1 Reading contemporary fiction

- Can the novel still be 'novel'?
- Book or Internet?
- Is there a modern literary canon?
- Is the novel in Britain obsessed with the historical past?
- How does the novel reflect its society?

Is the novel 'novel'?

The novel is the youngest literary **genre**: poetry and drama both have ancient roots in pre-Christian societies, evolving throughout the history of Western Europe. In England, the novel is usually dated from the beginning of the 18th century with the writing of Daniel Defoe (1660–1731), including *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Moll Flanders* (1722). Many literary historians would regard the Victorian age as belonging pre-eminently to the novel, the Brontës, Dickens and George Eliot being undoubtedly the literary giants of their age. Today, equally, the novel as a form clearly dominates the publishing scene and, despite rival media attractions, remains popular. Has the novel, then, re-invented itself in order to survive, or does it retain traditional methods and styles?

Some of Britain's principal contemporary writers make great claims for the power of the novel. In the following comment, Salman Rushdie refers to the novel's capacity to be experimental in form, as well as challenging in its vision:

> I do not believe that novels are trivial matters. The ones I care most about are those which attempt radical reformulations of language, form and ideas, those that attempt to do what the word *novel* seems to insist upon: to see the world anew.

To Rushdie, the novel is an imaginative space offering unlimited freedom. Contemporary novels can range from realistic accounts of the First World War, based on authentic historical sources, to fantastical evocations of non-existent worlds in unknown galaxies. Stylistically, novels can be written in beautifully crafted language, with eloquent sentences that seem close to the effects of poetry. Or the language can be direct, brutal to a point that some readers will find offensive. In terms of form, novelists can choose to structure their material sequentially, with events unfolding in a logical order. Equally, form can be fragmented and apparently incoherent to suit particular **narrative** purposes.

For many writers, the crucial experience of the novel is that of the individual reader responding to the fictional world created. To the novelist Graham Swift

> [The] whole point of fiction … is to get away from yourself into experiences of other people, into different worlds, into different lives … It's all about imagining what it's like to be somebody else. And that is, after all, one of the most important tasks of life. One of the things the novel can do, is to stimulate that process.

Swift is arguing here that the novel has the ability to enlarge private, imaginative experience; other writers would argue that the novel plays its part within society, by shaping or challenging readers' perceptions. It is a long time since D.H. Lawrence (1885–1930) proposed the novel as 'the book of life', urging his readers to 'learn from the novel … see wherein you are [alive]', but it remains true that the moral concerns within certain novels are regarded as important and receive serious discussion. So the novel is still seen as offering unique fictional adventure or provocative ethical debate. The possibilities of the genre are not yet exhausted. The Czech novelist Milan Kundera has argued in his recent work *The Art of the Novel* that the novel has barely begun to explore its unlimited opportunities for narrative experimentation, particularly with concepts of thought, time, dream and mental play. But the vitality of the contemporary novel should not be taken for granted.

▶ Look at the reviews of Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (pages 112–114) and discuss ways in which a novel might spark, or make a contribution to, ethical debate.

The death of the novel?

In 1980 the literary journal *Granta* debated the death of the novel in English, and the artistic and intellectual timidity of English writers. Citing major 20th-century critics, *Granta*'s editor Bill Buford accused the English novel of having a 'dreadful droning sameness', and being an essentially middle-class (whining) monologue, no more than 'a longish piece of writing with something wrong with it'. Worse, he argued, publishing was driven by consumer choice:

> Of course, it is a commonplace that what is published in the end is decided by the Great British Public. A mythic beast of extraordinary proportions – with puppy white arms, sustained by McVities chocolate biscuits and books about the Queen Mother.

In short, Buford's perception was that 'the novel is no longer novel' – a phrase coined by the critic Bernard Bergonzi in his survey of the genre, *The Situation of the Novel* (1970). As a form, the novel 'no longer possesses the essential "novelty" that traditionally characterised it'. During the post-war period, a number of writers tolled the funeral bell for fictional writing. The American critic Leslie Fieldler

identified and lamented, in *Waiting for the End* (1965), a cultural moment which he termed 'the nausea of the end'. In *Granta*, Buford's strongest condemnation was for lack of experimentation with the form of the novel: too many fictions of the second half of the 20th century, he argued, seemed to be written in straightforward linear form. Texts failed to challenge readers, unwilling to disturb the artifice of 'character' and illusion of narrative certainty.

