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Introduction: Critical Constructions of British Fiction since 1945

Overlapping generations of writers with diverse ambitions, backgrounds, and commitments have ensured that British fiction since the Second World War evades neat portraits of affiliation or progression, in mode as well as in matter. Classifications become hard to justify, because of the multiple ways in which late twentieth- and twenty-first-century writers have imaginatively responded to the era's changing social realities, and because '[c]reativity itself', as British-Guyanese writer Fred D'Aguiar observes, 'cannot be contained for long in any fashion or vice-hold which the process of naming and compartmentalizing seeks to promote'.¹ Moreover, the very construction of this field faces one obvious logistical consideration: the ever-expanding end-dates for 'post-1945' as a periodising rubric make comprehensive accounts of so many decades of cultural transformation seem increasingly unviable. Still, undaunted, this *Companion* provides its own atlas of an era whose unwieldy temporality and perpetually moving horizon do nothing to discredit its usefulness in framing some of the most significant developments in British fiction.

Although it does not pretend to grant an exhaustive coverage, this collection does intend to offer distinctive commentaries, drawing on some of the field's latest areas of critical interest. In what follows, chapters range from surveys of writers working within particular national and regional traditions to readings that pursue fiction's responses to financial upheaval, that trace the impact of new technologies on the literary rendition of perception and embodiment, that chart the novel's engagement with conditions of globalisation, and that situate formal innovations within transnational parameters. By embracing the challenge of creating a stylistically attentive, historically attuned and pedagogically valuable roadmap of literary fiction since mid-century, this *Companion* utilises a broad lexicon of critical concepts and procedures that the study of postwar British writing now deserves.

In the 1960s and 1970s, such critical vocabularies often circulated around the fortunes of the novel as a cultural form. Debates centred on how writers

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were extending or repudiating modernism's legacy of formal experimentation, whether they followed the aesthetic and political trajectories of social realism's postwar renaissance, and how they navigated the impulses of an emergent postmodernism towards self-referentiality and textual play. For some critics, the direction was clear: the novel had reached a watershed moment in wake of modernism, such that writers in the 1950s 'participated in the rejection of experimental forms', as Rubin Rabinovitz asserted, 'and a return to a more traditional style'.² Undoubtedly, this was a time when the 'social novel' rose to prominence thanks to emerging figures such as Alan Sillitoe, Kingsley Amis, and John Braine, among others. In characterising the period, Raymond Williams detected a 'return to older forms, and to specifically English forms, especially by comparison with the most widely discussed work of the 1920s and 1930s, which was largely experimental in form and cosmopolitan in spirit'.³ Today, scholars are revising this portrait of the early postwar years as a phase of retrogression and provincialisation. Not only do we now appreciate how such writers as Sillitoe or Barry Hines were hardly straightforward 'realists', combining as they do episodes of psychological interiority that catalysed innovations in imagery, syntax, and narrative perspective. We can also realign the national coordinates of 'British fiction' to include its postcolonial agents of change. Immigrant writers including Sam Selvon and George Lamming capitalised on the global reception and institutionalisation of modernist principles. By extending the project of aesthetic experimentalism for an arena of metropolitan intellectuals, they entered and perpetuated a sphere of artistic prestige, as Peter Kalliney has shown, despite the formidable racial disenfranchisements they were likely to face in daily life.⁴ Their fictions of migration and taxing assimilation are a testament to how vibrant and differentiated fiction's development was in the immediate years following the War, in contrast to received opinions about its social realist orientation. Such is the evidence, if we ever needed it, of the way the forms and purposes of postwar narrative remain resistant to schematic categorisation.

