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Introduction: Framing the Present

When does the present begin?

An immediate answer to this curiously vexing question might be to suggest that the present *does not* begin. The present, one might argue, has no duration. It is the now, the passing moment, and as such cannot be truly said to have a beginning or an end, and cannot be measured, or regarded in any sense as having passed, or being to come. The present does not unfold or occur, but is the vanishing, fleeting medium of our immediate becoming.

If the question is a vexing one, however, this is because this answer, however plausible or even inescapable it is in one sense, is entirely inadequate in another. The present cannot have duration, because if it is so extended then it immediately becomes divisible, partaking of the past and the future, from which it is by definition distinct; but our experience of the present is nevertheless necessarily an experience of duration. The present is an experience of passing time, and the way that we give our time colour, substance and experiential weight depends upon the ways in which we frame the present, the ways in which we assign it parameters and coordinates. The present might begin with the opening of a sentence, or the break of a day, or the beginning of a life, or the emergence of a historical period or geological era, and the essential ephemerality of presentness as such is only thinkable – is only endurable – when it is located within this wider, extended timeframe. Consider Tom Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, characters exiled to an epistemologically evacuated present that will not attach itself securely to a wider history. 'What's the first thing you remember', Guildenstern asks Rosencrantz. Rosencrantz considers for a while, before replying, 'No, its no good. It's gone. It was a long time ago.'[1] To anchor ourselves in the present requires us to endow it with a beginning, an origin, as Guildenstern recognises; but the experience of the present itself allows no such originary stability, and requires us to abandon ourselves to Rosencrantz's hellish non-time, dramatised so tantalisingly by Stoppard, and by Beckett and Sartre before him.

This is a problem that attends all attempts to think about the present – a problem that is perhaps intrinsic to the ontology *of* the present. But it takes on a particular urgency, a particular critical freight, when one seeks to produce a historical picture of any period that ends with 'the present' – that has the immediately contemporary moment as its far horizon. To speak of a period which ends with one's own moment – to write in the last days of 2018 of a period which ends in 2018 – touches on the difficulty of capturing a time that is still in process, that is so close to us as to defy categorisation or focus. It is always difficult to fashion the historical or temporal frame through which the attributes of a given present might come to view. And what is more, it is perhaps the case that this is particularly difficult in our own time, when addressing *our own present*, given that one of our defining preoccupations is the ephemerality, the unthinkability of the present itself. Wendy Brown makes an exemplary argument when she writes, in 2001, that in our own time we have 'lost the thread of progress in history',[2] that the 'engine of historical movement' has stalled.[3] 'Ours', she argues, 'is a present that is hurtled into the future', 'a present that dishonours the past by erasing it with unprecedented speed and indifference', 'a present whose inevitable and rapid eclipse is uppermost in the political consciousness of its inhabitants'.[4] If there is any truth in this observation, then how can we produce a historical frame in which to locate the present – a present which owes its historical specificity to its resistance to, obliteration of, historical protocol, its refusal of what Brown calls the 'periodicity of this particular past-present-future'?[5]

To respond to this difficulty is to return to the question with which we began – where does the present, our present, begin? If Wendy Brown's comments sound somewhat out of focus, somewhat anachronistic, then this is perhaps because she is writing here at the turn of the millennium, before 9/11, before the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, before the financial crisis of 2008 – before the unfolding of the historical events that have begun to give colour to a Western postmillennial present. It felt to Brown, at the dawn of the new millennium, that the present had folded into the future, that, as Don DeLillo puts it in the later twentieth century, the future has arrived 'ahead of schedule', 'It's backed into us. It's here';[6] but as she writes, she is unaware of the actual postmillennial future to come, the future that would give a different texture to the experience of 'our' present (as a character puts it in DeLillo's future haunted novel *Cosmopolis*, in the looming lee of 9/11 Brown is ironically unaware that 'something will happen soon, maybe today, to correct the acceleration of time'[7]). This gives Brown's comments a slightly anachronistic feel, but her observations nevertheless remain recognisable, maintaining a purchase on the texture of contemporary temporality.

