The Cambridge Introduction to
Postmodern Fiction

Postmodern fiction presents its readers with a challenge: instead of enjoying it passively, they have to work to understand it, to question their own responses, and to examine their views about what fiction is. Yet accepting this challenge is what makes postmodern writing so pleasurable to read and rewarding to study.

Unlike most introductions to postmodernism and fiction, this book places the emphasis on literature rather than theory. It introduces the most prominent British and American novelists associated with postmodernism, from the 'pioneers', Beckett, Borges and Burroughs, to important post-war writers such as Pynchon, Carter, Atwood, Morrison, Gibson, Auster, DeLillo, and Ellis. Designed for students and clearly written, this *Introduction* explains the preoccupations, styles and techniques that unite postmodern authors.

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For Karen, Joe and Jamie

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Preface: reading postmodern fiction

> The commonest complaint about the narratives of Beckett or Burroughs is that they are hard to read, they are 'boring'. But the charge of boredom is really hypocritical. There is, in a sense, no such thing as boredom. Boredom is only another name for a certain species of frustration. And the new languages which the interesting art of our time speaks are frustrating to the sensibilities of most educated people.
>
> Susan Sontag, 'One Culture and the New Sensibility' (1965)

> Sometimes I suspect that good readers are even blacker and rarer swans than good writers. . . . Reading, obviously, is an activity which comes after that of writing; it is more modest, more unobtrusive, more intellectual.
>
> Jorge Luis Borges, Preface to *A Universal History of Infamy* (1935) (trans. Norman Thomas di Giovanni, 1972)

In an essay about postmodern fiction a student once declared that Beckett's writing 'doesn't go down easily'. As I was the marker, I had to point out that this phrase was not exactly appropriate academic discourse. But I could also see her point. If reading Jane Austen is like having a nice Sunday lunch, and *The Da Vinci Code* is the equivalent of a McDonald's, then reading Beckett is, for some, like being asked to complete the 'Bushtucker Trial' in the TV show *I'm A Celebrity . . . Get Me Out Of Here*.

Besides the parallel between literature and food, her statement implied a definition of fiction. A novel should be something accessible, easy to read. Literature should be *digestible*. But why is this? Why shouldn't literature be a *challenge* to the reader? Who said reading a novel has to be easy? After all, we accept more readily the fact that modern art, the kind we are confronted with in the Tate Modern or the Turner Prize, does not communicate straightforwardly, that we have to work to interpret it. Even poetry, part of the staple diet on university literature courses, is something we accept from the outset is not going to give its meaning over to us without a struggle.

If asked why they read, most people (including myself) would say that they read fiction for pleasure. It is hard, though, to determine exactly what the pleasure of reading a novel or a short story is. It may be the pleasure of escapism, of experiencing what it would be like to be another person, indulging one's fantasy-life, or exercizing the intellect. If asked why they choose to study literature at university, most students reply that it is because they enjoy reading fiction. (For the kind of reasons just mentioned.) But very quickly they realize that 'reading' literature at university is not simply about enjoying reading. In fact, for some students, it turns out to be the exact opposite. Many students feel that the process of studying literature empties reading of the enjoyment that caused them to study literature in the first place. Why do we have to ask so many questions about a book? Can't we just accept that an author wrote something because he or she felt like it, or wanted to make money?

Postmodern fiction presents a challenge to the reader. This is true even though most of it is actually not as hard to comprehend as Beckett, and many of the authors labelled as postmodern (and examined in this book) are among the most popular, acclaimed, and, I think, enjoyable, writers in contemporary fiction: Thomas Pynchon, Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood, Toni Morrison, William Gibson, Paul Auster, Don DeLillo, Bret Easton Ellis.

But postmodern writing challenges us because it requires its reader to be an active co-creator of meaning rather than a passive consumer. More than this, it challenges its readers to interrogate the commonsense and commonplace assumptions about literature which prevail in our culture. Though it is a product of the latter half of the twentieth century, studying postmodern fiction can deepen our knowledge about literature on a wider scale. To read postmodern fiction is to be invited to ask: what *is* fiction? What does reading it involve? Why do we read? Why, for that matter, do novelists write? Why do they create innovative, experimental forms rather than just stick to traditional ones?

Postmodernisms

This book is an introduction to postmodern fiction, offering accounts of its various 'waves' in a period stretching mainly from the 1950s to the 1990s and providing in-depth readings of texts which have been consistently associated with postmodernism by literary critics and theorists.

Though the term 'postmodern' is still an important one in a number of academic disciplines and remains essential in the literary-studies lexicon, the topic of postmodernism is no longer hotly debated in academic journals and research monographs. Linda Hutcheon, one of the major theorists of postmodern

fiction, has suggested that postmodernism is now, in the twenty-first century, 'a thing of the past' because it has become 'fully institutionalized, it has its canonized texts, its anthologies, primers and readers, its dictionaries and its histories' (Hutcheon, 2002, 165).

This is not quite true, since the conditions of 'postmodernity' (as detailed in the Introduction) still seem to shape the contemporary world, and much aesthetic and cultural production (novels, film, TV, etc.) still clearly deploys strategies and generates effects which have been defined as postmodern. And while it is no longer the subject of cutting-edge academic debate, postmodernism is now more than ever a fixture on literature courses in universities around the world, and studying it remains one of the most valuable ways of making sense of contemporary writing.

