Introduction

This is a book that is devoted to the discussion of fiction – reference is made to more than a hundred novelists, and to some two hundred fictional works. I am concerned chiefly with novels, but I also discuss significant works of shorter fiction. My aim has been to produce a history of post-war fiction in Britain that places the literary texts centre stage, and that allows them, rather than a predetermined critical agenda, to reveal the significant patterns and themes in the literary culture. Inevitably, one's own critical perspective is fashioned by a particular intellectual climate, but the withholding, or (at least) the judicious deployment, of favoured critical frameworks is often a necessary part of uncovering the significance of a novel. One needs to bear in mind that the theoretical preoccupations that have become dominant in the academy since 1980 – and that may be overtly alluded to in the work of a Carter, a Rushdie or a Winterson – had no relevance to the novelists of the 1950s and earlier 1960s, whose work unfolded against a very different cultural and intellectual background.

At the beginning of such a project, however, some kind of general framework for reading is required, most especially to explain what is unique to the novel as a form of knowledge, and to help justify the claim, which underpins this work, that the novel in Britain from 1950–2000 yields a special insight into the most important areas of social and cultural history. The survey as a whole stands as a full justification of this claim; but to sketch a short explanation I can do no better than turn to a novel for a suggestion about the effects of narrative fiction.

In John Fowles's *Daniel Martin* (1977) there is an important symbolic scene at an abandoned site of Amer-Indian habitation in New Mexico. Daniel Martin, on a quest for personal authenticity, and the means by which this quest might be advanced in the form of a novel, sees the ancient site of Tsankawi as hugely significant to his goals. He begins to long for a particular kind of medium, 'something dense, interweaving, treating time as horizontal, like a skyline; not cramped, linear and progressive'. The longing is inspired by the ancient inhabitants of Tsankawi, and 'their inability to think of time except in the present, of the past and future except in terms of the present-not-here'. This approach to temporality creates 'a kind

of equivalency of memories and feelings, a totality of consciousness that fragmented modern man has completely lost' (p. 371).

What Fowles does here is identify the key element of the novel in a secular, individualistic age; for this is a medium that follows a notional present in the life of one or more characters, but traces necessary connections with the 'past' and 'future' experiences in this imagined life, in the course of narrative exposition. Since this temporal interplay is compressed in a (relatively) short narrative span, the structure of the novel is one that demonstrates the horizontality of time, and can deliver the complete temporal consciousness that is sometimes felt to be missing in contemporary life, governed by short-term goals and ephemeral cultural forms. This component of the modern novel is, perhaps, that which most clearly accounts for its ability to strike the desired balance between imagination and reality (p. 310). In Daniel Martin's moment of creative epiphany at Tsankawi, the novel's credentials as a vehicle of knowledge are underscored: the novel, through its ability to fictionalize and reimagine, affords a reinvigorating perspective on the real. And, through its fluid yet cohesive treatment of time, the novel fashions a mode of temporal understanding that is unavailable in other forms of writing, and that assists our comprehension of the individual's ongoing role in social history.

In making this kind of special claim for the post-war novel, I am (partially) supporting Steven Connor's proposition to view the novel since 1950 'not just as passively marked with the imprint of history, but also as one of the ways in which history is made and remade'.[1] I am also working in the spirit of Andrzej Gąsiorek's important demonstration of the ways in which realism has been extended in this period.[2] In their different ways, Connor and Gąsiorek discover creative impulses that reinvigorate the immediate social function of the post-war novel. In seeking to illustrate that function, however, this book asserts several principles that would seem to be currently unfashionable. First, I am implicitly suggesting that a large sample of novels is a necessity in the attempt to establish a tentative literary history. My selection of two hundred novels, and more than a hundred authors, is, of course, a selective representation of the literary activity between 1950 and 2000; there are inevitable practical constraints – on the number of years one critic can devote to a single project, and on the word-limit for a publishable book – and these have prevented me from ranging still further. But the sample is significantly larger than has been attempted hitherto in comparable surveys, and the representativeness I can claim for this book is bestowed by its attempt at coverage.

I have, however, operated a stringent understanding of the 'social novel', and this brings me to my second principle: the concentration on those works that treat of contemporary history and society, even though such an emphasis may seem to be out of kilter with recent literary fashion. Indeed,

a turn towards the historical novel has been frequently observed in the 1990s, in marked contrast to the gritty working-class realism of the 1950s and 1960s. The career of Beryl Bainbridge would seem to illustrate this development; yet this survey privileges the close observation of social mores in the Bainbridge of *The Bottle Factory Outing* (1974) and *A Quiet Life* (1976) over the later Bainbridge who turned to the broad canvas of public history in works like *Every Man for Himself* (1996), inspired by the Titanic disaster, and *Master Georgie* (1998), set in the time of the Crimean War. I am not disputing that the turn to history can still tell us something very interesting about a writer's own time; but I am suggesting that the claim for the novel's participation in the *making* of cultural history is more justifiable in relation to those works that strike a chord in the public consciousness by virtue of their engagement with the present. *Lucky Jim* (1954) by Kingsley Amis, *Poor Cow* (1967) by Nell Dunn, *The History Man* (1975) by Malcom Bradbury, *Money* (1984) by Martin Amis, and Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996) are all novels – one from each of the five decades, 1950–2000 – that have struck such a chord.

