise of academic feminism and African American (as well as other ethnic) studies.

A scholar of contemporary American fiction today reads multiculturally or not at all, and in the world of literature anthologies (which can only contain so many pages and cost only so much), John Barth must make way for Toni Cade Bambara; Joseph Heller for Amy Tan; Ken Kesey for Sherman Alexie. But such decisions by anthology editors necessarily reduce the complexity of literary history. One purpose of this volume is to tell a fuller story of the breadth and nuance of American fictional production since 1945.

One story that explains part of the post-1945 landscape has been told by people as various as the Marxist critic Fredric Jameson and the metafictionist John Barth. It is the story of postmodernist experimentation, which Amy Elias explores more fully in Chapter 1. As Jameson puts it, postmodernism "is most often related to notions of the waning or extinction of the hundred-year-old modern movement (or to its ideological or aesthetic repudiation)"; for fiction, this means that "final forms of representation in the novel" have been spent and the new forms of fiction are aggressively nonmimetic.[2]

Fiction, as indeed all forms of cultural production, for Jameson, has become an expression of the cultural logic of late capitalism and therefore has lost its ability to think historically and to comment critically on the culture. From the point of view of a practicing novelist, Barth sees that the modernist thematics of alienation and the failure of language as a medium of expression have come to the end of the road in Samuel Beckett's late fiction. If nothing more can be accomplished in that arc of modernist experimentation, what is to be done? Barth's answer is to follow in the footsteps of Jorge Luis Borges and to produce metafiction: "novels that imitate the form of the Novel, by an author who imitates the role of the Author."[3] While Barth admits that such self-conscious and self-reflexive fiction runs the risk of becoming a contemporary form of art for art's sake, he insists that metafiction could be "serious and passionate despite its farcical aspect."[4]

In the late 1980s, Linda Hutcheon, critiquing Jameson's pessimistic view of postmodernism, would develop Barth's sense of the serious possibilities of ludic narration in her conception of postmodern fiction as historiographic metafiction. For Hutcheon, contemporary fiction, by blending the reflexivity of metafiction with a sense of historiography, could still create a critical purchase on the culture by taking us where the official archives of history were either silent or repressed. Where Jameson sees only apolitical pastiche (artists simply recycling and dehistoricizing previously articulated styles), Hutcheon sees parody, which has the power to produce a complicit critique. While Hutcheon's is a more hopeful theoretical model than Jameson's, in the hands of practicing critics just about any post-1945 novel can be identified as historiographic metafiction. When texts as different as Robert Coover's *The Public Burning* (1977), with every other chapter narrated by then Vice President Richard M. Nixon and which climaxes with a mass orgy during the execution of the Rosenbergs in Times Square, and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1977), a serious narrative of the trauma of slavery and the need to recover stories of historical abuse, can both be termed historiographic metafiction, the concept loses a good deal of its usefulness. Whatever its theoretical limitations, Hutcheon's concept allowed more women and minority writers to be considered postmodern, broadening a canon that had previously been composed largely of white men.

By the turn of the twenty-first century, the story of postmodernist fiction was beginning to unravel. The problem is that debates within postmodern theory and discussions of postmodernist experimentation do not adequately account for the full range of fictional production after 1945. As Michael Bérubé so pithily put it in his essay "Teaching Postmodern Fiction without Being Sure That the Genre Exists," while the theory he teaches is unquestionably postmodern, "The problem is with the fiction: It just isn't postmodern

enough. And that, I've gradually come to realize, is because there really isn't any such thing as postmodern fiction – at least not in terms that most literary critics have proposed so far."[5] As Bérubé goes on to elaborate: "there's nothing especially postmodern about most critically acclaimed writers of 'quality fiction' … Richard Ford, E. Annie Proulx, Mary Carr, Madison Smartt Bell, Oscar Hijuelos … can't plausibly be called postmodernists. For the most part, they seem to be capable, mimesis-minded chroniclers of contemporary life."[6]

If the canonization of the high modernist formal experiments pushed writers of the 1950s through the 1980s to different narrative forms, to a writer starting out today, the metafictional and nonmimetic moves of the high postmodernists (Barth, Pynchon, Coover, and Barthelme) must now feel like the dead hand of history, much as modernism did to Barth when he published "The Literature of Exhaustion" in 1967. What is next when the solution to the problem of modernism's exhaustion, metafiction, itself seems to have reached the point of exhaustion? Very often it is the re-emergence of mimesis-minded chroniclers of contemporary life, a topic Robert Rebein explores in Chapter 2. But beyond a backlash to postmodernism, what else might account for the rise of contemporary realism?

