

The Novel Today: Recent British Fiction

Lecture 10: The Present in Perspective: Where We Are and Where We Are Heading

- 1) A Day in the Life: Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (2005)
- 2) Writing the World: Adam Thirlwell, *Kapow!* (2012)
- 3) Brave New World Revisited: Kazuo Ishiguro,
Never Let Me Go (2005)

- 1) A Day in the Life: Ian McEwan, *Saturday* (2005)

The Novels of Ian McEwan:

The Cement Garden (1978)
The Comfort of Strangers (1981)
The Child in Time (1987)
The Innocent (1990)
Black Dogs (1992)
The Daydreamer (1994)
Enduring Love (1997)
Amsterdam (1998)
Atonement (2001)
Saturday (2005)
On Chesil Beach (2007)
Solar (2010)
Sweet Tooth (2012)
The Children Act (2014)
Nutshell (2016)
Machines Like Me (2019)
The Cockroach (2019, novella)

[+ short stories]

> “England’s national author” (*New Yorker* 2009)

Saturday (2005):

I wanted to capture the present, to get what would be in the mind of a reasonably educated person in early 2003. So it's 9/11, it's Iraq, but it's also a game of squash, making fish stew. If this novel were to be read in 300 years' time, if there's anyone left to do anything, they would have a sense of a slice of existence.

(McEwan in <http://living.scotsman.com/index.cfm?id=108202005>)

15th February 2003,

a day in the life of London-based neurosurgeon Henry Perowne

- waking up early and witnessing a burning plane going down
- making love to his wife, the attractive and clever newspaper lawyer Rosalind
- talking to his son Theo, a brilliant blues musician
- being caught up in the anti-Blair/Bush-demonstration and the resulting minor car crash with Baxter
- the regular Saturday morning squash match with a colleague
- buying the ingredients for a fish stew to welcome back his beloved daughter Daisy in the evening
- visiting his mother in an old people's home
- preparing the stew and quarrelling with Daisy while the family is gathering
- Baxter's attack
- saving Baxter
- making love to his wife
- sleep

Famous Forerunners:

- James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1922)
- Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925)

but

figural narrative situation/stream of consciousness has been replaced by a refined interiorized mode of authorial narration in present tense (continuous text in five parts)

The Aesthetic Challenge:

'Happiness writes white.'

The Moral Challenge:

the unpredictability and contingency of 21st century life with its gaps between the public and the private

Beginning:

Some hours before dawn Henry Perowne, a neurosurgeon, wakes to find himself already in motion, pushing back the covers from a sitting position, and then rising to his feet. It's not clear to him when exactly he became conscious, nor does it seem relevant. He's never done such a thing before, but he isn't alarmed or even faintly surprised, for the movement is easy, and pleasurable in his limbs, and his back and legs feel unusually strong. He stands there, naked by the bed – he always sleeps naked – feeling his full height, aware of his wife's patient breathing and of the wintry bedroom air on his skin. That too is a pleasurable sensation. His bedside clock shows three forty. He has no idea what he's doing out of bed: he has no need to relieve himself, nor is he disturbed by a dream or some element of the day before, or even by the state of the world. It's as if, standing there in the darkness, he's materialised out of nothing, fully formed, unencumbered. [...]

Ending:

Quietly, he lowers the window. The morning is still dark, and it's the coldest time now. The dawn won't come until after seven. Three nurses are walking across the square, talking cheerfully, heading in the direction of his hospital to start their morning shift. He closes the shutters on them, then goes towards the bed and lets the dressing gown fall towards his feet as he gets in. Rosalind lies facing away from him with her knees crooked. He closes his eyes. This time there'll be no trouble falling towards oblivion, there's nothing can stop him now. Sleep's no longer a concept, it's a material thing, an ancient means of transport, a softly moving belt, conveying him into Sunday. He fits himself around her, her silk pyjamas, her scent, her warmth, her beloved form, and draws closer to her. Blindly, he kisses her nape. There's always this, is one of his remaining thoughts. And then: there's only this. And at last, faintly, falling: this day's over.