The experience of historical, temporal life in the early decades of the twenty-first century remains, in Ursula Heise's terms, schismatic. Chronology is disrupted, still, by what Heise calls 'chronoschisms', that is, by the perception that temporality is no longer linear, that periodicity, in Brown's phrase, is no longer contained within a stable model of past-present-future.[8] The historical events of the twenty-first century have not restored us to a prior model of historiography, have not, in their massive implications, kick-started a stalled historical engine; rather they have ushered in a new historical structure of feeling, that is still difficult to measure, and that remains historically estranged and estranging. The question, then, the challenge that the quality of the present offers to the cultural historian, is how to find the roots of this historical quality, how to historicise a temporal structure of feeling, whose qualities are manifest in the political consciousness of a weakened historicity, of a present that cannot quite engage with the past, and that melts into a future that we cannot quite frame or shape.

The response taken, by this *Cambridge Companion*, to this question, is to find the genesis of a contemporary British condition, as it is reflected in and in part produced by the development of contemporary British fiction, at the turn of the 1980s, that decade which ushered in the cultural formations which still dominate cultural and socio-economic life today – the decade in which a certain conception of our present can be seen to begin. Existing accounts of the modern and contemporary British novel tend to fall either side of this watershed moment. There are a number of prominent and influential accounts of the modern novel which take the Second World War or its immediate aftermath as the originary moment – such as Steven Connor's *The English Novel in History: 1950–1995*,[9] Dominic Head's *Cambridge Introduction to Modern British Fiction: 1950–2000*,[10] Alistair Davies and Alan Sinfield's *British Culture of the Postwar*,[11] or *The Oxford History of the Novel in English*, edited by myself and Bryan Cheyette.[12] Conversely, many accounts of the contemporary novel, perhaps taking their cue from Robert Eaglestone's suggestion that 'the contemporary' should be measured 'as the last ten years',[13] bring a much tighter focus to bear on the near present. There are a number of studies which take the turn of the millennium as the moment when a recognisable contemporaneity began, such as my own *Twenty-First Century Fiction*,[14] or Sian Adiseshiah and Rupert Hildyard's *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: What Happens Now*,[15] and Eaglestone's 2013 study *Contemporary Fiction* obeys his own rule by declaring the contemporary to consist of 'the last ten years or so'.[16] Both of these horizons are perfectly justifiable ways of framing the period, but this *Companion* takes 1980 as its point of departure, because this is the moment, we will argue here, that saw the emergence of the structure of feeling which

still shapes the angle at which we meet our present, and so telling a story of the development of the novel from 1980 to 2018 will best allow us to capture the terms in which modern and contemporary British fiction enters into a shaping dialogue with our living, changing present. It is 1980, David Harvey has recently argued, that marks what he calls a 'revolutionary turning point in the world's social and economic history'.[17] Where the period from the end of the Second World War to 1980 was characterised by a Keynesian economics, and by the development of the welfare state, several things come together, around 1980, to transform the socio-economic basis of the culture. The election of Margaret Thatcher in Britain in May 1979, along with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, changes to Chinese economic policy instigated by Deng Xiopenh in 1978 and changes to US monetarist policy instigated by Paul Volcker in the United States in 1979 came together, Harvey writes, to give birth to what we now call neoliberalism, at a moment which was to 'remake the world around us in a totally different image'.[18]