Nonetheless, bifurcations of realism and experimentation die hard in criticism on this period. While Malcolm Bradbury reminds us that 'realism can be a form of radical experimentalism' just as 'experimental novels are concerned with exploring and discovering, if not directly depicting, a reality',⁵ the distinction has persisted because of the novel's propensity to be apprehended as a chiefly referential medium. Thanks to this long-standing 'humanist reading of the novel', writes Andrzej Gasiorek, 'as primarily realist and essentially liberal', critics have 'tended to pit realism against experimentalism, conceiving them as opposites rather than as writing practices that stand in a complex, mutually interanimating relation to one another'.⁶ These divisions provoked an 'oscillation', as Bradbury termed it, 'between

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two views of the novel, one as a report on history and the social and moral world, the other of it as a self-conscious and self-discovering fiction'.⁷ One of the most influential versions of this split vision came from Iris Murdoch, whose 1961 essay 'Against Dryness' portrayed postwar novelists confronted by forking tendencies: either writers were wedded to a 'journalistic' mode of realism or else they remained seduced by a self-absorbed and consoling 'crystalline' aesthetic, a hangover from high modernism.⁸ Less severe though equally reliant on an image of binary options, David Lodge also saw fiction in 1969 standing before a set of 'crossroads' where realist imperatives intersected the more adventurous path to formal innovation. Here, the stakes of fiction's survival were located in the writer's capacity – informed by post-modernism's positive and enabling influence – to incorporate some awareness of the constructive possibilities of self-reflexive representation, instead of 'continuing serenely along the road of fictional realism'.⁹

Even amid this rhetoric of compromises and crossing paths, critical prognoses of fiction's wellbeing at the time could also sound decidedly upbeat. Evaluating the 'situation of the novel' in 1970, Bernard Bergonzi was largely optimistic, suggesting that '[i]n the arena where novels are produced, publicized, reviewed and, presumably, read, there is every indication that the form is in a state of high vitality'.¹⁰ Indeed, whatever despondency there was could be found less in the writing than in the criticism practiced upon it, highlighting what Bergonzi called 'a paradox in the fact that despite the commitment of novelists to the power and authority of the fictional form, critics have for a long time been predicting the end of the novel, in tones ranging from cool indifference to apocalyptic gloom'.¹¹ It would be heartening to imagine that more than forty years later this paradox might now be resolved or rebuked. But some of our most inventive writers today are perpetuating the doomsaying: 'The literary novel as an art work and a narrative art form central to our culture is indeed dying before our eyes'. So declared Will Self, using the occasion of his 2014 Richard Hillary memorial lecture at Oxford to offer not only a desolate forecast of the novel's fate in a digital age, but also a waspish characterisation of commentators who spend time working on it: 'Literary critics – themselves a dying breed, a cause for considerable schadenfreude on the part of novelists – make all sorts of mistakes, but some of the most egregious ones result from an inability to think outside of the papery prison within which they conduct their lives' work'.¹² Self appears unwilling to acknowledge the wealth of scholarship that has felt no need to declare the death of printed books in order to analyse how literary creativity reacts to digital contexts or how narrative genres operate within and adapt to contemporary media ecologies.¹³ Beyond the academy, there's a sense here too that the fiction-reading public is not given its due. Because

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general readers, as Self implies, are now drawn more readily to their tablets rather than to the printed word, they are no longer on par with ‘the kind of psyche implicit in the production and consumption of serious novels (which are what, after all, serious artists produce)’, a sensibility that ‘depends on a medium that has inbuilt privacy’.¹⁴ Lured away from the page by portable devices and forever short for time, contemporary readers are left in this scenario with an appetite merely for ‘the naïve and uncritical realism’, as Tom McCarthy denounces it, ‘dominating contemporary middlebrow fiction’. This population of potential novel-readers are emblematic, in Self’s words, of the ‘current resistance of a lot of the literate public to difficulty in the form’.¹⁵ Arguments of this type about the waning of educated readers’ desire for literary (read: *difficult*) fiction tacitly bemoan a lost age for literature’s apparent supremacy, when avid audiences supposedly had a greater aptitude for tackling the ‘serious’ novel without distraction. Beneath the despondent surface of such verdicts on the state of fiction flows an undercurrent of nostalgia that’s as speculative as it is sullen.