2) Writing the World: Adam Thirlwell, *Kapow!* (2012)

The Novels of Adam Thirlwell:

Politics (2003)
The Escape (2007)
Kapow! (2012)
Lurid and Cute (2015)

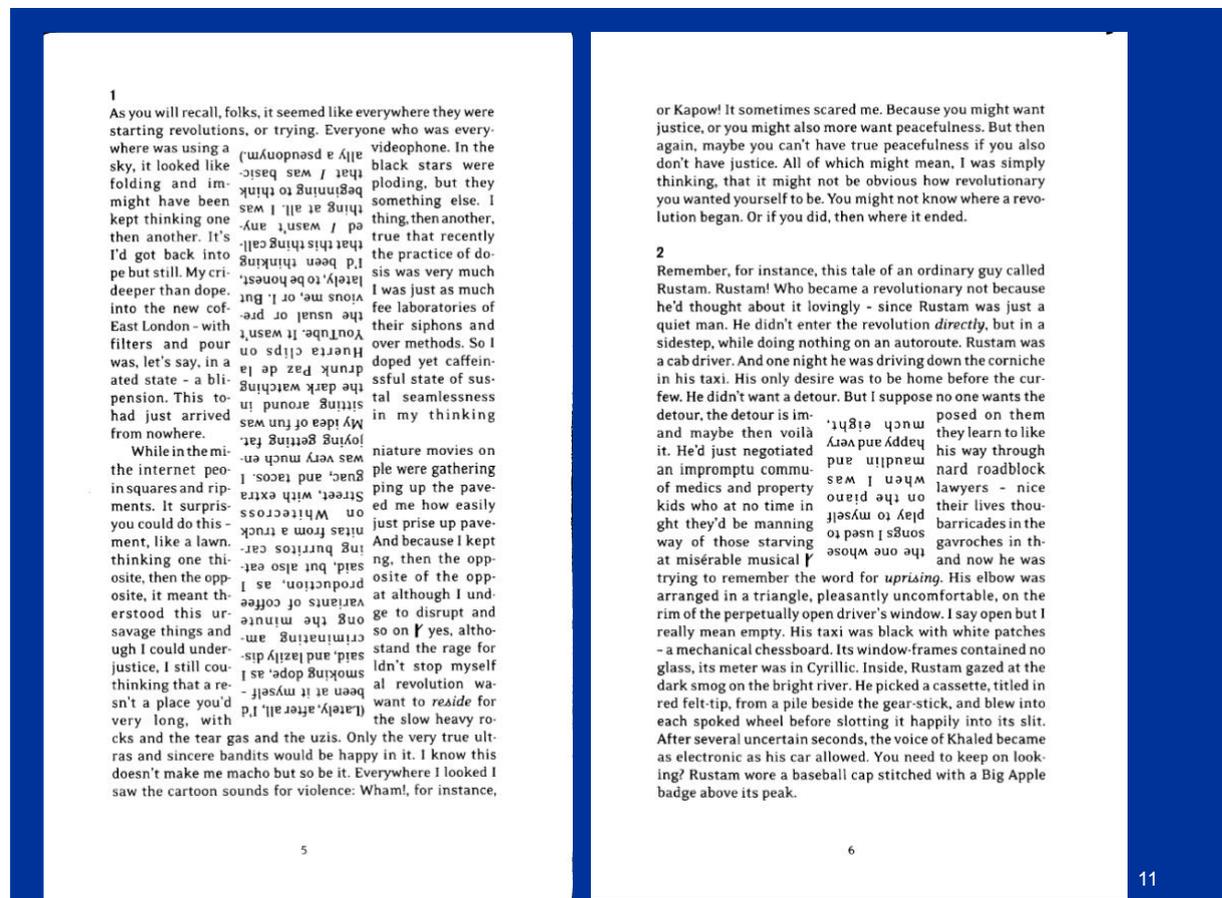
Metanovel (?):

The Delighted States: A Book of Novels, Romances & their Unknown Translators, Containing Ten Languages, Set on Four Continents, & Accompanied by Maps, Portraits, Squiggles, Illustrations and a Variety of Helpful Indexes (2008)
(dt. *Der multiple Roman* 2013)

Also of interest:

