

The Novel Today: Recent British Fiction

After a flowering in the 1980s and a comparable lull in the 1990s, British fiction seems to have gathered momentum again in the early years of the twenty-first century. Starting with a brief systematic overview of the history of the English novel, this course of lectures will introduce a 'map' of the bewildering landscape of 'contemporary' fiction from the 1980s to the present. Covering prototypical orientations from documentary through realism and revisionism to implicit and explicit metafiction, the map will provide a systematic focus for selected close readings of recent and not so recent novels in order to demonstrate how 'contemporary' culture can be approached academically (and critically). At the same time, it is to be hoped, a stimulating view of our very own present will emerge.

> the problem (cf. Eaglestone 2013b)

Course Requirements:

Please note that there will be no written exam for this lecture course, which yields **3 ECTS** as a rule (so it is not eligible for the Wahlpflichtbereich GymPO 4 ECTS slot, which needs a seminar to be filled).

If you need credits outside of the modules offered by the English Department (which combine lecture courses with seminars in oral examinations), you will have to hand in an essay by **February 14** at the latest. For the essay you will have to pick an example of 'recent British fiction' not treated in the lecture course and discuss it with the help of categories introduced in the lecture course.

The portfolio should not be longer than **3 pages (A 4, 1.5-spaced, 12 pt)**.

Note that the essay does not require the formalities of a fully developed term paper but should be written in precise and elegant English.

Don't forget to put your **name, Matrikelnummer, the title of the course and the degree programme/module** for which you want your results to be registered on the first page! As a rule, the essays will **not be graded** because most contexts at the English Department only require a 'pass'. If you think that you need a grade, please make sure that this is really the case in your exam regulations and then let me know at the end of the personal information at the beginning of the essay.

Lecture 1: How Recent Is Recent? Introductory Notes on the Contemporary British Novel

- 1) The End of the English Novel
- 2) Some Coordinates
- 3) Course Overview

1) The End of the English Novel

... was announced in *Granta* 3 (1980) drawing on assessments by Gore Vidal ("middle class novels for middle class readers with middle class problems"), John Sutherland and Bernard Bergonzi ("the novel is no longer novel", "The Ideology of Being English"), Chris Bigsby ("The Uneasy Middleground of British Fiction"), and Frederick Bowers ("An Irrelevant Parochialism")

A sense of crisis with regard to

- a) Englishness
- b) the specifically English brand of writing novels
- c) the genre of the novel or even literature at large and/or literary publishing

Reactions:

a) *The Last of England?* (cf. Stevenson 2004)

- Britishness, but a sense of crisis prevails (cf. *Granta* 56 [1996]: What Happened to Us? Britain's Valedictory Realism)
- *The Internationalization of English Literature* (cf. King 2004)
(the end of Imperial England and the emergence of a multiracial/multiethnic/multicultural England/Britain,
cf. Tew 2004:
Ch. 2 "Contemporary Britishness: Who, What, Why and When?"
Ch. 6: "Multiplicities and Hybridity")
- cultural benefits vs. political crisis (9/11, the 2005 London bombings)

b) a call for "Taking Risks" (James Gordin) and openness towards external influence (Lorna Sage, "Invasion from Outsiders") and formal experiment (Christine Brooke-Rose, "Where Do We Go from Here?")

- excerpts from Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker* and from forthcoming books by Angela Carter, Desmond Hogan, Alan Sillitoe and Emma Tennant
- impulses reflected in *Granta*'s listings of the Best of Young British Novelists and in list of Booker Prize winners

Granta Best of Young British Novelists:

1983

Martin Amis, Pat Barker, Julian Barnes, Ursula Bentley, William Boyd, Buchi Emecheta, Maggie Gee, Kazuo Ishiguro, Alan Judd, Adam Mars-Jones, Ian McEwan, Shiva Naipaul, Philip Norman, Christopher Priest, Salman Rushdie, Lisa St Aubin de Terán, Clive Sinclair, Graham Swift, Rose Tremain, A.N. Wilson

1993

Iain Banks, Louis De Bernières, Anne Billson, Tibor Fischer, Esther Freud, Alan Hollinghurst, Kazuo Ishiguro, A.L. Kennedy, Philip Kerr, Hanif Kureishi, Adam Lively, Adam Mars-Jones, Candia McWilliam, Lawrence Norfolk, Ben Okri, Caryl Phillips, Will Self, Nicholas Shakespeare, Helen Simpson, Jeanette Winterson

2003

Monica Ali, Nicola Barker, Rachel Cusk, Peter Ho Davies, Susan Elderkin, Philip Hensher, A.L. Kennedy, Hari Kunzru, Toby Litt, David Mitchell, Andrew O'Hagan, David Peace, Ben Rice, Rachel Seiffert, Zadie Smith, Adam Thirlwell, Alan Warner, Sarah Waters, Robert McLiam Wilson

