Vera Nünning, Ansgar Nünning (Eds.)

The British Novel in the Twenty-First Century

Cultural Concerns – Literary Developments – Model Interpretations

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The undiminished popularity and diversity of contemporary fiction, the challenges of an environment largely dominated by various crises and digital media, and the specifics of emerging cultural concerns in the new millennium are only some of the reasons why we see a need for a handbook that systematically addresses the developments and current state of the British novel in the twenty-first century. This conceptually oriented volume on recent trends in the British novel tries to provide a provisional map of the most salient developments, genres, and trajectories that are already discernible, while also situating them within the broader cultural contexts and transformations to which many novels respond.

With this book, we pursue three aims: First, although this handbook does not claim to attain comprehensiveness, the chapters explore key works of as many of the most influential novelists of the new millennium as possible. Second, the volume tries to provide a survey of the most important developments, subgenres, themes, narrative techniques and contexts of the contemporary British novel, while being particularly geared towards the cultural concerns and contexts which the novels examined in each chapter address. Third, the chapters are designed in such a way as to offer exemplary critical analyses and interpretations of the novels in question, while also demonstrating various theoretical and methodological approaches in action, thus hopefully serving as model interpretations.

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Last but certainly not least, our heartfelt thanks go to the colleagues who not only kindly agreed to contribute original articles to this handbook but who also provided valuable suggestions from which this volume benefited in many ways. They have made working on this volume a source of intellectual pleasure, confirming the value of collaborative research. We are very grateful to all of our contributors for sharing their great expertise, and for bearing in mind the interest of their readers.

Heidelberg/Gießen, December 2017 Vera and Ansgar Nünning

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1.

AN OUTLINE OF THE OBJECTIVES, FEATURES AND CHALLENGES OF THE BRITISH NOVEL IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

VERA NÜNNING & ANSGAR NÜNNING

1. Introducing the Main Features, Questions and Objectives of this History

Although the seminal overview that Malcolm Bradbury gives in *The Modern British Novel* (1994) surveys the history of the genre from 1878 to the 1990s, his tongue-in-cheek comment about the alleged death or on-going decline of the novel could also be used as a point of departure for introducing the contemporary British novel: "Perhaps we should all agree that the novel – the British variety in particular, but also the novel in general – is dead, but that somehow a great many remarkable and talented people are writing something peculiarly like it, and discovering themselves and new forms in the process." (Bradbury 1994: xiv) For the time being, the contemporary British novel is not only alive and kicking, it has even continued to flourish by engaging with a host of current issues, generating new forms and sub-genres, and enjoying great popularity and cultural prestige. Despite many pronouncements on the alleged demise of the novel, the on-going popularity of this genre has shown that such Cassandra calls have been premature at best, misleading and simply wrong at worst. The novel continues to be "one of the most powerful and inventive critical tools we have with which to address the emerging conditions of a new being in the world", as Peter Boxall (2013: 14) observes in his critical introduction to 21st century fiction. Pamela Bickley may well be right when she states that "[t]here is perhaps no genre more suited to the articulation of millennial anxieties than the novel" (2008: 35).

Though paradoxical at first, the observation that the novel has so far fared quite well in what might at first glance look like a hostile cultural environment dominated by all kinds of crises and digital technologies (see chapter 2) points to some of the strengths of the genre that can be traced back to the definition of a 'novel', or rather to the difficulty or lack thereof: While everyone has an intuitive understanding of what a novel is, nobody is particularly confident about venturing to give an exact definition of what has evolved as a particularly adaptable and protean genre, which exists in infinitely varied forms. Whereas poetry is often conceived as a particularly 'difficult' genre, which has to be avoided at all costs (especially amongst students), novels continue to appeal to the common reader. The enduring popularity of the novel as a genre may be attributed to the fact that man (and woman) can, after all, be defined as "the story-telling animal", as the narrator of Graham Swift's *Waterland* (1983: 53) felicitously suggests, but it can also be traced back to its unique adaptability, flexibility and openness. In her essay "The Narrow Bridge of Art", Virginia Woolf captured these

qualities of the novel very well by resorting to an unusual metaphor and characterizing salient features of the novel: "That cannibal, the novel, which has devoured so many forms of art will by then have devoured even more. We shall be forced to invent new names for the different books which masquerade under this one heading." (1994 [1927]: 435)