Multiples: 12 Stories in 18 Languages by 61 Authors, edited by Adam Thirlwell

Kapow! > Cover Design Beginning:



3) Brave New World Revisited: Kazuo Ishiguro, *Never Let Me Go* (2005)

The Novels of Kazuo Ishiguro:

A Pale View of Hills (1982)
An Artist of the Floating World (1986)
The Remains of the Day (1989)
The Unconsoled (1995)
When We Were Orphans (2000)
Never Let Me Go (2005)
Nocturnes: Five Stories of Music and Nightfall (2009)
The Buried Giant (2015)

Nobel Prize for Literature 2017 > England's global author
(cf. Walkowitz 2006, 2015; Wong 2015)

Designation of Setting in *Never Let Me Go*: "England, late 1990s"

Beginning:

My name is Kathy H. I'm thirty-one years old, and I've been a carer now for over eleven years. That sounds long enough, I know, but actually they want me to go on for another eight months, until the end of this year. That'll make it almost exactly twelve years. Now I know my being a carer so long isn't necessarily because they think I am fantastic at what I do. There are some really good carers who've been told to stop after just two or three years. And I can think of one carer at least who went on for all of fourteen years despite being a complete waste of space. So I am not trying to boast. But then I do know for a fact that they've been pleased with my work, and by and large, I have too. My donors have always tended to do much better than expected. Their recovery times have been impressive, and hardly any of them have been classified as 'agitated', even before fourth donation. Okay, maybe I *am* boasting now. But it means a lot to me, being able to do my work well [...]

Narrative Technique:

- first-person narration → Kathy H. looking back on her life
- the question of (un-)reliability: there seems to be something hidden behind her reasonable, calm discourse
- Kathy provides access to a triangle of protagonists which she forms together with Tommy and Ruth

I try not to make a nuisance of myself, but I've figured out how to get my voice heard when I have to. And when things go badly, of course I'm upset, but at least I can feel I've done all I could and keep things in perspective. (204)

The Contours of a Shadow World of Donors and Carers:

- Hailsham (Madame, Miss Emily, Miss Lucy, guardians)
(→ creativity/art; sex → "Never Let Me Go")
- the Cottages (Keffers)
- carers → donors → completion
- the possibility of 'deferral' through art/love

► unreliability as an effect of the boundaries of one's world

Ending:

The only indulgent thing I did, just once, was a couple of weeks after I heard Tommy had completed, when I drove up to Norfolk, even though I had no real need to. I wasn't after anything in particular, and I didn't go up as far as the coast. Maybe I just felt like looking at all those flat fields of nothing and the huge grey skies [...] Then at last I spotted a few trees in the distance, not far from the roadside, so I drove up to them, stopped, and got out.

[...]

That was the only time, as I stood there, looking at that strange rubbish, feeling the wind coming across the empty fields, that I started to imagine just a little fantasy thing, because this was Norfolk after all, and it was only a couple of weeks since I'd lost him. I was thinking about the rubbish, the flapping plastic in the branches, the shore-line of odd stuff caught along the fencing, and I half-closed my eyes and imagined this was the spot where everything I'd ever lost since my childhood had washed up, and I was now standing here in front of it, and if I waited long enough, a tiny figure would appear on the horizon across the field, and gradually get larger until I'd see it was Tommy, and he'd wave, maybe even call. The fantasy never got beyond that – I didn't let it – and though the tears rolled down my face, I wasn't sobbing or out of control. I just waited a bit, then turned back to the car, to drive off to wherever it was I was supposed to be.

A Map of (Post-)Modern Fiction

Modes:	Documentary Fiction	Realist Fiction	Revisionist Fiction	Implicit Metafiction	Explicit Metafiction
Scales:	external/environmental reference illusion 'real' comm./ character comm.			internal/systemic ref.	auto-referentiality anti-illusion lit. comm./ narr. comm.
'Programs':	(Avantgarde) ↑	Realism	Romanticism →	Modernism	← Aestheticism ↑
Orientations of Meaning:	obj. (subj.) [[lit.]]	obj. subj. (lit.)	(obj.) subj. lit.	(obj.) subj. lit. → lit.	[(obj.)] (subj.) lit.

(cf. Reinfandt 1997, 240)

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