One promising way to begin responding to this question is recent work done on the institutionalization of creative writing programs in the United States after World War II. American modernist novelists, such as F. Scott Fitzgerald, Sherwood Anderson, and Ernest Hemingway, found a congenial meeting spot in Gertrude Stein's salon – a place for conversation and poetics. Stein famously provided Hemingway with a critique of a draft of his *The Sun Also Rises*. Aspiring American writers no longer have to go Paris for camaraderie and critique. Instead, they may go to just about anywhere in the hinterland of America – Iowa City, Iowa; Lincoln, Nebraska; West Lafayette, Indiana. That is because whether famous (as the Iowa Writers' Workshop is) or obscure, just about any university worth its salt has an MFA program, even my home institution, Purdue, which markets itself almost exclusively for its strength in the STEM disciplines.

As Mark McGurl has recently argued, the rise of creative writing in the university goes a long way toward explaining the landscape of American fiction after World War II:

> The handful of creative writing programs that existed in the 1940s had, by 1975, increased to 52 in number. By 1984 there were some 150 graduate degree programs … and as of 2005 there were more than 350 creative writing programs in the United States, all of them staffed by practicing writers, most of whom, by now, are themselves holders of an advanced degree in creative writing.[7]

This specialization has had a profound impact on the culture of university-sponsored quarterlies and little magazines that grew to prominence from the late 1930s to the early 1950s. Magazines such as the *Southern Review*, first series (1935–1942); the *Kenyon Review*, first series (1939–1970); and the *Sewanee Review* (1892–) all published seminal mixes of literary and cultural criticism, as well as poetry and fiction. The foundational theoretical essays that shaped New Critical formalism appeared side-by-side with fiction by such writers as Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor, and Peter Taylor. That is because these journals were edited by men of letters who wrote fiction and poetry, as well as literary criticism and theory: Robert Penn Warren was one of the editors of the *Southern Review*; John Crowe Ransom edited the *Kenyon Review* from 1939 to 1959; Andrew Lytle and Allen Tate edited the *Sewanee Review* during its zenith from 1943 to 1946. Both the *Southern Review* and the *Kenyon Review* were revived during the 1970s, but now as journals edited by and for "creative writers," the term of choice for faculty members affiliated with MFA programs. There is very little crossover readership among English professors today. Professors who teach literature (to say nothing of general readers) do not, by and large, read the highly competent, well-crafted poetry and fiction published in literary reviews, and professors who teach in MFA programs do not read the essays on modernist and contemporary fiction published in journals like the one I edit, *MFS: Modern Fiction Studies*, because these essays have nothing to say about craft.

The changes in mass-market magazines have been even more profound. If the growth of magazine culture following the Civil War allowed writers to earn a living through their fiction, many of these magazines, such as the *Saturday Evening Post*, begin to lose their cultural force with the advent of electronic media (radio, film, television) and eventually disappear. While there are still a few mass-market magazines that publish fiction, notably *The New Yorker*, these venues create insufficient opportunities for most writers to make a living. Prior to the eighteenth century, writers worked under a patronage system, supported by the largess of the aristocracy. Since 1945, American fiction has returned by and large to a patronage system, one that is underwritten by state governments. Like academic quarterlies, literary magazines published by universities, for the most part, pay contributors nothing. The eighteenth-century writer Samuel Johnson famously said that "No man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money." Today's university creative writers, though, are not blockheads for publishing their work in venues that pay nothing because such publication can help advance their careers.

Starting with Flannery O'Connor, who honed her craft at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, if we look at the writers discussed in the various chapters that

follow, the majority were nurtured and sustained by the university. This is not to say that the man or woman of letters, someone who supports themselves solely by the products of their pen or PC, has disappeared, but simply that the Updikes, Pynchons, and DeLillos of the world are becoming increasingly rare. Even for the generation of writers who came of age prior to the rise of MFA programs, many have taught in the American university. Barth taught at Penn State University in the 1960s before moving on to the State University of New York at Buffalo. Nobel Laureate Toni Morrison taught for years at various universities before ending her academic career at Princeton.

One result of the growth of creative writing programs has been the institutionalization of Hemingway's version of modernist experimentation, his minimalism. The neo-realist minimalism of Raymond Carver (who attended the Iowa Writers' Workshop for a year) and other writers of the 1980s, as Eric Bennett has argued, "did not simply arise as a protest against the wooly experimental fiction of the 1960s."[8] Rather, along with the exponential growth of MFA programs in the last sixty years, Hemingway's minimalism took hold as the unacknowledged hegemony of creative writing programs. In the 1950s, Hemingway was central to both New Critical pedagogy and the New Humanists' development of creative writing at Iowa and Stanford.[9] As graduates of these early MFA programs went on to found new MFA programs, modernist minimalist aesthetic increasingly became institutionalized. This is not to say that MFA programs suppress all difference. They do not. Even the metafictional novelist David Foster Wallace earned an MFA from the University of Arizona.[10] But such formal experimenters are the exceptions that prove the minimalist rule. To write a text like Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* today would not get one to a thesis defense at most MFA programs.

