Introduction

Sarah Graham

Anyone who reads fiction will eventually encounter a Bildungsroman – a novel about a young person facing the challenges of growing up – because it is one of the most popular and enduring genres in literary history. Depicting the journey from youth to maturity, a classic Bildungsroman concentrates on a protagonist striving to reconcile individual aspirations with the demands of social conformity. The narrative offers privileged access to the psychological development of a central character whose sense of self is in flux, paralleling personal concerns with prevailing values. The Bildungsroman's ability to explore the relationship between self and society accounts for its lasting global appeal.

A History of the Bildungsroman is the first comprehensive study of the genre and the broadest in terms of historical and geographical scope to date. Its sweeping perspective reveals the remarkable adaptability and diversity of the genre. By exploring its emergence and endurance in multiple locations over more than two hundred years, rather than focusing solely on national or historical literary traditions or the influence of identity politics, the volume investigates the genre in a new way. The chapters range widely in terms of place and time, and offer a variety of approaches to the subject. Firstly, there is discussion of the genre's evolution in the countries that have most fully embraced it: Germany, France, Britain, Russia and the Soviet Union, and the United States of America, all of which have substantial Bildungsroman traditions. Secondly, there is analysis of how the genre, historically associated with the realism, was adopted and adapted in innovative forms of fiction, such as Modernist novels at the beginning of the twentieth century and contemporary graphic fiction. Thirdly, consideration is paid to the ways in which the Bildungsroman, originally concerned with young, white, privileged, heterosexual men, came to give expression to the marginalised and silenced, in writing about the formative experiences of women, LGBTQ people, and postcolonial populations. The chapters, written by prominent critics in Bildungsroman studies,

discuss canonical and less familiar texts, forming an original analysis of how the genre has been adapted to the concerns of various times and places. The volume as a whole conveys that the Bildungsroman has not only survived but thrived while other traditional forms, like the epistolary novel, the picaresque, and the allegory, have all but disappeared. *A History of the Bildungsroman* thus explores the principal aspects of the genre – its themes, ideologies, implications and effects – to show why it has been, and remains, an integral part of literary culture.

A History of the Bildungsroman enriches debates about a genre that has inspired little critical consensus. While there is agreement that 'Bildungsroman' is a German word, every other aspect of the genre has been debated, from when it first appeared to whether it exists at all.[1] Tobias Boes credits Karl Morgenstern with first defining the genre in a lecture titled 'On the Nature of the Bildungsroman' (1819), although he acknowledges that Wilhelm Dilthey popularised the term in his study, *Poetry and Experience* (1906).[2] 'Bildungsroman' has been widely adopted untranslated, which could suggest shared understanding of its meaning, though for Jeffrey L. Sammons the word 'lurks about in non-German usage because it resists easy translation'.[3] That 'roman' means 'novel' is commonly accepted, but 'bildung' could be rendered in English as 'formation', 'development', 'growth', or 'education'. Marc Redfield contends that the 'word *Bildung* is untranslatably rich. *Bild* means "image," "painting," "figure," or "trope," and *Bildung* thus commands a range of aesthetic associations'.[4] Additional complications arise with the variant terms that are near-synonyms for Bildungsroman, such as Entwicklungsroman, Erziehungsroman, and the more commonly used Künstlerroman.[5] Antibildungsroman and Metabildungsroman add to the variety of terms available, indicating the range of narratives that can be understood to be part of the tradition of the genre.[6]

Like one of its protagonists, the Bildungsroman has an origin story, but there is ongoing disagreement on its key points. Several critics assert that Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's multi-volume novel, *Wilhelm Meisters Lehjahre* (*Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, 1795–6), is the urtext, while others make that claim for *Geschichte des Agathon* (*The Story of Agathon*, 1766–7) by Christoph Martin Wieland.[7] Either way, the genre's birth seems deeply implicated with the German Enlightenment. In his renowned study of the genre, *The Way of the World* (1987), Franco Moretti argues that the Bildungsroman arises in the late eighteenth century because it allows writers and readers to navigate the rapid pace of social change in Europe. 'Youth is . . . modernity's "essence"', argues Moretti,

underscoring the connection between the progress of a young person and the transformation of European culture.[8] Because of its association with the German Enlightenment, it has been argued that only a German novel of the era of Goethe and Wieland that depicts the transition from youth to maturity can be truly considered a Bildungsroman. In 1916, for instance, Thomas Mann defined the genre as 'a variety of the novel that is German, typically German, legitimately national'.[9] Kelsey Bennett avers that 'many view bildung as a summation of the eighteenth century's impossibly utopian Enlightenment ideals', suggesting that the genre has strict boundaries.[10] These critical assessments call into question the capacity of the Bildungsroman to integrate itself into the literature of other nations while maintaining a distinct identity as a genre.