The emergence of a peculiarly disappearing present, the schismatic chronology outlined by Brown and by Heise, has its roots in this moment, as do so many of the features of contemporary British and Western culture that have been dominant in giving a shape to our time. Thatcher and Reagan, in their commitment to free trade as the basis of an emerging global marketplace, set in train the process by which local communities, embedded in their own discrete histories and practices, were dismantled, like cheap housing in the path of a rail route, in order to make way for the free movement of capital. As Fredric Jameson has brilliantly demonstrated, the mark of this transformation can be seen in the emergence of the shopping mall – the replacement of organic, slow-growing town centres with readymade, prefabricated market places, all of which are indistinguishable from one another.[19] Thatcherism, despite its nostalgic investment in Englishness, in the idea of a 'nation of shopkeepers', acted to weaken the concept of national sovereignty, as well as welfare-statism, in order to replace the model of parliamentary democracy endorsed by the nation-state with the model of global capital, overseen not by national governments, but by the international corporation. The major historical developments that have determined the passage of British culture over this time, from 1980 to 2018, have been shaped by this transformation. The miners' strike, from 1984 to 1985, and other industrial disputes such as the Wapping strike in 1986 were some of the more visible ways in which an older model of community struggled against the emerging logic of neoliberalism. In defeating the unions, the Thatcher government enabled what Harvey calls the 'process of neoliberalization'[20] that characterises contemporary Western modernity – that saw the mass privatisation of what Marx calls the 'means of production', the

marketisation of the university, the collapse of the British left into the neo-conservative 'New Labour', and with it the emergence of a new electronic public sphere (exemplified by corporations such as Amazon and Google). Thatcherism leads, in Britain, to Blairism, and then to the conditions which determine British culture in the twenty-first century – such as Britain's adherence to US foreign policy in Afghanistan and Iraq, as a side effect of its ideological investment in US global capital. The crisis which has gripped UK cultural politics in the latter half of the current decade – marked by the referendum decision to exit the European Union, by the murder of the Labour MP Jo Cox, or the powerful symbolism of the Grenfell fire (sharply anatomised in a recent radio essay by Will Self) – seems in one sense to mark the end of the Thatcher-Blair period. Brexit appears in part to be a reassertion of national sovereignty in which Parliament 'takes back control' from the corporation as represented by Brussels; the grim spectacle of Grenfell tower stands as a rebuke to contemporary architecture, a peeling back of the cheap cladding that disguised the unequal distribution of wealth which is the real driver of global capitalism. But, rather than demonstrating the collapse of neoliberalism, it is equally if not more likely that the end of the second decade of the current century is seeing simply the intensification of the contradictions that have fuelled neoliberalism since 1980 – the contradiction between on the one hand the smooth spectacle of frictionless free trade and the political and cultural homogenisation that it requires (captured in the bland ubiquity of the 'barcode facade' that veneered Grenfell tower), and on the other the reality of deprivation and disenfranchisement that underwrites it, that led to the deaths of Grenfell residents, that provoked the xenophobic violence perpetrated against Jo Cox, and that inspired 52 per cent of those who voted on 23 June 2016 to defy both the logic of the market place, and the principle of liberal hospitality, by turning their backs on their neighbouring countries. As Self says, of the barcode facades that wrap around the exteriors of London's tower blocks, 'I wonder what price would be displayed if you were somehow to scan them'.[21]

1980 stands as a moment at which the historical structure of the present adopted its recognisable form – the form which still shapes development of the culture as I write. And if the Thatcher-Reagan era saw the birth of the political present, then the turn of that decade also sees the emergence of a new era in the history of the British novel. It was the later 1970s and early 1980s that saw the arrival, on a British scene that was up until then rather resistant to both European and American literary influence, of cultural post-modernism. The texture and feel of the British novel, immersed as it was in the stylistic and political conditions of realism, was fundamentally shifted by the arrival of a series of major figures at this time, all of whom were

associated to some extent with the developing fiction of postmodernism. Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber* was published in 1979,[22] and was the first of her works to have a shaping influence on our understanding of the role of fiction in forging the basis upon which we establish gendered identity. Ian McEwan's work first started having an influence at this time also, with the publication of his early, macabre fictions such as *The Cement Garden*[23] and *The Comfort of Strangers*.[24] Martin Amis published *The Rachel Papers*[25] and *Dead Babies*[26] in the 1970s, but it was the publication of *Money* in 1984 that established his global reputation, and that also produced one of the most enduring literary depictions of the greedy superficiality of Thatcherism.[27] And perhaps most influentially of all, it was the publication, in 1981, of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* that suggested how fundamental a role fiction can have in determining the cultural forms – postmodern and postcolonial – in which we give expression to our history and to our identity.[28]