Another reason for the unraveling of the story of postmodernism is the growing recognition of the full range of writing in a multicultural America. Fiction by Native American, African American, Latino/a, Asian American, and other ethnic groups have both challenged the presumption of a white canon of American literature and made clear the colonial impulses of the United States. Leaving aside the many foreign interventions and adventures of the US military and American corporations, the long history of colonial appropriation of land and labor within America – from the displacement of the Native population and the slave trade (as well as the subsequent development of quasi-apartheid of Jim Crow until the post-Civil Rights period), to the interment of Japanese Americans during World War II – indicates how America has repeatedly scared the racial Other and produced a discourse about race and identity that may be critiqued from the perspective

of postcolonial theory. In the post-1945 period, many ethnic and minority writers have plumbed this history, as Chapters 6 through 9 by Keith Byerman, Nancy Peterson, A. Robert Lee, and Victoria Aarons make clear.

Although best known as a Nobel Prize-winning novelist, Toni Morrison in her study of whiteness in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992) begins to make clear the way toward a rapprochement between ethnic and postcolonial studies. Influenced by Edward Said's classic postcolonial study *Orientalism* (1978), Morrison develops her concept of the Africanist presence in American literature. Just as Said sees British colonial understanding of the Oriental Other as telling us more about white colonial identity than about Islamic people, Morrison details the way the representation of the Africanist Other tells us much more about white American identity than it does about actual black people. And the relation between Morrison and postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha is a two-way street of influence. If Morrison's thinking has been influenced by Bhabha's work on mimicry and hybridity, Bhabha acknowledges the importance of Morrison's fiction in shaping his understanding of narrative.[11] Morrison's explicit embrace of postcolonialism helps us better recognize the way that earlier African American writers of the post-1945 period, such as Ralph Ellison, were themselves critics of American colonialism.

A more historical reason for still considering the period from 1945 to the present as a coherent unit for literary study is that the United States continues to play out the cultural logic of its failure to fully claim or process the act of dropping atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki at the end of World War II. For Donald Pease, that failure constitutes the latest form of exceptionalism governing American political life. A sense that America is exceptional is as old as Puritan America, first articulated in 1630 by Jonathan Winthrop in his sermon "A Model of Christian Charity" which, quoting Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, declared that their new community would be a "city upon the hill." During the Cold War, America denied its responsibility for using atomic weapons through fantasy: "In that fantasy, the United States always successfully liberated other nations from the nuclear threats posed by Soviet imperialism"; thus, as a signifier, "Hiroshima" "became a purely symbolic referent for the merely possible event, which was reassigned the duty to predict what 'will have happened' had not the United States already mobilized the powers of nuclear deterrence against the Soviets."[12]

America's first Gulf War, for Pease, becomes a way in 1992 to provide the literal war (in defense of Kuwait but also to ensure that Iraq's nuclear capability was neutralized) that the Cold War never provided but always feared (an all-out nuclear war) to assure Americans that the Cold War was indeed over.[13] With the terrorist attacks of 9/11, however, America's Cold

War fantasy became reborn, energized by a born-again Christian, President George W. Bush. The shorthand way of understanding this Cold War resurgence is that the site where the destroyed World Trade Center towers once stood is referred to as Ground Zero, a term that in the late 1940s through the 1990s would have been understood to refer primarily to the point on the surface of the Earth closest to the detonation of the atomic bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The destruction of the WTC towers, then, serves as the fulfillment of the fantasy logic of the Cold War, thus initiating a new version of Us versus Them, substituting a forty-five-year struggle with the Soviet Union with what, it seems, may be an equally lengthy War on Terror. The paranoid style of right-wing American politics that Richard Hofstader wrote about in 1964 was reincarnated during the eight-year Bush administration (2001–2008), when any criticism of the government was labeled un-American. And as the administration of President Barack Obama faces the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, the paranoia from the political Right and cultural conservatives continues unabated with fears about the Ground Zero mosque and with the anti-intellectualism of the tea party movement, which backs political candidates who do not believe that the First Amendment to the US Constitution provides any rationale for the separation of church and state.