The chapters collected in this volume contest the notion that the Bildungsroman is exclusively German. Equally, they resist Michael Beddow's claim that, once outside the context of German studies, 'any novel which depicts the development of a single hero or heroine' might be labelled a Bildungsroman, a definition that risks becoming meaningless because it is too wide.[11] As *A History of the Bildungsroman* shows, although it rarely presents the intense philosophical debates often seen in its early German incarnation, 'Bildungsroman' is much more than a bland synonym for any story of personal formation. Though adaptable, the genre retains fundamental characteristics that render it distinct. Thus, the Bildungsroman is recognisable wherever it appears. Although responsive to culture, history, and society, Martin Swales asserts that '[a]s long as the model of the genre is intimated as a sustained and sustaining presence in the work in question, then the genre retains its validity as a structuring principle within the palpable stuff of an individual literary creation'.[12] In Mikhail Bakhtin's formulation, what is vital about the genre is that at its heart is a person in the process of becoming, someone who 'emerges *along with the world* and [who] reflects the historical emergence of the world itself'.[13] However, for Michael Minden, trial and failure are far more important than becoming: 'the *Bildungsroman* makes the shortcomings of the individual . . . the driving force of its narratives'.[14] Minden's emphasis on failure challenges the traditional view that the Bildungsroman traces its protagonist's journey to social integration and success.

Despite the specifics of its birth in eighteenth-century Germany and attempts to control its form and meaning, the Bildungsroman has proved, as Bennett observes, 'fully capable of resonating with meaning in a number of widely divergent quarters'.[15] All the chapters in this study refer to the key aspects of the Bildungsroman identified in its German manifestation, but

also show how and why other national literatures have embraced it for their own purposes, typically using it to communicate concerns that extend beyond the literary sphere to wider society. As Moretti argues, the Bildungsroman is crucial 'not only in the history of the novel, but in our entire cultural legacy', because it 'depicts and re-enacts as we read it, a relationship with the social totality' (23). As several chapters in this volume show, the Bildungsroman is profoundly concerned with what it means to be an individual and to participate in the life of a nation.

According to Moretti, the different eras of the Bildungsroman cannot be traced in a rigid, linear manner. He suggests, '[w]e need a different geometrical pattern here – not a straight line but a tree, with plenty of bifurcations for genres to branch off from each other' (234). Progression in the Bildungsroman since the publication of *The Way of the World* might be considered new branches of the genre's genealogical 'tree'. However, Moretti's metaphor of roots and shoots implies that varieties of Bildungsroman subsequent to the German original are marginal and inferior. An alternative metaphor for the genre's growth might be the rhizome. In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari adopt the rhizome, a term taken from botany, as an image of thought. In contrast to the tree, the rhizome is a tangled network of interwoven roots, a structure without origin or end. As John Marks explains, 'the model of the tree is hierarchical and centralized whereas the rhizome is proliferating and serial, functioning by means of the principles of connection and heterogeneity'.[16] Embracing Deleuze and Guattari's concept to reconceive the tradition of the Bildungsroman, the chapters in this book together demonstrate that the expansion of the genre is less arboreal than rhizomatic.

In Chapter One, 'The German Tradition of the Bildungsroman', Todd Kontje challenges theorists who claim that the genre 'expresses the mysterious essence of the German soul', proposing that it has been employed to critique rather than simply articulate national identity. For Kontje, this makes the German Bildungsroman a highly political form. His analysis of texts such as Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, Gottfried Keller's *Green Heinrich* (1854–5), Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* (1924) and Günter Grass's *The Tin Drum* (1959) counters the traditional view of the German bildungsroman as an intellectual and philosophical investigation of personal identity. Instead, Kontje proposes that the genre comments critically on the complex history of the German nation.