These four figures – Amis, McEwan, Carter and Rushdie – as well as a number of associated figures such as Julian Barnes, Kazuo Ishiguro, Milan Kundera and others, had a revolutionary impact on the British novel at the turn of the 1980s, just as David Harvey's neoliberal revolution began to 'remake the world around us in a totally different image'. As the Thatcher-Reagan period introduced a set of forces which dematerialised the culture, which loosened our grounding in material histories and environments in order to prepare the ground for the free movement of capital, so the British novel responded, to an extent, with its own act of dematerialisation, its own melting of all that is solid into air. The uncertain emergence of a postmodern influence in British fiction was in part a symptom of the very socio-economic forces that gave rise to neoliberalism – what drove Carter's revolutionary conception of gendered identity, what fuelled Rushdie's retelling of the history of India after the partition of 1947, was a sense that such historical and material forms were themselves modes of *fiction*, that the homelands we live in, to quote the title of Rushdie's 1992 collection of essays, are imaginary homelands.[29] But if British postmodernism (if it is valid to deploy such a term) came about in part as a reflection of Thatcherite economics, it is also the case that the novel at this time produced a set of resistances, a set of critiques of the culture which gave rise to it. Rushdie's development of a postcolonial form in which to capture the imaginary history of his homeland, in *Midnight's Children*, was an act of political resistance to the homogenising power of global capital, as, in a more ambivalent sense, was Amis's *Money*, and the development of the British novel through the 1980s and 1990s was characterised by this difficult sense that it was at once enabled by, and resistant to, the global forces which shaped late twentieth-century

Western culture. Many of the most influential developments in the British novel of the 1990s were bound up with forms of regionalism, nationalism and decolonisation, which were conceived, quite directly, as a practice of resistance to the development of neoliberal globalisation. The Scottish Renaissance, for example, driven by writers such as Janice Galloway, A. L. Kennedy, James Kelman, Irvine Welsh and others, gathered pace over the 1990s, and, in extremely influential novels such as *Trainspotting*[30] and *How Late It Was How Late*,[31] pitted the specificity of a Scottish dialect and history against the imperial influence of Englishness, or the Anglo-American culture most hilariously dissected in Kelman's 2004 novel *You Have to Be Careful in the Land of the Free*.[32] These novels were committed to the retrieval of historical difference and specificity, but at the same time they were influenced to varying degrees by the postmodern mode, which itself was so closely bound up with the Anglo-American culture that they most fiercely resisted. These contradictions shaped the difficult and ambivalent relationship between postmodernism and nationalism in the British novel of the late century; and then, with the turn of the century, and with the decline of postmodernism as a global cultural dominant, one can see the emergence of a new generation of British writers, whose sensibility shifted from the ironic scepticism associated with Rushdian or Amisian postmodernism to a new kind of political commitment (sometimes known as 'the new sincerity'), which was nevertheless associated with the cultural experiments of postmodernism. Zadie Smith's enormously influential 2000 novel *White Teeth*[33] might mark the height of a form of postmodern cosmopolitanism, but this novel also has resonances with a new group of post-millennial writers, such as David Mitchell, Ali Smith, Tom McCarthy and others, who were deploying the formal innovations of late century fiction to produce newly vigorous commitments to the politics of form. There is, for example, a significant shift from the zany cosmopolitanism of *White Teeth* to the political seriousness of Zadie Smith's 2013 novel *NW*,[34] and works such as McCarthy's *Remainder*,[35] Gautam Malkani's *Londonstani*[36] and Ali Smith's *The Accidental*,[37] *Autumn*[38] and *Winter*,[39] however different in temperament and tone, all work through the production of new forms with which to critique the neoliberal culture which emerged in 1980, and which has determined the terms in which the British novel has given an expression to our present, the 'periodicity of this particular past-present-future'.