Diagnoses of the novel’s postwar journey into obsolescence or middlebrow naivety after the audacious monuments of early twentieth-century modernism soon sound empirically insubstantial and needlessly polemical, once we understand in more culturally plural terms what fiction-reading has actually contributed to ordinary lives – irrespective of the diversions nowadays of digital communication and entertainment – together with the varieties of affective work it continues to carry out.¹⁶ Correlations between the state of fiction and the state of reading can also become (as in Self’s case) conspicuously selective in an age of world literature, when they rest on conjectures about the inclinations of primarily Anglo-American audiences. Furthermore, they are far from unprecedented, echoing commentators in the past who have had similar axes to grind. In the early 1990s, D. J. Taylor, for instance, began his own barbed account of the novel in postwar Britain by warning that ‘[s]ooner or later ... anyone seriously interested in modern fiction will be forced to confront an enquiry which is more or less unanswerable: why devote so much attention to an art-form which nearly everybody admits is in a wretched state, and in which large numbers of intelligent people have lost interest?’¹⁷ Among those people who are ‘intelligent’ and ‘seriously interested in modern fiction’ we could surely include the readers of this *Companion*, who – by virtue of their willingness to dedicate rather more attention to challenging fiction than perhaps critics like Taylor and Self presume – ensure that the study and discussion of postwar writing expands precisely in ways that question generalising assumptions about the state British fiction is in. Since vigorous ‘debate about the novel’, as Doris Lessing reflected in 1971, ‘has been going on since the novel was born’, the very continuance of such

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debates today says more about fiction's endurance than its enervation.¹⁸ That '[c]ultural contest enacts itself through our subjectivities', in Alan Sinfield's phrase, suggests that fiction remains a dexterous and adaptable art form most suited to express our subjecthood.¹⁹ As the following chapters attest, fiction is far from moribund with plenty of work left to do in refracting and intensifying our vision of cultures and subjects, past and present.

When fiction's importance as an agent in and commentator on cultural contest alters over time, so does the very vocabulary we use to recognise and describe its efficacy. One purpose of this collection is therefore to afford readers access to the latest insights from distinguished scholars who are working in a field that is advancing in methodologically exciting directions. Of course, whether in the number of writers it covers or in the range of approaches it deploys, no companion could hope to be exhaustive for such an abundant period as this: a period that witnessed both the advent and decline of a welfare state; the consequent polarisation of left and right governments; the expansion of a global economy in which Britain played a smaller part in comparison to the authority it formerly wielded over its now-contracted and dissolving empire; and the move through the 1980s into an era of aggressive privatisation, where commercial deregulation initiated an ethos of competitive free-market internationalism that correlated with the rise of entrepreneurial individualism. It has been, of course, a period of extended, traumatic, and controversial confrontation, too: the thirty-year Troubles in Northern Ireland; the Argentine invasion of the Falkland Islands in 1982; and the coalition combats in the Persian Gulf beginning in the early 1990s and resurging in the Bush-orchestrated 'War on Terror' from 2001, whose initiatives, supported by Tony Blair, included the highly contentious invasion of Iraq in 2003. To trace the full spectrum of fictional responses to these domestic and geopolitical sea changes would be an encyclopaedic exercise – due, indeed, as much to the fictions themselves as to the histories they narrate. 'Random, eclectic, in many cases blatantly hostile to the traditions it supplanted', notes Talyor, 'the great corpus of post-war writing in this country owes much of its randomness and eclecticism to the variety of social factors to which it has been subjected'.²⁰ Among the most fraught and historically extensive of those factors have been the political, territorial, and religious conflicts in Northern Ireland, the consequences of which for poetry and fiction can be more thoroughly explored elsewhere in scholarship devoted to this particular context.²¹

Accordingly, the goal of this book is to offer readers not so much a definitive survey of each and every sector of fiction published in the United Kingdom, but rather to demonstrate approaches inspired by current domains of critical interest that have opened up new interpretive opportunities. Divided