Towards the end of the 20th century, this critical consensus, that the novel has had its day, began to shift. The academic and critic Chris Bigsby, offering an analysis of the 'uneasy middle-ground' of British fiction, began to question the assumption that the novel is a 'cosily provincial, deeply conservative, anti-experimental enterprise, resistant to innovation, rooted in mimesis, dedicated to the preservation of a [19th century] tradition of realism'. He conceded the centrality of narrative and survival of character, but also identified an awareness of what he identified as 'textual insecurities':

> … the suspect nature of language, the manipulative power of art, the fragility of character, the dubious nature of historicism, the relativity of value and perception, and the collapse of the absolute.
>
> (*Granta*, 1980)

How, then, has the contemporary novel survived a demoralising decline into torpor and stagnation?

Surveying these pessimistic judgements from the perspective of the 21st century is an intriguing business. There would seem to be few voices now to endorse such funereal pronouncements. In *How to Read a Novel* (2006), John Sutherland's opening chapter is entitled 'So many novels, so little time'. He observes that Samuel Johnson, in the 18th century – the period in which the novel as we understand it evolved – might conceivably expect to read all the major publications of his day. Now, more novels are published every week than Johnson would have encountered in a decade. According to the consumer research agency, BML, women bought 188 million fictional works in the UK in 2006 (8% more than in 2005), while men purchased 128 million. Setting aside any gender question implied here, or what kinds of fiction are included in these numbers, these figures show the immense popularity of the genre.

It would seem that, just as the death-throes of the novel are being announced, the genre is entering a vibrant period of revitalisation. Why this should have occurred towards the end of the 20th century is perhaps a simple question, but one which eludes simple answers. Any study of the modern novel must acknowledge at an early stage that it is an endlessly controversial area, and there is little settled consensus of opinion. Dominic Head in his conclusion to the *Cambridge History of Modern British Fiction* (2002) asserts that:

> [The] novel of post-war history and society in Britain has been phenomenally rich and inventive, a genre in a state of creative expansion, and as far removed from terminal decline as it is possible to imagine.

Glittering prizes

So, although the 'death of the novel' has been a reiterated theme of the second half of the 20th century, the vast commercial success of the novel would seem to be unarguable. There is widespread familiarity with the Man Booker Prize, the Costa Book Awards (previously the Whitbread), and the Orange and James Tait Black Fiction Prizes, to name a few of the major English awards, and with the American Pulitzer and National Book Award. The Pulitzer and the Nobel Prize are possibly the high points of international success. The publication of a new novel is now an event of the media and the market place; it is no longer solely the business of academe or a select band of critics. David Lodge, in *The Practice of Writing* (1996), looks across twenty years of creative writing courses and observes how recent is the concept of the literary bestseller – he identifies this as a commercial event of the 1980s. In its earliest years (the late 1960s) the Booker Prize had no real impact on sales, but it subsequently developed the power to launch a bestseller. Now, it might be questioned whether literary texts have been selected for contemporary readers by the marketing body who advise major bookshops which titles to display at the entrance to their shops. Some will argue that this means an inevitable 'dumbing down' of material, and that a small clique of authors reappear on these annual shortlists and their current writing dominates publishing lists. A worst-case argument might go so far as to propose that subject matter and style are dictated by the prize mentality (or by TV chat-show presenters), with a certain degree of experimentation, but not too much. The author Julian Barnes has famously rejected the Booker Prize as 'Posh bingo'. More positively, it could be proposed that there is currently a renaissance of interest in fiction: book groups thrive and, undoubtedly, novels do sell. Books, then, occupy a public dimension: they are reviewed, discussed on TV and are available from supermarkets – they are not an elitist product reserved for a minority. Robert McCrum, the literary editor of the *Observer*, argued recently that the prize world does have its importance in recognising important contemporary writing:

> Publishing, which is just another mirror to our society, cannot escape the zeitgeist. Prizes and their attendant hullabaloo satisfy contemporary narcissism and global consumerism in any number of ways. I would argue that they also play an indispensable role in identifying new writing of consequence.
>
> (*The Observer*, 6 May 2007)

Hermione Lee, as chair of the Man Booker Prize judges in 2007, commented that the novel's survival and significance were not in question:

> To read over a hundred novels … was to step into a fabulous trove of linguistic inventiveness, passion, originality, and energy …

As McCrum argues in his defence of prizes, the 'final and supreme act of judgement' is one that is immune to media hype or the world of literary lunches: 'it's called reading alone for oneself'.

