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The Cambridge Introduction to
British Fiction, 1900–1950

Examining the work of more than a hundred writers, in a wide variety of genres including detective, spy, gothic, fantasy, comic, and science fiction, this book is an unusually comprehensive introduction to the novels and short stories of the period. Providing fresh readings of famous modernist figures (Joseph Conrad, Ford Madox Ford, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, E. M. Forster, D. H. Lawrence, and others), Robert L. Caserio also brings new attention to lesser-known writers who merit increased study. He provides readers with an overview of modernist fiction's intellectual milieu, and addresses its contextualization by history and politics – feminism, global war, and the emergence of the welfare state after World War II. An ideal introduction for the student, this book offers a thought-provoking reexamination of literary history, and an exploration of the unique value of fiction's portrayals of the world.

Robert L. Caserio is Emeritus Professor of English, Comparative Literature, and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies at The Pennsylvania State University, University Park. He is the editor, with Clement Hawes, of *The Cambridge History of the English Novel* (2012), and the editor of *The Cambridge Companion to the Twentieth Century English Novel* (2009). His many publications include *Plot, Story, and the Novel: From Dickens and Poe to the Modern Period* (1979) and the Perkins Prize–winning *The Novel in England, 1900–1950: History and Theory* (1999).

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The Pennsylvania State University, University Park

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To Kristoffer O. Jacobson, beloved spouse; Julio C. H. Caserio, beloved son; Letitia C. Archard, beloved sister

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Preface

The present volume is different from other introductions to the same period. Volumes with like titles assume that a highly selective approach is the suitable starting point. A straitened selectivity, however, has drawbacks. To focus the beginner's attention on relatively few novelists is to suggest that those not "introduced" are of secondary or marginal interest. It also obscures the links among diverse fictions of a given era, depriving the reader of an overall view. Books that introduce British fiction 1900–1950 through the lens of "Edwardian" or "Georgian" or "high modernist" or "late modernist" or "interwar modernist," or through the lens of "themes" or "subgenres" or "contexts" – the various specializations of scholarship – run the risk of being motivated primarily by fashion or market forces, and often do a disservice to a broader exploration of the subject. This book aspires to an alternative possibility: it seeks to present an unusually comprehensive range of British narrative fiction combined with extensive and intensive analyses.

This book also differentiates itself from other introductions by presenting an overall view that examines seriously, and asks its readers to examine seriously, the nature of fiction itself, theorized or acknowledged as a distinct discourse, with an autonomy of its own. The producers of British fiction 1900–1950 are leading theorists of fiction's special and autonomous nature, as Chapter 2 attests. Scholarly commentary has oftentimes obscured and superseded fiction writers' own ideas of fiction, and blunted their force. I always have valued scholarly commentary, and I encourage readers to pursue the texts listed in this volume's "Further Reading." Nevertheless, this book attempts to return the novelists' own ideas about fiction, and their fictions themselves, to primacy.

This book attempts one more thing: to resist the tendency in scholarship of the last five decades to characterize the novel form in the period under review as a distorted reflection or symptom of real history and real "politics," or as an illustration of more truthful intellectual discourses – for example, sociology, psychology, anthropology, philosophy, or history. To be sure, not all scholarship has made such characterizations. The scholars of the International

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Society for the Study of Narrative have recently attempted to formulate a definition of "fictionality." Rita Felski's work poses a challenge to the notion of "critique." All of those efforts are valuable, but they, and similar efforts, remain minority ones, and they were anticipated by ideas expressed by the majority of writers of fiction surveyed in Chapter 2. I align myself, first and foremost, with this modernist majority. To do this I have frequently foregrounded the place of romance, the opposite of reality and realism, in the modernist period. I read romance's persistent prominence there as a marker of fiction's autonomy.

In Chapter 6 and the Coda, I address historical, political, and economic context in a way that I hope will satisfy readers' desires for connection with a real, or a differently real, documentary world. Prior to that, however, I turn in Chapter 4 and Interchapter 4 to nonfictional discourse from the period to show how fiction both engages and borrows from nonfictional discourse (and from the world at large), but nonetheless – by maintaining its special nature – provides a different, but equally valid, vision of the world, rather than merely a subordinate one.