Reviewing the multiple genres, strands and trajectories of the British novel in the first fifteen years of the 21st century, we can safely say that Woolf was right on both scores: First, the British novel has certainly continued to devour a great many forms of art, discourses, text-types and media, and it will by the end of this decade, let alone this century, no doubt have swallowed even more. Secondly, reviewers and critics have been forced "to invent new names for the different books which masquerade under this one heading", and they have indeed been very eager to do so and very prolific to boot. Describing the novel metaphorically as a 'cannibal', Woolf effectively illustrates the remarkable mutability of this genre, its concomitant diversity of manifestations, and its outstanding ability to adapt to even radically altered cultural and medial contexts by integrating new forms in the widest sense of that term (cf. Levine 2015). The novel thus encompasses a wide range of sub-genres classified according to subject-matter, such as historical fiction, science fiction, the campus, spy, adventure, war, artist, social and woman's novel, and according to combinations of structure, form and content. The latter include e.g. the neo-picaresque novel, the *bildungsroman*, thrillers, mysteries and hard-boiled crime fiction. In the 21st century, many novels have begun to devour features and text-types of the new digital media, generating ever new variants of fiction like the multimodal novel, the novel told in e-mails, and narrative fictions that engage with the internet. In doing so, the novel has continued to live up to its reputation and its name, continuing to be as novel as ever.

Coming to terms with contemporary literature in general and the history of the contemporary British novel in particular is by no means an easy task. In addition to the sheer number of new novels that appear every year, two of the main problems that a survey of trends in the contemporary novel poses are exactly the mutability of the genre and its resulting diversity of forms. Moreover, to a greater extent than genres and works from other literary periods, contemporary literature poses a number of methodological challenges to anyone who tries to get to grips with either recent developments in the history of the genre(s) or individual novels, let alone with broader cultural trends. The methodological challenges of attempts to write histories of contemporary literature include the problems of selection and canon-formation, of identifying salient developments and trends, of organizing and structuring the material, and the complexities of contextualizing and historicizing literary works (see section two below). While the benefit of hindsight (cf. Freeman 2010) tends to foster the illusion of literary historians who explore earlier periods that they are able to discern the most important literary developments, contemporaneity reminds us just how hard it actually is to identify, and distinguish, dominant, residual and emerging elements, practices and trends in the institutions of literature and culture at large (cf. Levine 2015: 62f.). Other

challenges for histories of contemporary literature result from the fact that emerging developments, just like latency in general tend to defy direct observation (cf. A. Nünning 2016), and that the 21st century has already witnessed so many crises, disruptions, and innovations that it is well-nigh impossible to keep track of the plethora of on-going cultural, economic, medial, and social transformations.

To begin with, the 21st century has been, and continues to be, a period of rapid technological change with far-reaching consequences not only for the economic landscape, but also for the trajectories of literary history, culture, and all walks of everyday life. The on-going disruptions ushered in by the digital age and the unprecedented growth of digital monopolies like Amazon, Facebook and Google have altered and even eroded beyond recognition many of the assumptions, social practices and values that used to be associated with the institutions of literature and culture (cf. Taplin 2017). The digital technologies have also left their mark on our brains and minds, as the renowned neuroscientist Susan Greenfield has shown in her fascinating book *Mind Change* (2014), and they have radically changed the dominant forms of life and the ways in which we experience the world. In his brilliant book entitled *Radical Technologies: The Design of Everyday Life*, Adam Greenfield (2017) not only offers an insightful analysis and probing critique of the ways in which the new digital information technologies have become the dominant media that shape contemporary life-worlds; he also explores the far-reaching consequences they have had, and continue to have, on the design of our everyday life and the pre- and remediated ways in which we experience it:

> But more pertinently, *networked digital information technology has become the dominant mode through which we experience the everyday*. In some important sense this class of technology now mediates just about everything we do. It is simultaneously the conduit through which our choices are delivered to us, the mirror by which we see ourselves reflected, and the lens that lets others see us on a level previously unimagined. (A. Greenfield 2017: 6)

