contexts in literature

contemporary fiction: the novel since 1990

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Introduction

Post-1990 fiction is an exciting and rewarding area of study. Following a period when the decline of the novel was widely discussed, fiction has emerged as a vibrant and inventive genre, exploring the diversity of the contemporary world and frequently experimenting with form and language. This is not to say that current works of prose fiction are always optimistic and uplifting, there are few utopian worlds to discover. Rather, it might seem that the visions of urban decay, individual isolation and fractured relationships depict a bleak picture at the turn of the millennium. But readers will also find strange and compelling tales, new and original voices, trenchant wit and humour. Contemporary writing is a controversial area and readers will inevitably become involved in discussions over literary language and subject matter. It is precisely because modern writing engages with the new that it can be seen as challenging and, at times, disturbing. The post-1990 novel is expressive of a wide range of imaginative perspectives, both realist and fantastical. Post-colonial writing explores experiences of exile and displacement where the central question ‘Who am I?’ is probed and questioned. Some commentators have seen the numbers of novels taking as subject the two world wars of the 20th century as an obsession of contemporary writers. We live in troubled times and apocalyptic fears haunt certain texts as they grapple with the dark question of what happens beyond the end of civilised society.

This study intends to introduce readers to major and recurrent preoccupations of the post-1990 novel, to identify some of the chief characteristics of the genre, and to offer ways in which contemporary writing can be analysed and discussed.

Part 1: Reading contemporary fiction addresses the question of the genre itself, looking at the circumstances in which novels are written and received. Why does the novel continue to flourish in a world of increasingly sophisticated media? Can it still be seen as a form which can achieve novel, in the sense of ‘new’, effects? Fiction is constantly under discussion in today’s society: from the media coverage of the prize world to local book groups, novels are regarded as significant. Clearly, novels arise out of their cultural moment; they might also be seen as shaping and crystallising that moment. Contemporary novelists such as Ian McEwan, Martin Amis, Graham Swift locate their fictions firmly within the recognisable modern world, as though insisting upon the ‘real’ in their work. James Kelman and Irvine Welsh have united a pursuit of narrative truth with the desire to challenge and unsettle readers, raising the question of whether the novel has reached the ultimate limits of expression and subject matter. New voices within contemporary writing introduce dual, or multiple, perspectives upon the modern world, and fiction. Hanif Kureishi, Zadie Smith, Kazuo Ishiguro, Michael Ondaatje belong to the
post-1990 ‘novel in English’, but their individual influences derive from many
different sources. Cultural hybridity has proved to be part of the novel’s continuing
evolution and inventiveness. As well as examining some areas of the novel’s
production and reception, together with the relationship between contemporary
writing and society, Part 1 also identifies thematic considerations which recur
insistently in the writing of the late 20th century. Millennial anxiety inevitably
informs writing which follows the 9/11 attacks on New York, yet the proliferation of
novels revisiting the two great conflicts of the 20th century suggests that the past
also remains troubling and unresolved.

Part 2: Approaches to the texts offers ways of analysing the form of the novel,
considering narratives and narrators, plot and structure, types of ‘characterisation’.
Investigation of conventional areas of narration reveals the extent to which
contemporary fiction experiments with inherited forms, or seeks to invent new
strategies. Intertextuality is an experimental device which is characteristic of post-
1990 writing. This section also examines different types of narrative realism – from
the novelist’s desire to insist upon factual accuracy (in McEwan’s or Pat Barker’s
writing) to the bizarre world of Yann Martel’s Life of Pi. Post-colonial writing is
complex and varied, and different perspectives are explored here: the brutal, post-
apartheid world of J.M. Coetzee’s Disgrace as well as contemporary multicultural
London in the writing of Monica Ali and Zadie Smith. The Irish rejection of
British rule which informs the subtle and probing writing of William Trevor and
Colm Tóibín is also relevant to this debate. Structural and thematic questions
are illustrated with reference to a range of post-1990 writing, drawing on texts
specified by UK examining boards as well as relevant comparative texts. Tasks and
assignments suggest further reading as well as areas for discussion.

Part 4: Critical approaches examines the nature of textual interpretation:
What expectations do readers bring to a given text? Is it appropriate to regard
literature as enshrining timeless feelings and values? Discussion of Jane Smiley’s A
Thousand Acres demonstrates ways in which a single text may be open to multiple
interpretations and differing critical views.

Most of the texts cited in this book belong to the category of ‘contemporary
British fiction’. Limitations of space preclude discussion of other writing in
English, although some American novels have been included. Irish writing, for
reasons belonging to history, is also included, although many Irish writers would
claim a distinctly un-English tradition.

One of the advantages of studying the new and modern is that, although
there may be relevant resources to consult, it is unlikely that students will find an
overwhelming body of critical material. The novels are written for contemporary
readers and the response of those readers is paramount.
How this book is organised

Part 1: Reading contemporary fiction
This section addresses key questions which dominate discussions of the genre, and identifies characteristic preoccupations of the novel in this period.

Part 2: Approaching the texts
This section introduces different ways in which fictional texts can be analysed, through discussion of a range of literary works.

Part 3: Texts and extracts
Part 3 offers a selection of extracts, chosen to illustrate different types of writing in the period. The extracts can be used as a basis for textual analysis and discussion.

Part 4: Critical approaches to contemporary fiction
In this section, different critical perspectives are introduced with some discussion of how these can be applied to specific texts.

Part 5: How to write about contemporary fiction
Part 5 aims to offer advice about structuring written work on fictional texts, using a range of suggested assignments.

Part 6: Resources
This section includes suggested further reading on the novel, a brief glossary of relevant critical terms and a chronology listing texts cited in the book with brief reference to contextual information.