There is a close accord, then, between the development of a neoliberal globalisation, the rise and fall of a postmodern cultural dominant, and the history of the British novel in the period from 1980 to the present. The chapters of this *Companion* set out to trace this relationship, and to offer as full as possible an account of the ways in which the novel of the

period engages with its political, cultural and literary contexts. In order to produce this account, what follows is broken into four parts.

Part I, 'Overview', breaks the period into three sub-periods – the 1980s, the 1990s and the literature of the new millennium. Bridget Chalk's chapter on the 1980s offers an account of the most significant figures and works of the 1980s – Amis, Carter, Rushdie and McEwan, as well as Barnes, Amitav Ghosh, Graham Swift, Jeannette Winterson, Pat Barker, Kazuo Ishiguro and writers such as Margaret Drabble and V. S. Naipaul, who wrote important works in the 1980s – to demonstrate the interweaving of the influence of Thatcherism, and the emergence of a postmodern strain in the British novel. Pieter Vermeulen offers a close and nuanced account of the passage, in the 1990s, from Thatcher, to Major, to Blair, to trace the difficult and uncertain ways in which the novel of the 1990s (in works by Caryl Phillips, Hanif Kureishi, A. L. Kennedy, James Kelman, Michael Ondaatje, Jeanette Winterson and others) captured a new kind of cosmopolitan excitement (bound up with 'Cool Britannia'), while also maintaining forms of resistance to or ambivalence about the postmodernism that influenced it. Leigh Wilson's chapter then covers the fiction of the two decades of the current century, from Zadie Smith to David Mitchell to Tom McCarthy to Nicola Barker, finishing with a reading of Paul Kingsnorth's novel *The Wake*[40] as a reflection on climate change. Deploying a term from Benedict Anderson – the 'meanwhile' of the novel – Wilson argues that the fiction of the twenty-first century crafts a new kind of temporality which gestures towards an emergent cultural imaginary – an imagined community, that might come to thought after the decline of postmodernism, but that remains for us difficult to conceive or codify.

This first part lays out the broad trajectory of the novel in the period; subsequent parts then offer a range of critical frames through which to view that trajectory. Part II, 'New Formations', focuses on some of the cultural, material and aesthetic formations that have produced and have been produced by the novel of the period. Gabriel Griffin's chapter on the 'limits of the human' reads the novel from 1980 to 2018 as it has been involved with the transformation of the human as a result of the development in the period of new forms of biotechnology. Exploring the inventive engagement with new biopolitical formations in J. G. Ballard, Tom McCarthy, Deborah Levy, Kazuo Ishiguro, Emma Rendel and Rob Davis, Griffin suggests the novel of the period offers a means of critically picturing forms of material and technologised life, after the paradigms that situated us with the realms of the human have lapsed. Griffin explores the relation between new biotechnological forms and new literary forms; Kevin Brazil's chapter offers a close history of the shifting ways in which literary form itself has produced pictures

of reality. Beginning with the development of metafictional formal strategies in the 1980s, used to explore the relationship between fiction and history in writers such as Rushdie, Caryl Phillips, Timothy Mo, Graham Swift, Peter Ackroyd, Pat Barker and A. S. Byatt, Brazil traces the relationship between form and postmodernism over the course of the period. There is a shift, he argues, around the turn of the century, when the exhaustion of a postmodern strand of metafiction led to a rethinking of the relationship between form and the real – exemplified on the one hand by the new relationships between literature and science in the work of McEwan and Ishiguro, and on the other by inventive forms of realism developed by Zadie Smith and Tom McCarthy. Brazil and Griffin, then, in different ways, explore the relationship between cultural formations and literary formations; Caroline Wintersgill closes Part II by attending to the development of new forms that shape the production of the book as a material commodity – one of the shifts that has had a foundational effect on the ways that novels are produced and consumed. Combining an empirical history of the book in the period with a theoretical account of its contribution to the process of imagining our environments, Wintersgill traces five processes that have determined the transformations in the publishing industry from 1980 to 2018 – professionalization, commodification, globalisation, democratisation and digitisation.