2013

Naomi Alderman, Tahmima Anam, Ned Beaman, Jenni Fagan, Adam Foulds, Xiaolu Guo, Sarah Hall, Steven Hall, Joanna Kavenna, Benjamin Markovits, Nadifa Mohamed, Helen Oyeyemi, Ross Raisin, Sunjeev Sahota, Taiye Selasi, Kamila Shamsie, Zadie Smith, David Szalay, Adam Thirlwell, Evie Wyld

The Booker Prize

Financed by Booker McConnell, a multinational conglomerate company, and awarded annually for the best full length novel in the British Commonwealth of Nations. In 2002 the Man Group became sponsor of the Booker Prize Foundation, and the prize was named the Man Booker Prize for Fiction until 2019, when it reverted to Booker Prize.

Year	Author	Title	Country
1969	P. H. Newby	<i>Something to Answer For</i>	United Kingdom
1970	Bernice Rubens	<i>The Elected Member</i>	United Kingdom
1971	V. S. Naipaul	<i>In a Free State</i>	U.K./Trinidad
1972	John Berger	<i>G.</i>	United Kingdom
1973	J. G. Farrell	<i>The Siege of Krishnapur</i>	United Kingdom
1974	Nadine Gordimer	<i>The Conservationist</i>	South Africa
	Stanley Middleton	<i>Holiday</i>	United Kingdom
1975	Ruth Praver Jhabvala	<i>Heat and Dust</i>	U.K./Germany
1976	David Storey	<i>Saville</i>	United Kingdom
1977	Paul Scott	<i>Staying On</i>	United Kingdom
1978	Iris Murdoch	<i>The Sea, the Sea</i>	Ireland/U.K.

1979	Penelope Fitzgerald	<i>Offshore</i>	United Kingdom
1980	William Golding	<i>Rites of Passage</i>	United Kingdom
1981	Salman Rushdie	<i>Midnight's Children</i>	U.K./India
1982	Thomas Keneally	<i>Schindler's Ark</i>	Australia
1983	J. M. Coetzee	<i>Life & Times of Michael K</i>	South Africa
1984	Anita Brookner	<i>Hotel du Lac</i>	United Kingdom
1985	Keri Hulme	<i>The Bone People</i>	New Zealand
1986	Kingsley Amis	<i>The Old Devils</i>	United Kingdom
1987	Penelope Lively	<i>Moon Tiger</i>	United Kingdom
1988	Peter Carey	<i>Oscar and Lucinda</i>	Australia
1989	Kazuo Ishiguro	<i>The Remains of the Day</i>	U.K./Japan
1990	A. S. Byatt	<i>Possession: A Romance</i>	United Kingdom
1991	Ben Okri	<i>The Famished Road</i>	Nigeria
1992	Michael Ondaatje	<i>The English Patient</i>	Canada/Sri Lanka
	Barry Unsworth	<i>Sacred Hunger</i>	United Kingdom
1993	Roddy Doyle	<i>Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha</i>	Ireland
1994	James Kelman	<i>How Late It Was, How Late</i>	United Kingdom
1995	Pat Barker	<i>The Ghost Road</i>	United Kingdom
1996	Graham Swift	<i>Last Orders</i>	United Kingdom
1997	Arundhati Roy	<i>The God of Small Things</i>	India
1998	Ian McEwan	<i>Amsterdam</i>	United Kingdom
1999	J. M. Coetzee	<i>Disgrace</i>	South Africa
2000	Margaret Atwood	<i>The Blind Assassin</i>	Canada
2001	Peter Carey	<i>True History of the Kelly Gang</i>	Australia
2002	Yann Martel	<i>Life of Pi</i>	Canada
2003	DBC Pierre	<i>Vernon God Little</i>	Australia/Mexico
2004	Alan Hollinghurst	<i>The Line of Beauty</i>	United Kingdom
2005	John Banville	<i>The Sea</i>	Ireland
2006	Kiran Desai	<i>The Inheritance of Loss</i>	India
2007	Anne Enright	<i>The Gathering</i>	Ireland
2008	Aravind Adiga	<i>The White Tiger</i>	India
2009	Hilary Mantel	<i>Wolf Hall</i>	United Kingdom
2010	Howard Jacobson	<i>The Finkler Question</i>	United Kingdom
2011	Julian Barnes	<i>The Sense of an Ending</i>	United Kingdom
2012	Hilary Mantel	<i>Bring Up the Bodies</i>	United Kingdom
2013	Eleanor Catton	<i>The Luminaries</i>	New Zealand
Opened for all work in English published in the UK:			
2014	Richard Flanagan	<i>The Narrow Road to the Deep North</i>	Australia
2015	Marlon James	<i>A Brief History of Seven Killings</i>	Jamaica
2016	Paul Beatty	<i>The Sellout</i>	USA
2017	George Saunders	<i>Lincoln in the Bardo</i>	USA
2018	Anna Burns	<i>Milkman</i>	Northern Ireland
2019	Margaret Atwood	<i>The Testaments</i>	Canada
	Bernardine Evaristo	<i>Girl, Woman, Other</i>	United Kingdom