Although it is too early to reliably gauge how these networked digital information technologies will impact the trajectory of contemporary literature and the development of the novel, it is already obvious that they have had far-reaching and largely devastating consequences for such cultural domains as journalism and the music industry. As Jonathan Taplin (2017) has shown, the business models, ruthless practices and questionable values of the gigantic digital monopolies, especially Amazon, Facebook and Google, have not only "cornered culture", as the felicitous subtitle puts it, they have also been responsible for a massive reallocation of revenue from the artists, musicians, and writers who create artistic works (i.e. the so-called 'content') to the monopoly platforms, to the tune of around $50 billion a year. One does not have to be a pessimist or a prophet to dare to predict that other cultural domains will sooner or later undergo similar transformations, and that the unprecedented ubiquity of digital information technologies and their effects on our brains, minds, forms of life and societies will also impact the history of literature, both on an institutional level (cf. Collins 2010) and on the development of forms and genres.

The undiminished popularity and diversity of contemporary fiction, the challenges of an environment largely dominated by digital media and various crises, and the specificities of emerging cultural concerns in the new millennium are only some of the reasons why we see a great need for a handbook that systematically addresses the developments and current state of the British novel in the 21st century, taking into account some of the most important recent contextual changes like the financial crises, technological innovations, economic disruptions, and the cultural, political, and social transformations. Although in the last few years the first book-length studies have appeared that begin to reflect on the development of the British novel in the new millennium, only few of them take at least some of these contexts, disruptions and transformations into account (for an overview, see chapter two), nor is there any work that deals with these complex issues on a broad basis of authors, texts, and cultural contexts.

We therefore decided to devise a conceptually oriented handbook on recent trends in the British novel in the 21st century that tries to provide a provisional map of the most salient developments, genres, and trajectories already discernible, while also situating them within the broader cultural contexts and transformations to which many novels respond. Although novels nowadays compete with a whole range of other narrative formats across various media for the attention of the common reader, who is usually also a smartphone user, an avid watcher of films and television series, and perhaps also a player of computer and video games, the productivity and creativity of novelists is miraculously as unbroken as readers' hunger for new novels. The novel continues to thrive as a genre in which cultural, economic, political, social, and even technological transformations are processed and reflected, interpreted and, sometimes, even anticipated. An elliptical enumeration already serves to show just how many far-reaching changes, cataclysmic events, major disruptions, and erosive processes the new century and millennium has already witnessed: The global outbreak of violence and the deepening rift between 'the West and the rest' that shaped the turn from the 20th to the 21st century and found its iconographic representation in the collapsing Twin Towers; America's and Britain's subsequent ill-judged and ill-omened 'war on terror' (see Hodges 2011), its dire consequences, including the world-wide rise of terrorism, and the concomitant revision of (trans-)national and cultural narratives; the Lehman bankruptcy and the ensuing global financial crises (cf. Lanchester 2010); the threat of global warming and climate change; the digitization, securitization and surveillance of life-worlds hitherto considered 'private', and the concomitant "mind change" (S. Greenfield 2014) resulting from the impact of the digital technologies on our brains; the fierce resurgence of nationalism, racism and racist violence in an allegedly post-racial age; and now the backlash of conservatism, nationalism, and the erosion of political authority, culminating in the ill-fated Brexit – these are only some of the many relevant contexts in which British novels of the 21st century are situated and to which they respond with great aesthetic flexibility, including formal, generic and thematic innovations.

Although each chapter in this handbook deals with different developments, genres, authors, novels, and cultural concerns, there are some overarching research ques-

tions which they attempt to address: What are the dominant literary developments, cultural issues, themes and topics of contemporary British novels? What are the cultural dynamics, i.e. the institutional, political, economic, cultural, and social contexts that have influenced the various trajectories of the British novel in the past fifteen years, and how can we account for their complex relations to the novel? Which authors – well-established and younger ones – have shaped the development of British novels in the 21st century? What are the most influential novels of the new millennium so far, and how have they responded to, altered, and propelled our very notion of 'the British novel'? Why, and if so, how should we read British novels in the 21st century, i.e. which theoretical frameworks, methodological approaches, and concepts can offer us new insights into this relatively old and well-established genre, which nonetheless has managed to retain its defining quality of continuing to be novel? How have the changing media landscape and the manifold disruptions brought about by networked digital information technology changed both the dominant forms of life in the 21st century, and the materiality, narrative techniques, and aesthetics of the contemporary novel? If postmodernism no longer prevails, as some critics argue, how can we grasp and define the new aesthetics, thematic concerns and formal trends of contemporary British novels?