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into three parts, the book begins with a series of essays that move from regionalism to migration, provincialism to globalisation, giving attention to writers who capture issues of nationhood and identity that have been 'denied conventional forms of social and political self-expression', as David Goldie argues, by their 'prevailing constitutional situation' (Chapter 3). What contributions to this section also make clear is that to invoke the nation as a critical optic for modern fiction is not to turn away from but in fact to shed light on the wider ramifications of decolonisation. As James Procter contends, examining the 'regional' work of Pat Barker and David Peace, 'debates on empire and its aftermath have tended to flicker between metropolitan centre and postcolonial periphery while paying scant attention to the internal margins of provincial Englishness'.²² Turning to immigration across the period, Aarthi Vadde considers modes of 'British fiction centred on the experience of exclusion', as migrant writers dramatize 'conflicts over the meaning of national traditions' and reflect 'upon the significance of collective identity in a multiracial, international society' (Chapter 4).

Part II connects cultural, ontological, and environmental concerns with elements of literary technique, as contributors historically track different registers of queer and feminist writing, new modalities of 'nature writing', and the novel's depiction of scientific and technological advancement. Finally, Part III is devoted more explicitly to questions of form. Here chapters address the generic renovations and transformations that have emerged among the afterlives of modernism and the multifaceted formations of post-modernism, as writers from B. S. Johnson and Christine Brooke-Rose in the 1970s (Chapter 9) to David Mitchell and Hilary Mantel in the 2000s re-envision the futures of novelistic experimentation and reanimate fiction's incorporation of history (Chapters 10 and 13). Listening in to contemporary literature's dialogues with the nuances of postmodern thought, this section follows British writing across a period when some of its most virtuosic practitioners, as Joseph Brooker notes, paradoxically 'speak so authoritatively about the loss of epistemological authority' (Chapter 10). Loss of a more economic kind makes a striking appearance, as well, when Nicky Marsh brings the story of fiction's engagement with cultural crisis right up to date in her account of the British thriller as a genre peculiarly suited to the temper and tumult of global finance (Chapter 12).

By no means all-encompassing, then, these three sections nevertheless showcase alternative ways of conceptualising postwar British fiction as a field. Some areas of focus are all the more valuable for being recuperative: in Chapters 1 and 7, for instance, Dominic Head and Daniel Weston bring back into view localised treatments of regional environments, reassessing the vibrancy of often-overlooked rural narratives of place, habitation, and

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ecological consciousness. Elsewhere, the critical impetus is one of expansion rather than recovery, as Weihsin Gui ‘measures how fiction’s play of references and allusions patterns and shapes the worlds it inhabits and imagines’, elucidating as he does the forms British fiction assumes to chronicle the contiguities and cross-currents of transnationalism (Chapter 14). Complementing this consideration of the novel’s response to what Gui has called the ‘sweeping force field of narratives of cultural and economic globalization’,²³ Aarthi Vadde and Matthew Hart likewise move beyond a national paradigm to reassess the critical geography of British fiction through globalism: both as a lived experience and as a style of thought. These new frames entail not only an analysis of writers’ transnational reception through translation, but also our awareness that the novel’s ‘global circulation’, as Rebecca L. Walkowitz argues, has ‘shaped its strategies and forms of appearance’.²⁴ As well as material texts, circulation of course includes people and communities, commitments and desires – all of which reconstitute social imaginaries and extend horizons of artistic possibility. In this sense, new conditions for social collectivity, racial interaction, and cosmopolitan accommodation amount to more than mere backdrops for those writers concerned with ethnicity and belonging; rather, the ‘political and social processes of immigration shape the whole literary system, the relationships among all the works in a literary culture, and not simply the part of that system that involves books generated by immigrant populations’.²⁵

Given the scale and implication of these systemic transformations over the second half of the twentieth-century and into the twenty-first, one might reasonably wonder whether the very notion of ‘British fiction’ is sustainable at all. Perhaps the label is best seen as a critical convenience rather than a point of lengthy contention, a placeholder rather than an imposition, enabling us to make certain practical decisions about selection and organisation. Either way, this *Companion* reveals that there are more interesting and urgent debates circulating today than those concerned about the legitimacy of national denominations. After the Scottish referendum on independence in 2014, devolution may seem imminent in years to come, making the epithet ‘British’ sound all the more vexed. But then again, that would be a rather presentist assumption: fiction in Britain acquired an extraterritorial disposition and cosmopolitan purview long before political question marks appeared over the constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom. Approaching a form that often ‘rejoices in mongrelization’, in Salman Rushdie’s memorable phrase,²⁶ critics have been alert for some time to the challenges late twentieth-century writing has posed to settled categories and frameworks. Bradbury, for one, admitted that ‘it seems no longer easy to fix on some distinctive contemporary movement or tendency, or