In this symbolic logic of history, the attempts of novelists who have tried to make sense of the 2,752 deaths at America's Ground Zero and of post-9/11 America may ultimately lead us to a better understanding of the initiating moment of this volume: an America of 1945 as the atomic power that brought about the end of World War II at the price of 200,000 civilian deaths at Japan's two Ground Zeros – Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The chapters that follow are divided into three parts: "Poetics and genres," "Historical and cultural contexts," and "Major authors." I have noted the work of many of the chapters throughout the course of this introduction but should briefly mention now those that were not embedded in my previous comments. The first part, in addition to the chapters on postmodern metafiction and contemporary realism, explores a number of generic developments. In Chapter 3 Stacey Olster surveys two related hybrid narrative forms, the nonfiction novel and the new journalism, that came to prominence in the 1960s and that have blurred the boundaries of fiction, history, and reportage. Looking at a range of writing from Truman Capote and Norman Mailer to Joan Didion and Hunter S. Thompson, Olster examines the way this work can be read as a skeptical response to the supposed objectivity of mass media – newspaper and television accounts of current events. Next, Phillip Wegner in Chapter 4 looks at the reasons why a global

form of narrative, science fiction, came to be dominated by American writers after 1945. Relating this dominance to both publishing practices and Cold War politics, Wegner takes the reader through a decade-by-decade history ending with the post-Cold War period, arguing that the period of American hegemony is ending as the genre returns to its global roots. Part I concludes with Susan Lohafer's chapter on the short story. For Lohafer, the post-1945 American short story is fiction's truest workshop, continually in the vanguard of trends that play out more slowly in the more expansive worlds of the novel, whether 1960s experimentalism or 1980s neo-realism, or multiculturalism in the 1990s.

Over and above the chapters devoted to racial and ethnic identity in Part II (Chapters 6–9), other historical and cultural contexts are represented in Chapters 10 through 13. Jane Elliott explores the emergence of fiction written by women for women with an overtly feminist perspective, particularly since the mid-1960s. While acknowledging women's writing between 1945 and 1965 as a kind of feminist fiction *manqué*, Elliott unpacks the theoretical and critical debates within feminist criticism and theory of the 1980s that allows women's fiction to be understood as feminist. In this context, many writers who are claimed by others in the name of multiculturalism (Alice Walker, Maxine Hong Kingston) are viewed more for their perspectives on gender than for the specificity of their race or ethnicity.

In Chapter 11, Martyn Bone explores the ways in which Southern writers after World War II struggled to step out of the long shadow cast by William Faulkner. These post-Southern Renaissance writers of the 1950s and 1960s – Flannery O'Connor, William Styron, and Walker Percy – nevertheless prepare the way for the truly postsouthern writers who began writing in the aftermath of the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement. Postsouthern is a term Bone uses to express the racial and class diversity of contemporary Southern writers, whether African American (Alice Walker, Ernest Gaines) or working class (Ray Brown, Dorothy Allison), who previously would have fallen outside the parameters of Southern literature as conceived by the Southern Agrarian/New Critical founders of the field.

Alan Nadel in Chapter 12 contextualizes the Cold War fiction of the 1950s and 1960s through David Riesman's 1950 popular sociological study, *The Lonely Crowd*, that identified the problem with contemporary America as the rise of the Other-directed individual (which represented a falling-off from older societies that had been tradition-directed or individual-directed) susceptible to the manipulations of the (communist) Other. While identifying Reisman's generalizations as Cold War fantasy, Nadel nevertheless sees *The Lonely Crowd* as providing a scheme that allows one to connect the

dots between texts as various as J. D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and Saul Bellow's *Herzog*. In Nadel's mapping of Cold War fiction, paranoia is repositioned from being a psychological disorder to being instead a social condition.

My contribution concludes Part II by looking at the ways in which fiction after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 has addressed the resulting individual and collective trauma. Because authors have produced such a variety of mimetic, metafictional, and allegorical narratives to explore this trauma, attempts to tell the bigger story of the cultural work of this body of fiction, whether identifying it as a failure for foregrounding domesticity or claiming that it signals the end of irony, typically exclude certain novels that would complicate such claims.

Part III provides overviews of the writing careers of five of the most significant writers of the post-1945 period, writers who appear frequently on syllabi of American literature surveys and courses on contemporary American fiction. Chapters by Nicole Waligora-Davis, Jay Watson, Brian Jarvis, Linden Peach, and Laura Barrett provide overviews of the lives and careers of, respectively, Ralph Ellison, Flannery O'Connor, Thomas Pynchon, Toni Morrison, and Don DeLillo. The volume concludes with Jessica Pressman's reflections on the future of American fiction in a world where the printed word is increasingly being displaced by digital and Web-based technologies.

No course in fifteen weeks can tell the full story of American fiction since 1945. I hope that readers will turn to these chapters for grounding in areas that may have been underrepresented or excluded from their previous introductions to this period.

## NOTES

1 Tony Tanner, *City of Words* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 19.
2 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 1.
3 John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion," in *The Friday Book: Essays and Other Nonfiction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), p. 72.
4 Ibid.
5 Michael Bérubé, "Teaching Postmodern Fiction without Being Sure That the Genre Exists," *Chronicle of Higher Education* (May 19, 2000): 159.
6 Ibid.
7 Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 24.
8 Eric Bennett, "Ernest Hemingway and the Discipline of Creative Writing, or, Shark Liver Oil," *MFS*, 56.3 (2010): 563.
9 Ibid., pp. 545–9.