The chapters in this volume aim to address these (and other) questions in a manner that is at once systematic and clearly structured *and* deliberately pluralistic and open, particularly with regard to the theoretical and methodological frameworks applied. Accordingly, our idea for a handbook on the 21st century British novel pursues four major goals. First, although no such one-volume handbook could ever make any claims to comprehensiveness, we have made an attempt to represent as many of the most influential novelists of the new millennium as possible with at least one work each. We thus hope that the list of authors and works reads like a 'who is who' of the contemporary British novel, featuring for instance the recent Nobel prize winner Kazuo Ishiguro – even though such an attempt implies a series of problems and challenges with regard to questions of canon formation and the granting of cultural capital, and, of course, acknowledging that there will no doubt be readers who will miss one of their favourite writers or novels. Second, the volume tries to provide a survey of the most important developments and subgenres of the contemporary British novel, while being particularly geared towards the cultural concerns and contexts to which the novels read closely in each chapter respond. Third, the selected authors, works, and trends should in their entirety provide a more or less representative, albeit not comprehensive overview of the broad spectrum of themes, genres, contexts, and styles of British novels in the 21st century. Fourth, the chapters are designed in such a way as to offer students and other readers exemplary critical analyses and interpretations of the novels in question, while also demonstrating various theoretical and methodological approaches in action, thus hopefully serving as model interpretations.

In the next section, we will discuss the main methodological challenges that are involved in any attempt to write histories of contemporary literature, or culture at large. This introduction, which focuses on background, context and overarching de-

velopments, will be concluded by a brief overview of the structure of this volume and of the chapters that follow after the introductory section. The second chapter of this handbook will then provide an overview of some of the main cultural contexts, concerns and disruptions that have significantly changed the dominant forms of life and that should be taken into consideration when trying to come to terms with recent developments in the history of the British novel, and with the cultural dynamics of generic change, in the 21st century.

2. Literary History in the Making: Canonization, Classification and Contextualization as Challenges of Writing Histories of Contemporary Literature

In what is still a landmark work on the challenges and contradictions involved in writing literary history, David Perkins casts severe doubts on the possibility of answering the question raised in the title of his book in the affirmative: *Is Literary History Possible?* (1992) Although there is no need to summarize the wide range of his fine insights, the fundamental problems that Perkins identified in the writing of literary history are especially pertinent for any attempt to come to terms with contemporary literature, viz. the problems involved in classifying, organizing and presenting recent literary developments, and the challenges of trying to explain literary change by contextualizing the trends that have been identified and described. One could even go so far as to say that what Lawrence Lipking maintained about literary history in general is especially true for histories of contemporary literature: "Literary history used to be impossible to write; lately it has become much harder." (1995: 1)

One of the main reasons for writing histories of contemporary literature being impossible, and for lately becoming much harder, resides in the on-going cultural dynamics of the subject itself: What the critic and historian of the contemporary novel is confronted with is not a self-contained or settled period of the past but rather what the Dutch critic Elisabeth Wesseling has felicitously called "History in the Making" (1991: 135) and "Historiography in the Making" (ibid.: 120). Anyone who tries to get to grips with recent developments of contemporary literature thus not only has to struggle with all of the challenges and constraints of historical research (including the partiality of historical knowledge, the potential unreliability of sources, selectivity, and narrativity; cf. ibid: 120-33), but also with the cultural dynamics of the literary field, the on-going literary productivity and the ensuing openness of the subject matter, which has not yet been mapped.

Dealing with literary history in the making, this handbook of the British novel in the 21st century is therefore not only confronted with all the methodological challenges of writing histories that Perkins (1991, 1992) has scrutinized, it also partakes in literary historiography in the making, inevitably constructing the very object that it cannot merely describe innocently or neutrally. Like all literary histories, it is necessarily selective: In order to provide adequate representations of some main developments, it concentrates on selected genres, novels, and contexts, while inevitably giving