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treat contemporary writers with a firm critical finality'.²⁷ In part, his hunch still obtains today, as classifications of modes and movements alike – however historically precise and narratologically robust – give us only partial answers to the question of why some fictions either endure as touchstones for the postwar period or remain so prescient of later cultural moments.

One of the purposes of this *Companion*, though, is to demonstrate how certain collective tendencies can nonetheless be discerned across this aesthetically hybrid and temporally protracted literary scene: tendencies that tell us something fruitful about the development of novelistic technique; about the way present modes relate to past movements; and about how we can group seemingly unconnected writers together via common social, environmental, economic, or philosophical preoccupations without homogenising their aims or compromising our grasp of their work's formal particularities. In short, this volume invites its readers to welcome what is a 'perennial problem with literary history', in Dominic Head's words, the problem being that criticism often 'emphasizes change, drawing chronological lines in the sand that may be preliminary signposts', thereby 'requiring complication and enrichment, so that the way the history is manufactured is constantly under review'.²⁸ That each new generation of readers will shift the criteria for this review is a prospect as invigorating as it is inevitable. With that shift, of course, our critical language will evolve, too, a process the authors here engage with and energise as they rearticulate the story of British fiction since 1945.

NOTES

- 1 Fred D'Aguiar, 'Against Black British Literature', in *Tibisiri: Caribbean Writers and Critics*, ed. Maggie Butcher (Sydney: Dangeroo Press, 1988), p. 109.
- 2 Rubin Rabinovitz, *The Reaction Against Experiment in the English Novel, 1950–1960* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967), p. 5.
- 3 Raymond Williams, quoted in Rabinovitz, pp. 9–10.
- 4 See Peter Kalliney, *Commonwealth of Letters: British Literary Culture and the Emergence of Postcolonial Aesthetics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), chapter 1: 'Modernist Networks and Late Colonial Intellectuals'.
- 5 Bradbury, 'Introduction to the 1990 Edition', *The Novel Today: Contemporary Writers on Modern Fiction* (London: Fontana, 1990), p. 10.
- 6 Andrzej Gasiorek, *Post-War British Fiction: Realism and After* (London: Arnold, 1995), p. 17. Similarly, Dominic Head concludes his account of postwar fiction by viewing it as far more stylistically polyphonic than arguments distinguishing realism from experimentation would suggest, urging us to trace 'different brands of formal hybridity, where "innovation" can embrace tradition, and where the reworking of realism can be just as insightful as its rejection'. *The Cambridge Introduction to Modern British, 1950–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 259.