Book vs Internet

Perhaps the most compelling significance of the popularity of modern writing is the fact that the book, in its conventional form, has survived virtually unchanged as an object since the earliest days of Caxton's printing press. Why? This is an age of unimaginable technological change. John Sutherland, like Robert McCrum, suggests that books survive because reading is, ultimately, not a public matter but an essentially solitary act. Readers do not, apparently, prefer to access books from Google, or download them onto an iPod. Sutherland discusses the unchanging nature of the form, the **codex**, in the chapter 'Every other thing has changed, why hasn't the book changed?'

> What are the features of the codex which have enabled it to survive so long? It is, as I have previously said, a lean-back, not a lean-forward apparatus – and human beings like nothing more than to relax while they read, or spectate … the codex is wonderfully portable … More significant is the fact that reading, done well, is … an act of self-definition. Put another way it is a solitary vice. One reads, as one dreams … alone.
>
> (*How to Read a Novel: a User's Guide*, 2006)

The American novelist Jane Smiley has also addressed this question of the book as physical object, arguing that books offer delight – and much more:

> An inexpensive book from a reputable publisher is a small, rectangular, boxlike object a few inches long, a few inches wide, and an inch or so thick. It is easy to stack and store, easy to buy, keep, give away, or throw away. As an object, it is user-friendly and routine, a mature technological form, hard to improve upon and easy to like. Many people … feel better at the mere sight of a book.
> … The often beautiful cover of a book opens like the lid of a box, but it reveals no objects, rather symbols inscribed on paper. This is simple and elegant, too. The leaves of paper pressed together are reserved and efficient as well as cool and dry. They protect each other from damage. They take up little space. Spread open, they offer some

> information, but they don't offer too much, and they don't force it upon [anyone]. They invite perusal. Underneath the open leaves, on either side, are hidden ones that have been read, or remain to be read. The reader may or may not experience them … Only while the reader is reading does it become a novel.
>
> (*13 Ways of Looking at the Novel*, 2005)

Smiley describes her rapturous pleasure in books: she goes on to claim that her sense of physiological well-being noticeably improves as she looks at the books that have delighted her over years of reading, 'I smile. This row of books elevates my mood.'

Her emphasis is on a world of private pleasure – what some critics have called *jouissance*. But she is also at pains to remind her readers that the novel can have quite different, urgent and profound, functions:

> Writing powerfully embodies and develops the will to survive. The Czech novelist Arnošt Lustig was eighteen and had lived in three concentration camps when he escaped from a train heading to Dachau and joined the Czech resistance. His many novels about the Holocaust assert not only his characters' will to survive, but also his own.

The need to write, and the importance of fiction, survives individual and collective horror; Smiley draws attention to the significance of the novel as much-loved object and its value as articulating individual trauma.

The world of Internet fiction, or hyperfiction, proposes a fictional universe in which there is no linear narrative, and no single authorial voice: rather there is a potentially unlimited world of myriad possibilities whereby any 'author' can enter or leave the text at will, rejecting any conventional notion of causality. There can be no eventual outcome; all is provisional, revisable, open-ended. The American critic and novelist Susan Sontag has argued that this negates precisely what we desire in narrative:

> A great writer of fiction both *creates* – through acts of imagination, through language that feels inevitable, through vivid forms – a new world, a world that is unique, individual … Story – the idea that events happen in a specific causal order – is both the way we see the world and what interests us most about it. People who read for nothing else will read for plot.
>
> (quoted in the *Guardian*, March 2007)

- How far do you feel that the book will survive developments in technology?
- Would you want to read and contribute to narrative fiction online? How does this differ from conventional reading experience?

Is there a modern literary canon?

The literary canon is generally held to be that body of texts which holds undisputed sway in the minds of the majority of critics and educationalists: a core of great works which constitute a literary heritage. The narrowest definition of the fictional canon must be that of the critic F.R. Leavis whose *Great Tradition* (1948) consisted of just some of the novels written by four writers – Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad. Since the 1970s, the notion of the 'western canon' has been under attack: too white, too male, too reflective of an elitist cultural world. Feminist critics started to construct alternative canons as a way of drawing attention to women's writing which had been neglected or undiscovered. Today the range of literature studied at both A level and for a degree in English Literature has widened considerably, while the question of the canon will continue to be debated. To discuss the canon, or the texts selected for A-level study, is to become immediately aware that English Literature is a controversial subject.

