



The Novel Today

Allan Massie



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Allan Massie

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Contents

List of Illustrations	vi
1 The novel today	1
2 A personal voice: Anthony Powell, Graham Greene, Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark, Kingsley Amis	9
3 The moral imperative: A. S. Byatt, Margaret Drabble, Stanley Middleton, David Storey, Stan Barstow, Alan Sillitoe, William McIlvanney, James Kelman, Alasdair Gray, Iain Crichton Smith	18
4 Politics and the novel: Doris Lessing, Nadine Gordimer, Brian Moore, William Trevor, V. S. Naipaul, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Piers Paul Read, Fay Weldon	29
5 Genre fiction: Anthony Burgess, William Golding, Robert Nye, Peter Vansittart, John Banville, J. G. Ballard, Michael Moorcock, John Le Carré, P. D. James, Ruth Rendell	39
6 The contemporary scene: Martin Amis, Julian Barnes, Ian McEwan, Peter Ackroyd, Salman Rushdie, Angela Carter, Emma Tennant, William Boyd, Alan Judd, Anita Brookner, Penelope Lively, A. N. Wilson, Graham Swift, Kazuo Ishiguro, Timothy Mo, Peter Carey	46
7 Sense and sensibility	68
Select bibliography	73
Index	89

List of Illustrations

Graham Greene	12
Iris Murdoch	14
Margaret Drabble	21
Doris Lessing	30
V. S. Naipaul	35
John Le Carré	43
P. D. James	44
Ian McEwan	50
Angela Carter	56
Kazuo Ishiguro	65

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The novel today

The title of this essay begs definition and poses questions. There is no such thing as 'the novel today'; there are only novels. Several hundred works of fiction of some literary merit are published every year. They are tangible objects which may be read. 'The novel', on the other hand, cannot be read; it is an idea, an abstraction. As such, it is not even the Platonic idea of which individual novels are shadowy representations. Indeed the reverse is more nearly true. It is 'the novel' which represents a concept formed as a result of reading a great many quite distinct novels. All talk of 'the novel' is inevitably generalization, made more impressive, but perhaps less significant, the further it is removed from consideration of particular works of fiction.

Whether a book is a novel may itself be a matter of dispute. There is no satisfactory definition of a novel. Books have been published as novels in one country and as non-fiction in another. I have concluded it is sensible to consider a book as a novel if its publisher has offered it as such.

This survey excludes fiction written in foreign languages and novels first published in the United States. What should properly come within its scope is a difficult question. The Booker-McConnell Prize, which was established in 1969 and which has contributed to a revival of public interest in fiction, is open to novels written by citizens of the United Kingdom, the Commonwealth, and the Republics of South Africa, Ireland and Pakistan, if written in English and first published in the United Kingdom. Of the eighty different novelists short-listed for the prize since its inception, at least a quarter are not British citizens. The prize is indeed imperial in conception; eligibility is conferred by citizenship of any country which was within the British Empire a hundred years ago. On the whole I have found it convenient to adhere to this liberal, if illogical, criterion.

For one thing is clear: it is no longer possible to impose narrow national categories on the novel. Thirty years ago it

was still possible to write of 'the English novel'; such a title would no longer make sense.

Twenty years is not necessarily a long time in terms of a novelist's career. Graham Greene, for instance, published his first novel in 1929 and his twenty-fifth in 1988. Anthony Powell's first novel, *Afternoon Men*, appeared in 1931; *The Fisher King* in 1986.

Clearly Greene and Powell are exceptional examples of longevity and the survival of talent. Death, illness, insanity, liquor, financial failure, disappointment, the malediction of critics, loss of ability, or the decay of ambition, truncate many careers. Nevertheless, in spite of all, a writing life of thirty or forty years is common. Any survey of two decades must at least take note of many writers whose reputation was established long before the commencement of the period under review.

However sceptical one may be of the value of speaking about 'the novel', it is difficult to write about fiction without giving some sort of assent to that abstraction. Twenty years ago it was fashionable to speculate about 'the death of the novel'. It would, we were told, become an art-form that pleased only a minority; like poetry. All forms of art of course appeal only to a minority of people, but it seemed plausible then to maintain that the novel had surrendered its primacy as a means of conveying imaginative experience. In 1975, in his introduction to *Beyond the Words: Eleven Writers in Search of a New Fiction*, Giles Gordon wrote that 'fiction is no longer a popular art'. Few would now agree. The recovery may have owed something to the introduction of prizes and the consequent heightening of public awareness. It has owed more to novelists themselves, and to their ability to address themselves to interesting themes in a sufficiently interesting manner.