'Booker of Bookers' 1993 (25 years): Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (1981)

'Best of the Booker' 2008 (40 years): Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (1981)

'The Lost Man Booker' for 1970 (2010): J.G. Farrell, *Troubles* (1970)

'Golden Booker' 2018 (50 years): Michael Ondaatje, *The English Patient* (1992)

**c) the “Current Crisis in Publishing” diagnosed in 1980 is still with us
(cf. Clee 2006):**

- quantity vs. quality
- market vs. idealism
- salability vs. literariness
- bestsellers vs. normal sellers

(Dan Brown, *The Da Vinci Code*/J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* novels:
more than 4 million copies;
novels endorsed by TV or winners of prominent prizes:
200,000 to 300,000 copies;
all other novels: a figure below 1,000 copies is common)

→ What is the cultural position of ‘literary fiction’ today?
(competition from other media/‘eccentricity’)
(cf. English 2006/2016; Nensel/Reinfandt 2017)

2) Some Coordinates

[T]he novel, if it climbs into an ivory tower, will find no audience except those with ivory towers of their own. I used to think that the outlook of the novel was poor [...] ‘Story’, of course, is a different matter. We like to hear of a succession of events and, as an inspection of our press will demonstrate, have only a marginal interest in whether the succession of events is minutely true or not [...] Story will always be with us. But story in a physical book [...] what the West means by a ‘novel’ – what of that? Certainly, if the form fails, let it go. We have enough complications in life, in art, in literature without preserving dead forms fossilized [...] But what goes with it? Surely something of profound importance for the human spirit! A novel ensures that we can look before and after, take action at whatever pace we choose, read again and again, skip and go back. The story in a book is humble and serviceable, available, friendly, is not switched on and off but taken up and put down, lasts a lifetime.

Put simply, the novel stands between us and the hardening concept of statistical man. There is no other medium in which we can live so long and so intimately with a character. That is the service a novel renders. It performs no less an act than the rescue and the preservation of the individuality and dignity of the single being, be it man, woman or child. No other art, I claim, can so thread in and out of a single mind and body, so live another life. It does ensure that at the very least a human being shall be seen to be more than just one billionth of one billion.

William Golding, “Nobel Lecture” (Stockholm, 7 Dec 1983). *A Moving Target*. London/Boston: Faber, 1984: 203-214, 208-210.

Certainly, the novel is not in decline in publishing terms; indeed, it is in a boom period. The number of works of fiction published each year doubled between 1950 and 1990; currently, about 100 new British novels are released each week. Approximately 130 works of fiction are submitted for the Booker Prize, while around 7000 novels eligible for the prize are published in Britain and the Commonwealth annually.

(Childs 2005, 3)

To argue that the 'state of the nation novel' no longer provides a viable template for contemporary fiction and that the past has often proved more amenable to fictional analysis than the present is not, of course, to argue that the best novels of the last two decades have turned away from social and political questions entirely. (Such a retreat would not be possible, in any case. Novels necessarily reflect the society in which they are written. Even the most apparently uncomplicated fantasy fiction has some kind of disguised relationship with social reality.)

(Rennison 2005, x)

Might it not simply be that a new novel is emerging, a postcolonial novel, a de-centred, transnational, inter-lingual, crosscultural novel; and that in this new world order, or disorder, we find a better explanation of the contemporary novel's health than [in the] somewhat patronizingly Hegelian view that the reason for the creativity of the 'far rim' is that these are areas 'which are in an earlier stage of the bourgeois culture, which are in an earlier, rougher, more problematic form' [George Steiner]. [...] There is, in my view, no crisis in the art of the novel. The novel is precisely that hybrid form for which Prof. Steiner yearns. It is part social enquiry, part fantasy, part confessional. It crosses frontiers of knowledge as well as topographical boundaries. [...] I am [...] less worried [...] about the threat posed to the novel by [...] newer, high-tech forms. It is perhaps the low-tech nature of the act of writing that will save it [...] what one writer can make in the solitude of one room is something no power can easily destroy. [...]