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- 7 Bradbury, 'Introduction', *The Novel Today*, p. 10.
- 8 Iris Murdoch, 'Against Dryness: A Polemical Sketch', *Encounter* (January 1961), pp. 16–20. For a discussion of the pertinence and implications of Murdoch's term for twenty-first-century fiction, see David James's 'A Renaissance for the Crystalline Novel?' *Contemporary Literature* 53.4 (Winter 2012): 845–74; and, for a consideration of the wider influence of Murdoch's fiction and philosophy, Mark Luprecht, ed., *Iris Murdoch Connected* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2014).
- 9 David Lodge, 'The Novelist at the Crossroads', *The Novelist at the Crossroads and Other Essays on Fiction and Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1971), p. 22.
- 10 Bernard Bergonzi, *The Situation of the Novel* (London: Macmillan, 1970), p. 12.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- 12 Will Self, 'The Novel is Dead (This Time it's for Real)', Richard Hillary Memorial Lecture, 6 May 2014. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/may/02/will-self-novel-dead-literary-fiction>. Accessed 15 December 2014.
- 13 See Jessica Pressman, *Digital Modernism: Making it New in New Media* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); and Naomi S. Baron, 'Redefining Reading: The Impact of Digital Communication Media', *PMLA* 128.1 (2013): 193–200. For an encyclopedic handbook of approaches to reading multimedia forms, the virtual codex, and cybertextualities, see *A Companion to Digital Literary Studies*, eds. Ray Siemens and Susan Schreibman (Oxford: Blackwell, 2013). For an exploration of the utility of computational analysis for tracing patterns of change in literary culture across time, see Matthew L. Jockers, *Macroanalysis: Digital Methods and Literary History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013).
- 14 Self, 'The Novel is Dead (This Time it's for Real)'.
- 15 Tom McCarthy, 'Writing Machines', *London Review of Books*, 18 December 2014, p. 21. Self, 'The Novel is Dead (This Time it's for Real)'.
- 16 See Timothy Aubry, *Reading as Therapy: What Contemporary Fiction Does for Middle-Class Americans* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2011), a study of the collective effects of empathic experience for nonprofessional readers of fiction. Analysing collaborative contexts for evaluation – Amazon reviews, the Oprah Winfrey book club – Aubry argues that shared emotional responses 'promote forms of recognition, identification, and sympathy among strangers living without the support of stable local communities' (205).
- 17 D. J. Taylor, *After the War: The Novel and English Society Since 1945* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993), pp. xiv–xv.
- 18 Doris Lessing, 'Preface to *The Golden Notebook*' (1971), in *A Small Personal Voice: Essays, Reviews, Interviews*, ed. Paul Schlueter (London: Flamingo, 1994), p. 36.
- 19 Alan Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p. 4.
- 20 Taylor, *After the War*, p. xx.
- 21 See Neal Alexander, 'The Carceral City and the City of Refuge: Belfast Fiction and Urban Form,' *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 33.2 (2007): pp. 28–37, and also his 'Remembering to Forget: Northern Irish Fiction after the Troubles', in *Irish Literature since 1990: Diverse Voices*, eds. Scott Brewster and Michael Parker (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), pp. 272–83. Also: Elmer

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- Kennedy-Andrews, 'The Novel and the Northern Troubles', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel*, ed. John Wilson Foster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 238–58; Liam O'Dowd, 'Republicanism, Nationalism, and Unionism: Changing Contexts, Cultures, and Ideologies', in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Irish Culture*, eds. Joe Cleary and Claire Connolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 78–95; O'Dowd, 'New Unionism, British Nationalism and the Prospects for a Negotiated Settlement in Northern Ireland', in *Rethinking Northern Ireland: Culture, Ideology and Colonialism*, ed. David Miller (London: Longman, 1998), pp. 70–93; and Aaron Kelly, 'Introduction: The Troubles with the Peace Process: Contemporary Northern Irish Culture', *Irish Review* 40.40–41 (2009): pp. 1–17.
- 22 James Procter, 'The Return of the Native: Pat Barker, David Peace and the Regional Novel after Empire', in *End of Empire and the English Novel since 1945*, eds. Rachael Gilmour and Bill Schwarz (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), p. 203.
- 23 Weihsin Gui, *National Consciousness and Literary Cosmopolitics: Postcolonial Literature in a Global Moment* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013), p. 2.
- 24 Rebecca L. Walkowitz, 'The Location of Literature: The Transnational Book and the Migrant Writer', *Contemporary Literature* 47.4 (Winter 2006), p. 527. See also Walkowitz's development of this argument in 'Theory of World Literature Now', her introduction to *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), pp. 1–48.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 533.
- 26 Salman Rushdie, 'In Good Faith', *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981–1991* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 394.
- 27 Bradbury, 'Introduction', *The Novel Today*, p. 12.
- 28 Dominic Head, 'H. E. Bates, Regionalism and Late Modernism', in *The Legacies of Modernism: Historicising Postwar and Contemporary Fiction*, ed. David James (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 41.