If you choose to study **gothic** writing at A level or at university, you will encounter, as a matter of course, *Frankenstein*, *Dracula*, *Jekyll and Hyde* and, among modern writers, perhaps Angela Carter, Emma Tennant or Patrick McCabe. In other words, the contemporary contribution to the genre is not yet fixed in stone in the way that Mary Shelley or Ann Radcliffe must be. The modern canon is not yet established. Choose to study 'The Victorian Novel' and you would expect to grapple with hefty amounts of Dickens, George Eliot and the Brontës. Students are, of course, encouraged to read outside the canonical texts, but Dickens and Eliot still dominate the centre stage of 'The Victorians'.

Specifying or recommending contemporary texts for academic study is not a simple business: it would be naive to assume that choices are a straightforward matter. Consider two recent winners of the Booker Prize: James Kelman's *How Late It Was, How Late* (1994) and Allan Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty* (2004). At the opening of the former, the **protagonist**, Sammy, wakes in a park from a drunken stupor, registers that his shoes have been stolen and almost immediately provokes a fight. When he next comes to consciousness, he is in a police cell and it is gradually dawning on him that he is now blind:

> He was definitely blind but. Fucking weird. Wild. It didnay feel like a nightmare either, that's the funny thing. Even psychologically. In fact it felt okay, an initial wee flurry of excitement but no what ye would call panic-stations. Like it was just a new predicament. Christ it was even making him smile, shaking his head at the very idea, imagining himself telling people; making Helen laugh; she would be as annoyed as fuck but she would still find it funny, eventually, once they had made it up, the stupit fucking row they had had, total misunderstanding man but it was fine now, it would be fine once she saw him.

> Now he was chuckling away to himself. How the hell was it happening to him! It's no as if he was ear-marked for glory!
>
> Even in practical terms, once the nonsense passed, he started thinking about it; this was a new stage in life, a development. A new epoch!

The narrative is conveyed through Sammy's Glaswegian interior monologue or through direct speech. In the novel the direct speech is famously known for its repeated use of 'swear-words' and it has been observed that response to the novel became dominated by this: reviewers 'unable accurately to recount the plot of the novel could tell you precisely how many times the [word] "fuck" … appear in its pages'. Simon Jenkins in *The Times* described the author, rather than the protagonist, as 'an illiterate savage'. Geoff Gilbert, analysing Kelman's work in Rod Mengham's *An Introduction to Contemporary Fiction* (1999), argues that swearing operates on three levels in the text: 'a realist swearing, operating between characters in the novel; the way that swear words regulate a heightened intensity at certain moments of the prose … and the way that swearing informs a reductive but uneasy characterisation of the novel in debates that surrounded the Booker Prize'. Kelman's text was judged by some readers to be unacceptable because of its language. The subject matter of the novel or the character of the protagonist seemed irrelevant to the debate.

Irvine Welsh in *Trainspotting* (1993) writes with splenetic rage, his style a furious explosion of hatred and defiance. Here too, the reprinted text challenges the potential reader (or purchaser) to consider the book as 'a seminal novel that changed the face of British fiction' (Vintage Books, 2004). So, have we attained a liberal consensus where anything can be published and we do not recoil from what was once unprintable? John Mullan, discussing Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003), refers to complaints that the use of swearing is unsuited to 'young readers' – one reader 'even recruited their MP to complain' (*How Novels Work,* 2006). Clearly, language remains a problematic area.

In Hollinghurst's novel, the 'line of beauty' of the title refers in part to the proposed title for an artistic magazine – '*Ogee'* – where it denotes a curved shape in architecture. It is also the line of cocaine, which fuels the social lives of the febrile personalities of the text. Set in the aggressive world of 1980s Thatcherism, the protagonist here is an Oxford graduate, living amongst the moneyed and privileged world of Notting Hill, and pursuing his first gay love affairs against a background of right-wing homophobia and the earliest awareness of AIDS. The text is as sexually explicit as Kelman's is colloquial:

> … a line wasn't feasibly resisted. He loved the etiquette of the thing, the chopping with a credit card, the passing of the tightly rolled note,

> the procedure courteous and dry, 'all done with money', as Wani said – it was part of the larger beguilement, and once it had begun it squeezed him with its charm and promise. Being careful not to nudge him as he worked, he hugged Wani lightly from behind and slid a hand into his left trouser pocket.