In Chapter Two, Alison Finch explores 'The French Bildungsroman'. She highlights ambivalence towards the genre, reflected in the absence of

both 'Bildungsroman' and its equivalent, 'roman de formation', from the French language prior to the 1960s. As Finch observes, this does not mean that there are no Bildungsromane in French literature. On the contrary, the genre existed before the publication of *Wilhelm Meisters Lehjahre*: the anonymously authored *The Princesse de Clèves* (1678) and Françoise de Graffigny's *Letters of a Peruvian Woman* (1747) may in fact have influenced Goethe. When it is adopted, it is often with irony, as seen in the hero's journey from kind-heartedness to egocentricity in Stendhal's *Red & Black* (1830). Though out of fashion by the end of the nineteenth century, Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913) brought the genre back to life. While French literature may not have adopted the traditional Bildungsroman unequivocally, it has produced some of the influential examples of the genre.

In Chapter Three, Richard Salmon acknowledges the irrefutable significance of *Wilhelm Meister* to nineteenth-century British fiction. He argues that all the major authors of the era were familiar with Goethe's text and that innumerable novels, both famous and obscure, show its influence. Salmon contends that a cohesive body of work that responds to the German Bildungsroman emerges across the period. Thomas Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* (1833–4) is a novel of formation and his translation of Goethe has been credited with establishing the genre in English literature. Salmon assigns equal significance to relatively unfamiliar novels such as Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Ernest Maltravers* (1837) and George Meredith's *Beauchamp's Career* (1876) and renowned texts like Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1849–50) and George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* (1876). He suggests that the popularity of the genre lies in its capacity to combine ostensibly oppositional Victorian values.

In Chapter Four, 'The Bildungsroman in Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union', Lina Steiner makes a case not only for the importance of Russian writers and literary theorists in the evolution of the genre, but also for its significance in Russian culture. Bakhtin's consideration of the Bildungsroman is still cited widely today. Through the Bildungsroman, artists and intellectuals connected with European thought and modernity. Alexander Pushkin's *The Captain's Daughter* (1836), Lev Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869) and Fyodor Dostoevsky's major works all underscore the importance of self-development in the nineteenth century, the era of Russia's cultural ascendancy. Although the social changes brought by the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 placed restrictions on the intelligentsia, Steiner argues that certain post-revolutionary novels, such as Mikhail

Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* (1940) and Boris Pasternak's *Doctor Zhivago* (1957), express scepticism about Soviet ideology.

In Chapter Five, 'The American Bildungsroman', I argue that the genre expresses the USA's unique sense of youth and potential through young protagonists on a formative journey. The chapter proposes that there are two distinct strands of American Bildungsroman. One, exemplified by the work of Horatio Alger, celebrates the nation's promise of life, liberty and happiness (enshrined in the Declaration of Independence) as well as the American Dream that promises success and prosperity to all. The second reveals that the nation's assurances do not hold for many young Americans. The chapter focuses on this second strand and analyses representations of white working-class boys and girls of all classes, whose stories reveal the hollowness of America's pledges to its citizens. It also discusses coming-of-age novels depicting social groups typically marginalised and dispossessed in the USA, including African and Native Americans. It concludes by showing that even a privileged white boy like Holden Caulfield in *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) is unimpressed by American ideals and definitions of success.

Many Bildungsromane, especially those of the nineteenth century, are realist novels, but in Chapter Six, 'The Modernist Bildungsroman', Gregory Castle shows that the genre is evident in more experimental fictions, too. In particular, the Künstlerroman plays a significant role in modernism, Castle argues, because it offers a way of expressing the creativity and dynamism of the protagonist's interior world that the classical version of the genre does not permit. Castle analyses representations of the artist in Walter Pater's *Imaginary Portraits* (1888), Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) and James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as Young Man* (1916). He also examines 'portraits of aesthetic life' in E. M. Forster's *A Room with a View* (1908), Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out* (1915), and Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage* (beginning in 1915). These texts, and fiction of the 1920s by H. D. and Elizabeth Bowen, all 'blur the line between the artists and the subject of the portrait' through their formal experiments. Ultimately, an aesthetic life, Castle argues, shapes an individual's relationship with the world. In this way, modernist portraits of the artist show protagonists interwoven with their milieu, connecting inner and outer worlds.

While many novels of formation are written by and for adults, some are aimed at younger readers, conveying to an audience still in the process of maturation how they might attain adulthood. In Chapter Seven, 'Bildungsromane for Children and Young Adults', Fiona McCulloch

explores examples of such narratives and considers how they might shape the expectations of younger readers as they connect the adventures depicted in fiction with their own futures. McCulloch observes that novels for younger readers that are didactic capitalise on children's simultaneous desire for and terror of the unknown to encourage 'compliant and productive citizen[s] who [have] internalised society's hegemonic values'. However, McCulloch argues that literature for children and young adults can present childhood 'as a contested and dynamic rather than settled space'. Her discussion of a range of fiction for younger readers, from Victorian classics to contemporary dystopias, conveys the genre's potential to empower its audience rather than inculcate compliance.