[However,] [t]he pressure of monopoly and bureaucracy, of corporatism and conservatism, limiting and narrowing the range and quality of what gets published, are known to every working writer. Of the pressures of intolerance and censorship, I personally have in these past years gained perhaps too much knowledge. There are many such struggles taking place in the world today [...] [and] [e]ven in Europe and the United States, the stormtroopers of various 'sensitivities' seek to limit our freedom of speech. It has never been more important to continue to defend those values which make the art of literature possible. [...] What George Steiner beautifully calls the 'wonderful vainglory' of literature still fires us, even if, as he suggests, we are too embarrassed to say so in public.

Salman Rushdie, "In Defence of the Novel, Yet Again" [2000]. *Step Across This Line: Collected Non-Fiction 1992-2002*. London: Cape, 2002: 54-63.

Literature thinks.

Literature is where ideas are investigated, lived out, explored in all their messy complexity. Sometimes these ideas look quite simple: What if you fell in love with someone who seems quite unsuitable for you? What happens if there is a traitor in your spy network? Sometimes they might appear more complicated: How can I reconstruct my memory of an event I can't recall? Perhaps, too, 'think' is not the right word: 'think' is too limiting a description of the range of what a novel can do with ideas. In any event, the way literature thinks is bound up with what it's like to be us, to be human. Literature is how we make ourselves intelligible to ourselves. And contemporary fiction matters because it is how we work out who we are, today.

I believe the novel is the best way of doing this. Of all the arts, the novel is the most thoughtful, the closest, most personal.

(Eagleton 2013a, 1)

3) Course Overview

24th Oct Lecture 1 How Recent Is Recent?
Introductory Notes on the Contemporary British Novel

Part 1: A Systematic Approach

31st Oct Lecture 2 The Novel in History: A Very Short Introduction

7th Nov Lecture 3 The Novelist at the Crossroads:
A Map of Modes and Orientations

Part 2: Case Studies

14th Nov Lecture 4 What's the Use of Stories that Aren't Even True? Salman
Rushdie as a Test Case for Writing Fiction Today

21st Nov Lecture 5 Condition of England, Condition of Europe: Realism at the
End of the 20th Century
[William Golding, *Darkness Visible* (1979);
Julian Barnes, *The Porcupine* (1992)]

28th Nov Lecture 6 Rewriting History: Subjective and Medial Turns
[Penelope Lively, *Moon Tiger* (1987);
Adam Thorpe, *Ulverton* (1992)]

5th Dec Lecture 7 Experimental Fictions: Looking Forward, Looking Back
[Russell Hoban, *Riddley Walker* (1980);
Jeanette Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry* (1989)]

12th Dec Lecture 8 Alternative Worlds: Fantasy and the Emergence of Dual
Address
[Philip Pullman, *His Dark Materials* (1995-2000);
Ben Aaronovitch, *Rivers of London* (2011-)]

19th Dec Lecture 9 Multicultural Britain: The Outside as Inside
[Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (2000);
Patrick Neate, *Twelve Bar Blues* (2001)]

9th Jan	Lecture 10	The Present in Perspective: Where We Are and Where We Are Heading [Ian McEwan, <i>Saturday</i> (2005); Kazuo Ishiguro, <i>Never Let Me Go</i> (2005)]
16th Jan	Lecture 11	Weird Fiction [China Miéville, <i>The City and the City</i> (2009); <i>Embassytown</i> (2011)]
23rd Jan	Lecture 12	The Novel and Digital Culture [Nicola Barker, <i>H(A)PPY</i> (2017); Ian McEwan, <i>Machines Like Me</i> (2019)]
30th Jan	Lecture 13	Brex(I)it [Ali Smith, <i>Autumn</i> (2016); John Lanchester, <i>The Wall</i> (2019)]
6th Feb	Lecture 14	Futures of the British Novel? [Tom McCarthy, <i>Satin Island</i> (2015); Bernardine Evaristo, <i>Girl, Woman, Other</i> (2019)]

Bibliography Lecture 1:

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- Nensel, Amrei Katharina, Christoph Reinfandt, eds., *The Literary Market in the UK*. E-pub. University of Tuebingen, 2017: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15496/publikation-16168>
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- Stevenson, Randall, *The Last of England? The Oxford English Literary History Vol. 12: 1960-2000*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004.
- Tew, Philip, *The Contemporary British Novel*. London/New York: Continuum, 2004.

Granta: The Magazine of New Writing:

- Vol. 3 (1980): The End of the English Novel
- Vol. 7 (1983): Best of Young British Novelists 1
- Vol. 43 (1993): Best of Young British Novelists 2
- Vol. 81 (2003): Best of Young British Novelists 3
- Vol. 56 (1996): What Happened to Us? Britain's Valedictory Realism
- Vol. 123 (2013): Best of Young British Novelists 4