But there is an advantage to thinking of postmodern fiction as something effectively in the past, like modernism, something we can treat as a more or less 'complete' historical movement with its own set of core texts (though this 'teleological' idea is entirely against the spirit of postmodernism). Now, in other words, a welcome sense of retrospectivity is possible in relation to the postmodernism debate.

This book does not seek to produce an exhaustive, exact chronological survey, taking in every significant writer who has been labelled 'postmodern', but tries to isolate and examine the main varieties of postmodern fiction. My strategy has been to divide postmodern fiction into groups of authors who deal with similar questions and favour similar formal techniques. Depending upon the particular theme, some chapters consider specific authors and offer readings of one or two or their key works, while others focus on specific representative texts. The order in which the book considers these varieties of fiction preserves a loose sense of chronology, though the book is not intended as a literary history.

The book concentrates mainly on Anglo-American fiction. This means that some of the non-English-speaking writers who have been convincingly co-opted into the postmodern 'canon' over the years, such as Alain Robbe-Grillet, Carlos Fuentes, Italo Calvino and Gabriel Garcia Marquez, are largely absent from the discussion. This is partly due to spatial constraints, but it is also because postmodernism has always chiefly been a phenomenon in theory and criticism produced in England and America and on university literature courses taught in these countries.

The book, then, attempts to determine what postmodern fiction is – or *was* – by looking back at key examples. Its aim is not to provide a final definition of an entity named 'the postmodern novel'. This book treats 'postmodern fiction' as a category which contains a number of different kinds of postmodern fiction,

a range of *postmodernisms*, in fact, rather than alternative ways of expressing a single, unified postmodernism.

Postmodern fiction is far too diverse in style to be a genre. Nor is it a historical label, like 'Victorian fiction', as to speak of the late twentieth century as the postmodern 'period' would be to misrepresent a great many contemporary writers whose work cannot usefully be related to postmodernism. I would prefer to think of postmodern fiction as a particular 'aesthetic' – a sensibility, a set of principles, or a value-system which unites specific currents in the writing of the latter half of the twentieth century.

To explain this, it is useful to follow the example of Brian McHale (another major theorist of the postmodern novel) in his approach to defining postmodern fiction, and use the Russian Formalist theorist Roman Jakobson's concept of 'the dominant': 'the focusing component of a work of art' which 'rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components [and] guarantees the "integrity" of the structure' and which shifts over literary history (McHale 1987, 6).

Identifying postmodern texts is a matter of determining which elements within them are especially dominant, in this sense. In my view, the most important features found in postmodern texts are:

(1) a self-reflexive acknowledgement of a text's own status as constructed, aesthetic artefact
(2) an implicit (or sometimes explicit) critique of realist approaches both to narrative and to representing a fictional 'world'
(3) a tendency to draw the reader's attention to his or her own process of interpretation as s/he reads the text

The reason why the concept of the dominant is useful is that none of these features are exclusive to postmodern fiction. Self-reflexivity is common in the eighteenth-century novel, modernist fiction rejects nineteenth-century realist techniques, and a great many novels from all periods invite the reader to interrogate the reading process. The question is really one of degree. It is also important to consider how these dominant features correspond to the specific historical context of postmodernism – in other words, how certain social and cultural factors have *caused* them to be more dominant than they are in, say, modernism.

I should point out that this book contains less about modernism than perhaps one would expect from an introduction to postmodern fiction. This is not to deny that postmodernism – as its name clearly indicates – bears a close relationship to modernism. Many of the most important definitions of postmodernism, such as those by McHale and Hutcheon, Jameson, Jencks,

and Eco, are founded upon a comparison with modernist values and aesthetic techniques. In fact, the precepts of modernism will figure in the Introduction and in Chapters 1 and 2. However, my view is that the starting-point for understanding postmodern fiction is to compare it chiefly to realism – or at least the kind of 'ideal', 'straw-target' version of the nineteenth-century realist novel, which may not always resemble more complex actual examples of literary realism but nevertheless has figured as an antagonistic force in the development of postmodern writing.

Distinguishing between modernism and postmodernism is again a question of the postmodern 'dominant'. Patricia Waugh has argued that where modernism is preoccupied by *consciousness*, showing how the workings of the mind reveal individuals to be much less stable and unified than realist psychology would have us believe, postmodernism is much more interested in *fictionality* (Waugh, 1984, 14). Fictionality refers to the condition of being fictional, that is to say, the condition of being constructed, narrated, mediated. Fiction is always all of these things, which means that the represented world is always framed, presented to us from the perspective of another. In particular, fictionality involves a concern with the relationship between the language and represented world of fiction with the real world outside. This is what especially interests postmodern writers (though an interest is visible in some modernist texts too) and the reason why they position their writing against realism rather than modernism is because, in realism, the question of fictionality is generally ignored or suppressed.

To try and isolate what is effectively a 'canon' of postmodern fiction might naturally lead to disagreement about which authors or texts have or have not been included. Yet my method is more conservative than it might seem: I have not tried to incorporate any novelists or texts into the postmodern tradition who have not seriously been identified as postmodern already by theorists and critics over the last few decades. To try to keep the discussion accessible I have offered my own readings of these writers and texts, supported by relevant theory and criticism, but without being overloaded by references to the readings of others.

This brings us back to the question of reading. I hope my analyses will be useful to you in *your* reading of the postmodern fiction discussed in this book. I believe the twenty-four novelists it examines are not only twenty-four of the most important postmodern writers but twenty-four of the most remarkable novelists in twentieth-century writing as a whole. I hope this book will enhance your enjoyment of them, making their writing go down a little bit more easily.