Fiction's power to transform historical reality by expressing it newly, or by evading or escaping history altogether, is traced in Chapters 3 and 5. Chapter 3 addresses the work of, among others, Dorothy Richardson and Henry Green, who enlist fiction to overturn conventions of thought and expression that ordinarily frame feminist, working-class, and anti-imperialist struggles for liberty (topics also discussed in Chapter 1). H. G. Wells paradoxically shares Richardson's and Green's insistence, even though he is the arch-critic of "the novel" in his era. Wells occupies what I call a modernist anti-modernist position, not least because his scientific romances make him depend on fiction's force, even as he wants to depress its role in the fight for a new world order. Romance plays an irrepressible role in fiction's most entertaining modes, as Chapter 5 expounds them; modernism is equally irrepressible there. Modernism becomes a conscious topic or object of representation in detective and spy fiction, in comic fiction, and in fantasy fiction. Moreover, it uses them self-consciously to defend its detachment, and fiction's detachment, from immediate worldly relevance.

I intend these pages to be pedagogically as well as speculatively useful. Chapter 1 looks at two points easily ignored in our classrooms: (1) a general reluctance to deliberate the trustworthiness of periodization in literary history and (2) a lack of student preparation for reading narrative fictions *as fictions* rather than as sociological, psychological, historical, or political reports and documents. Regarding the matter of periodization, Chapter 1 proposes a hypothetical period, covering fewer than fifty years, to test periodizing

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impulses – to test, above all, *modernism*. Regarding the lack of student awareness of the protocols for reading narrative fiction, Chapter 1 considers fiction, without an immersion in narratology, as a *treatment* of topics or themes, whereby a novelist or a storyteller shapes what is told, and presents ways of seeing it, rather than as something identical with those same topics and themes.

A practicable syllabus for a course in the period attuned to today's undergraduates can be constructed on the basis of the interchapters and the Coda. For a course that lasts a standard fifteen weeks (as is typical in US universities), an instructor might assign the texts discussed in the interchapters (but choosing only two from Interchapter 4's comparisons of historians' ideas of history and narrative fiction's ideas of it). Such a syllabus would give undergraduates a manageable reading task of nine full-length texts, supplemented with sample stories by Kipling, Mansfield, Bowen, and Wilson. Then, by using the analyses in the interchapters as take-off points for discussion, and by reading the chapters as contexts for the interchapter selections, students and teachers can gain enlarged exposure to relevant texts. The exposition of the difficult thought of non-novelists in Chapter 4 and the initial survey of political–economic contentions in Chapter 6 will inform students, especially those outside of the United Kingdom, about thinkers and ideologies of which they are unlikely to have any experience or any reading knowledge.

Graduate students of this period of British fiction, which is rightly or wrongly identified with modernist aesthetics, will also find this book useful. It provides them, in one volume, with a coordinated view of the period's primary texts, not only including a variety of fictional modes – realism, romance, short story, adventure tale, detective story, spy story, comic fiction, science fiction, and fantasy – but also encompassing texts from the realm of nonfictional discourse. It should ease students' difficulty in setting examination lists, and might open alternatives to conventional choices they might make, to the benefit of their future research.

Lastly, the eponymous term *British* is problematic. I know it is. Much has been written about this problem in the past; much will be written about it in years to come. For the purposes of this book, I have for the most part bracketed the problem. It is true that the authors I survey include those who were English, Welsh, Scottish, Irish, South African, New Zealander, West Indian, and Indian – in other words, some authors who were not solely or even in some cases primarily "British." These various identities, and others, should claim our attention. But so should the identity of fiction itself. I believe that the writers examined in this book – *as a group* – help us know what fiction is. Their shared quests for archetypes of the welfare state and their

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imaginative pursuits of commonalities relate to their practice of fiction. They relate to their ideas of what fiction is. As does their shared, almost ubiquitous detachment from such things. I believe the knowledge we glean from these writers is necessary and foundational, for both our understanding of fiction and for our current and future understandings of the term *British*.

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