Part III turns to 'genres and movements', to offer a critical account of the ways that shifts in our understanding of style, genre and periodicity have been reflected in the modern and contemporary novel. Martin Eve's chapter gives explicit theoretical attention to the question that runs through the *Companion* as a whole – that is, to the ways in which the period is shaped by the legacies of modernism, the powerful influence of postmodernism and the entry, in recent years, into a period that is variously defined as 'after' postmodernism. Caroline Edwards offers an analysis of the ways in which the balance between the generic and the experimental shifts in the fiction of the period. In relatively new genres such as steampunk and the 'new weird', as well as in more traditional genres such as horror, the crime thriller, and utopian and dystopian fiction, Edwards argues that the novel does not remain bound by genre conventions, but in fact offers a powerful and restless critique of them. As the period sees deep transformations in the way that we conceive of the boundaries that shape political identity as well as discursive forms, it is in the novel's critical engagement with the unstable genres that frame it that we see it at its most contemporary. Jerome de Groot's discussion of the historical novel, the genre in the period that has perhaps been the most productive of new aesthetic possibilities, extends Edwards's discussion of the relationship between the generic and the experimental. Offering a critical picture of the historical novel from Angela Carter's *Nights at the Circus*[41] to

Zadie Smith's *Swing Time*,[42] de Groot suggests that, while the historical novel has a generic tie to realism, this does not mean that it is trapped within temporal or formal conventions; on the contrary, it is the historical novel, he argues, that has allowed us the most inventive access to the ways in which temporalities, and our very access to the real, have been refashioned in the period. Part III closes with Petra Rau's analysis of the influence that the televisual and the cinematic has had on the novel of the period. In a chapter that resonates richly with Edwards and with de Groot, Rau argues that cinematic adaptations of the novel in the period are not simply aesthetically neutral or conservative, as has often been suggested; rather, Rau argues, the process of cinematic adaptation has given a new energy to our conception of the world-making powers of fiction, particularly as it relates to the generic parameters of the historical novel.

The final part, 'Contexts', zooms out to characterise some of the broader forces operating on the fictional imagination of the period. Ben Masters's chapter, 'The Mid Atlantics', offers an account of the pervasive influence of American culture on British culture, pitched at the level of style. Reading the influence of the major male American writers of the later twentieth century – John Updike, Normal Mailer, Philip Roth – on the British novel, and particularly on Martin Amis, Julian Barnes and Ian McEwan, Masters shows how the ethical, political and aesthetic currents that run through the British fictional imagination are directed by a difficult relationship with the American novelistic voice. Rebecca Pohl's chapter reads the relationship between fiction and forms of sexual dissidence and transgression, as it develops from Doris Lessing, Angela Carter, Alan Hollinghurst and Jeanette Winterson to Sarah Hall, Ali Smith and Joanna Walsh. The advances made in LGBT rights in the period might suggest that the battle for sexual equality and recognition has largely been won, and the adoption of writers such as Carter and Winterson in school syllabi might suggest that these works have lost some of their countercultural force; but Pohl demonstrates that the transgressive urge in this strain of British fiction remains a powerful means of critiquing all forms of cultural normativity, as the struggle for new ways of narrating identities continues in our own embattled present. The last two chapters of Part IV turn to forces that are actively shaping our own moment, at the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century. Stephen Morton offers an account of the 'Rushdie affair', to examine the tensions in British culture between cultural relativism and the right to free speech, that have worked through Rushdie's writing, from *Satanic Verses*[43] to *Joseph Anton*.[44] And this part closes with Patrick Deer's wide-ranging reflection on the purchase of cosmopolitanism in the fiction of the period. One of the contradictions of