In Chapter Eight, 'The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century', Maroula Joannou questions the primacy of *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre* by noting the earlier publication of Eliza Haywood's *The History of Miss Betty Thoughtless* (1751). Like Finch's identification of *The Princesse de Clèves* (1678) as a foundational text of the genre in France, Joannou also stresses the significance of Haywood's novel being a female narrative. Although the genre is traditionally male-dominated and conservative, presenting social integration as an ideal, Joannou shows that writers from Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot to Sarah Waters and Zadie Smith have used it to interrogate and subvert white, heteronormative patriarchy, undermining the supposed universality of male experience through woman-centred accounts of female maturation. In a reading of texts as varied as George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), Radclyffe Hall's *The Unlit Lamp* (1924) and Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* (1996), Joannou shows how women writers challenge the conventions of the classic Bildungsroman.

Ericka A. Hoagland's analysis of 'The Postcolonial Bildungsroman' in Chapter Nine highlights a process of appropriation and adaptation of the genre by writers dealing with the legacy of colonialism. Despite the genre's Eurocentrism, postcolonial writers utilise it to respond to the trauma of colonialism and neo-colonialism, conveying the difficulties of maturing in a racially oppressive context. Like many of the novels discussed in Chapter Five on the American Bildungsroman and in Chapter Eight on female Bildungsromane, Hoagland sees a departure from European tradition in novels from Africa. As with other forms of the genre that represent marginalised people, the postcolonial Bildungsroman has been integral to the emergence of the postcolonial subject. Hoagland argues that postcolonial literature reinvents the master narrative of the Bildungsroman as a 'political act of counter-colonisation'.

Like Hoagland, Meredith Miller explores how the Bildungsroman has been appropriated and repurposed by those traditionally left out of the genre. In Chapter Ten on 'Lesbian, Gay and Trans Bildungsromane', she contends that just as sexual dissidence poses a threat to normative social structures, so lesbian, gay and transgender narratives take issue with the conservatism of the classic novel of formation and rework the traditional structure to interrogate the relationship between sexuality and life narratives. Texts such as Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982) and Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985) position their protagonists 'as emerging into meaning against the national historical'. According to Miller, 'the Bildungsroman is the inevitable form for queer subcultural articulation' and the twenty-first century is 'the Bildungsroman's queer moment'.

In the final chapter, 'Bildungsromane and Graphic Narratives', Ian Gordon examines comics and graphic novels. Depicting the hero's transition from child to young adult is a feature of numerous comics, including *The Amazing Spider-Man* and *Archie*, but it is graphic novels since the publication of Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (1986) that most clearly show what visual art brings to the genre: a new way of representing memory and time. Gordon analyses a selection of graphic Bildungsromane, both fiction and memoir, to show how they convey 'what it means to move through time, or be stuck in it, and the implications of those two experiences for a sense of coming of age'. Acclaimed texts like *Maus* and Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006) simultaneously comment on their younger and adult selves in a way that can only be presented clearly through the artwork. As Gordon explains, graphic narratives make a unique contribution to the Bildungsroman by offering 'not simply a story told but a story revealed'.

As these chapters show, the significance of the journey to adulthood is recognised all over the world. However, the volume illustrates that teenage experience is inflected in different ways in different places. Youth is a powerful symbol of a nation or an era, full of vitality and potential. The progress to maturity can celebrate a young character's time and place or reveal its flaws. Youths understand the implications of social norms for the first time, and structural inequalities are exposed through the trials they face in maturation. As protagonists weigh the pressure to conform against the desire to be themselves, the true extent of their freedom is brought sharply into focus. As Colin Wilson notes in *The Outsider* (1967), the Bildungsroman is 'a sort of laboratory in which the hero conducts an experiment in living'.[17] *A History of the Bildungsroman* highlights how experimentation defines the genre in terms of theme and form.

The chapters examine its formation and continuing evolution. Like its protagonists, the Bildungsroman has places to go: relatively new research in the fields of disability, the post-human, critical animal studies and eco-criticism are beginning to explore the genre in fascinating and productive ways.[18] *A History of the Bildungsroman* leaves no doubt that the novel of development has a rich heritage and a bright future.