In 1977 Malcolm Bradbury edited a collection of essays on *The Novel Today*. He found that 'many novelists today have become uneasy with the code of old fictional expectations, with the established history of the novel, and have sought to re-experience and re-make the form by enquiring into its essentials'. The codes of which he wrote had come from two sources. There was realism, emphasizing plot and character, and drawing its strength from a 'real' world beyond the novel; and there was the 'modernist aesthetics of the earlier part of the

century, in which “pattern”, “form”, and “myth” assumed a paramount importance’. Both these modes had, he thought, ceased to satisfy writers, and he identified two responses to this dissatisfaction.

The first was a withdrawal from the established mode ‘towards the lexical surface of the text’ which ‘becomes the sufficient event’. The second ‘related phenomenon’ was ‘a fascination with the fictional process as a parody of form – it becomes the games-like construct with which permutations can be played’.

This was a widely held academic view of the state of the novel. However intelligent the analysis, its expression in this manner was likely to confirm the suspicion of the reader that the novel had been cornered by literary theorists. Certainly novels susceptible of such analysis were not likely to appeal to many readers.

Nevertheless the claim that experiment of one sort or another was the way of the future appeared persuasive. Giles Gordon then seemed content to accept that ‘novel writing and reading’ should become ‘a more private elitist activity than hitherto’; Bradbury judged that ‘the experimental potential of the novel has been strongly emphasized by contemporary English novelists, and has markedly intensified in the later 1960s and early 1970s’. How a ‘potential’ can ‘intensify’ puzzles me, but I am ready to accept that this is how it seemed then.

Both were writing in reaction to a categorization of the post-war English novel as offering, in Gordon’s words, ‘unambitious but competent slice-of-life mediocrity’. Though both agreed that this was too facile a judgement, Bradbury yet quoted with approval Bernard Bergonzi’s opinion that ‘the English novel is no longer novel’, offering only ‘predictable pleasures’.

Since then the confidence that the novel required to be revitalized by self-conscious experiment has waned. B. S. Johnson, the most interesting of the English experimentalists, whose work combined verbal inventiveness with structural, even typographical, innovation, killed himself in 1973, an act which in retrospect takes on a sad symbolic importance. Subsequent innovators have been tamer. A few such as Salman Rushdie have borrowed from the techniques of Latin American ‘Magic Realists’ with a success that already

seems flashy rather than substantial. D. M. Thomas in *The White Hotel* (1988) mixed poetry, psychoanalysis in the form of case-studies and exchanges between doctor and patient, reportage, and borrowings from other writers, concocting a brew which intoxicated some critics and intrigued many readers; his subsequent novels, written in the same manner, have seemed simultaneously thin and woolly, the lack of any true seriousness being apparent. At best they offer a portrait of the author rather than of the world.

Meanwhile more whole-hearted experimentalists like Christine Brooke-Rose and Giles Gordon himself seem to have abandoned the novel: her last book was *Thru* (1975) and his *Ambrose's Vision* (1981). Others like Emma Tennant have moved back into the mainstream. So has Anthony Burgess, who could in 1970 have been considered experimental on the strength of *The Clockwork Orange* (1962); his best novels *Earthly Powers* (1980) and *Any Old Iron* (1989) are the sort of 'baggy monster' which Henry James deplored as quintessentially English. Burgess has written illuminatingly about James Joyce; but *Earthly Powers* in particular recalls writers like Bennett, Wells, Galsworthy and Maugham, rather than Joyce.

An even more remarkable case is that of William Golding. His critical reputation has been high since his first novel *Lord of the Flies* appeared in 1954. With the exception of that book, which quickly, partly on account of its subject-matter, became a standard school-text, his novels were long regarded as 'difficult'; they attracted academics because they offered problems of exegesis. Throughout most of the 1970s he published nothing. Then came *Darkness Visible* (1979), a Miltonic novel (as the title suggests), being an exploration of the nature of good and evil. In it he employed time-shifts, indirect narration and multiple points of view. It was technically brilliant: shafts of dazzling light were emitted from obscure cloud. But, after this, Golding wrote a trilogy, a historical pastiche, about a voyage from England to Australia, the first volume of which, *Rites of Passage*, won the Booker Prize in 1980. Between the first and second volumes appeared *The Paper Men* (1984), a comedy about the pursuit of a celebrated author by an obtuse but determined biographer. All these books were more immediately accessible than any of his earlier work.