

Michael Basseler, Ansgar Nünning (eds.),
in collaboration with Nico Völker

The American Novel in the 21st Century

Cultural Contexts – Literary Developments –
Critical Analyses

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Ansgar Nünning und Vera Nünning

Michael Basseler, Ansgar Nünning (eds.),
in collaboration with Nico Völker

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**Cultural Contexts – Literary Developments –
Critical Analyses**

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I. INTRODUCTION/SURVEY

THE AMERICAN NOVEL IN THE 21ST CENTURY: CHANGING CONTEXTS, LITERARY DEVELOPMENTS, NEW MODES OF READING

MICHAEL BASSELER & ANSGAR NÜNNING

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

“Suddenly, as the book takes to its sickbed, everybody wants to write one,” Robert Coover observes in his thought-provoking essay “A History of the Future of Narrative” (2011: 1181). Indeed, it paradoxically seems that, in times when literature as we know (or knew) it finds itself in crisis, the American novel is thriving, having risen like a phoenix from its ashes or its sickbed. While novels nowadays must compete with many other narrative formats across various media for the attention of both general and scholarly audiences, the productivity and creativity of contemporary novelists are unbroken. Amidst the many political, social, economic, cultural, and technological transformations the young millennium has already engendered, the novel still thrives as a genre in which these transformations are negotiated and reflected, aesthetically shaped, interpreted, countered, and sometimes even anticipated. Moreover, contemporary novelists and their works continue to play an important role in shaping cultural conversations and discourses, responding as they do to a wide range of political, social and technological disruptions and the concerns they have engendered during the first two decades of the millennium.

It may come as somewhat of a surprise, however, that the novel has continued to flourish as a highly popular genre, particularly since most of the major changes, developments and disruptions that have characterized the new millennium seem to foster trends, tastes, and lifestyles that would relegate literature to an obsolete footnote. Our current historical moment has been dubbed, for instance, the age of globalization, the age of neoliberalism (cf. Greenwald Smith 2015), the age of the internet, the age of late capitalism, the age of Amazon (cf. McGurl 2016), the age of the Anthropocene, and the age of insecurity and risk, to name but a few. However, we should not uncritically accept such sweeping and unifying period designations, since they not only frame the recent past in an unduly homogenizing manner but also tend to marginalize or leave out other developments that do not fit into the picture, as the art historian Jonathan Crary has rightly observed about the so-called ‘digital age’:

This pseudo-historical formulation of the present age as a digital age, supposedly homologous with a 'bronze age' or 'steam age,' perpetuates the illusion of a unifying and durable coherence to the many incommensurable constituents of contemporary experience. (2013: 36)

Nonetheless, for most of the (often overlapping) terms that purportedly characterize the present age, scholars have come up with new novelistic subgenres deemed to originate from – or at least be ideologically, politically, aesthetically, or otherwise entangled with – these changing contexts in the 21st century. Cases in point include, for instance, such new subgenres as *Contemporary Crisis Fictions* (Horton 2014), '*Fictions of the Internet*' (Weigel-Heller 2018), *Anthropocene Fiction* (Trexler 2015), and 'cli-fi' or climate (change) fiction dealing with the causes and consequences of global warming, to name but a few of the recently emerging novelistic genres, or rather of the labels that critics have proposed to designate allegedly new genres. Other novelistic sub-genres that have come to the fore since 2000 or that have been proposed as new genre designation include, for instance, Ground Zero fiction (Däwes 2011), "the neoliberal novel" (Michaels 2011), and the "fragmentary essay-novel" (Nünning/Scherr 2018). Like the novel ontologies that have emerged after 9/11 (cf. Kovach 2016), these genres and other new trends in contemporary fiction arguably arise from altered states and matters of concern, addressing and critically responding to social, political and technological developments that have occurred in the new millennium, especially the post-9/11 era.

Focussing on the ways in which contemporary fiction and new genres of the novel are entangled with post-millennial challenges and concerns, the aim of this volume is to provide students, university teachers, and literary scholars with a compact overview of the American novel in the first two decades of the new millennium. Although in the last few years the first book-length studies have appeared that begin to reflect on the development of the American novel in the light of the various transformations and contexts hinted at above (see e.g. Boyle/Evans 2010; Gladstone et al. 2016; Fjellestad/Watson 2017a; Müller 2017), there is still relatively little research that systematically addresses these complex issues on a broad basis of authors and texts. Although each chapter in this handbook deals with different developments, genres, authors, novels, and cultural concerns, there are some overarching research questions which they attempt to address: What are the dominant themes and recurring topics of recent American novels? How can the cultural dynamics of literary change in contemporary fiction be conceptualized (see Basseler/Nünning/Schwanecke 2013), and what are the institutional, political, economic, cultural, and social contexts that have driven generic change in the American novel in the last fifteen to twenty years? Moreover, what authors – established and new – have shaped the course of the novel in the 21st century? What are the most influential novels of the new millennium thus far, and how have they responded to, altered, and complicated our very notion of 'the American novel'? Why, and if so, should we *read* American novels in the 21st century, i.e., what critical and post-critical approaches (see Anker/Felski 2017) can offer us new insights into this old genre (i.e. the novel)? How has the changing media landscape also changed the materiality, narrative repertoire, and aesthetics of the novel? If, as some critics have claimed, postmodernism is no longer