One of the invigorating aspects of studying contemporary fiction is precisely the lack of canonicity. The arbitrariness of textual choice has always existed: there are authors and texts that transcend the fashion of the moment and there are writers whose fame simply evaporates. In the past, A-level texts have included such titles as *The Knight of the Burning Pestle*, *Eothen*, *Sohrab and Rustum* – but few students have heard of them today. Whether the choices of 2008 will still be read in ten, twenty or fifty years, we cannot know. In a world of constantly changing literary trends, we select what we deem worthwhile – now.

The history of the novel is one which reminds us that there are texts which continue to be relished and enjoyed across different periods, and there are texts which have been banned or denounced at different times. Such texts we now read as a matter of course, without necessarily recoiling at the content but curious about the cultural world which has sought to deny them to readers.

▶ Would you exclude certain texts from academic study? What is your own view of an author's use of controversial language?

Contemporary novel, contemporary life?

> … the novelist [is] a person who performs a function essential to the soul of every community: the secret conscience of the tribe.
>
> (Colm Tóibín and Carmen Callil *The Modern Library: the 200 Best Novels in English Since 1950*, 1999)

> … 'the everyday' [is] not merely ennui, pointlessness, repetition, triviality; it is beauty as well …
>
> (Milan Kundera *The Curtain*, 2007)

Is the principal duty of contemporary writing to portray the society we inhabit? Do novelists seek to explore the complexities of modern society? To what extent does the contemporary novelist assume the prophetic role of Charles Dickens and become a social commentator?

When a writer – be it Dickens or McEwan – chooses to locate his writing within the empirical, urban world, he does so for a purpose. He is offering his readers a recognisable portrait of their society and can thereby draw the readers' attention to facts they have not observed or acknowledged; he can confront and challenge expectations or prejudices. He might, ultimately, offer resolutions to perceived

anxieties. There will be a unique relationship with the reader; indeed reviewers of current novels sometimes express the extent to which they would quarrel with or reject the novelist's vision. It could be argued that it is in the depiction of the everyday world that the writer might be most controversial. This is certainly true of writers such as J.M. Coetzee, whose novels of South Africa illustrate the complexities and difficulties of post-apartheid society. (The different uses of narrative realism are discussed in detail in Part 2.)

Perhaps the single fact to be emphasised here would be the pluralism of modern society and the corresponding range of its fictions. The 'contemporary' is often far from simple: fictional writing in the English language now extends across many borders. Again, the prize world is helpful in demonstrating the extent to which 'the English novel' has become 'the novel in Britain'. Richard Todd, in *Consuming Fictions: The Booker Prize and Fiction in Britain Today* (1996), states that the 'catchment area' of the Booker comprises one quarter of the world's population. In other words, 'the novel in Britain' now includes fiction from Australia, New Zealand, Canada, South Africa, Nigeria, the Caribbean, as well as other areas of the world, but published in Britain. Contemporary Scottish and Irish writers, whether or not asserting their non-Englishness, also fall into this category. It is precisely this plurality which has saved the novel from extinction: when *Granta* debated 'The end of the English Novel' in 1980, it was the 'Englishness' of the genre which attracted particular criticism. Frederick Bowers, writing from an American perspective, defined this as 'Irrelevant Parochialism':

> What strikes an expatriate most about the contemporary British novel is its conformity, its traditional sameness, and its realistically rendered provincialism. Shaped only by its contents, the British novel is the product of group mentality: local, quaint, and self-consciously xenophobic.

What emerges from the debates about the genre which proliferated towards the end of the 20th century is that the post-war English novel suffered acute myopia and timidity: it 'appeared to be strangling in its own decorous and unappetising repressions', as academic writer Lorna Sage described in *Granta*. It is then revitalised by new voices and perspectives:

> … much of what's significant in English fiction is written with 'elsewhere' very much in mind; is, in a sense, written *from* elsewhere.

In other words, one of the aspects of the novel which has changed most in recent years is that, whereas Dickens described his world from his own perspective within that world, the contemporary novelists who evoke London life (including Monica Ali, Zadie Smith, Hanif Kureishi) are writers whose perspective comes in part from 'elsewhere'.