The most unfashionable emphasis (or de-emphasis) in this survey follows from this second principle, and this is the demotion of fantasy and magic realism from its position of pre-eminence in much critical discussion. Again, I am not oblivious to the special access to the contemporary psyche that the initial departure from realism can afford. The huge popularity of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (1954–5) is not simply a reflection of a mass desire for escapism. Through the apparent escape, Tolkien's 'Shire' (for instance) can be seen to form an imaginative link with other social developments, such as the emergence of the early Green movement in Britain.[3] In a similar connection, I find (in Chapter One) a commentary on the nascent youth culture of the 1950s and 1960s fairly close to the surface of Anthony Burgess's future fable *A Clockwork Orange* (1962). Yet fable is a mode that can also operate in the reverse direction, obscuring particular contextual correspondences, and implying universal truths about human nature: it is a wilful reading which side-steps the revelation of timeless human evil in William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954), for instance.

Two of the problems I have been outlining here – the use of a theoretical perspective to determine rather than facilitate a reading, and the distorting claims that can be made for the flight from realism – are illustrated in the critical interest in Angela Carter. Looking at the vast body of critical material on Carter and Bakhtinian carnival, say, one is struck by a *de facto* cultural misrepresentation, especially where carnival has been used to imply a utopian ideal unhooked from the British context. Bakhtin is a useful theorist of the novel, and Angela Carter is a significant writer; but she does not deserve the status of (by some margin) the most-written-about post-war British novelist.

If the number of academic theses devoted to an author were to be taken as a reliable measure of the author's relative importance, Carter would emerge as the single literary giant of the period. One may legitimately wonder whether or not Carter is being used to illuminate the theory, rather than vice versa.

I do not wish to deny the importance of some theoretical perspectives, or the intellectual impact these have had on writers, especially from the 1980s onwards. Rushdie's allusion to postmodernist critiques of the West in *The Satanic Verses* (1988) obliges an effort of theoretical explication, for instance, as does the apparent extended reference to Donna Haraway in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000). There is also a sense that some contemporary texts grow organically out of their intellectual milieu and have profound and sustained affinities with theoretical writing. Thus, Homi Bhabha's 'DissemiNation' is an obvious companion piece to *The Satanic Verses*.[4] This may be no more than to observe that serious literature responds imaginatively to its intellectual climate, but this does make the appropriate application of critical theory a variable, and context-dependent business.

As an example, it is worth remembering that to critics in the 1960s, the influence of existentialism loomed large. Thus James Gindin was prompted to suggest that the perceived iconoclasm of John Wain, Kingsley Amis, and Alan Sillitoe, directed against established religious and political structures, was an attribute of a particular existential *Angst*.[5] Existentialism certainly had some influence as a point of debate – most notably on the work of Iris Murdoch – but this now seems a less pressing concern. (Gindin's discussion of how a typically working-class defence contributes to a dual mood of simultaneous estrangement and assertion, in the early post-war novel, now seems more pertinent.[6])

It is necessary, then, to recognize the existence of different period epistemes over a dramatically changing half-century. Such an inclusive perspective resurrects (for example) the class-consciousness of David Storey, the liberal anxieties of Angus Wilson and Malcolm Bradbury, and the social conscience of Margaret Drabble to stand beside those postmodernists whose work has dominated recent critical discussion.

The novel has clearly been shaped by non-literary ideas that go beyond the frame of reference established by the more self-contained intellectual debates. Certainly one of the most dominant contextual factors, with a decisive impact on the novelistic imagination, was the Cold War. Until 1989 and the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, the fear of nuclear conflict between the US and the Soviet Union was a constant presence in international relations. (Whether the dissipation of these immediate fears in the 1990s is fully justified is debatable, given that the weapons of mass destruction are still extant, often in a state of neglect.) Novelists were often

obliged to think through their themes in terms of the blunt opposition of political systems. In *Daniel Martin*, for instance, John Fowles allows the conflict between East and West to stand as a backdrop to his exploration of individual free will, finally promoting a progressive liberal philosophy in which will and compassion might be seen to inform one another (p. 703). The anxious mood is evoked more explicitly in Angus Wilson's *The Old Men at the Zoo* (1961), where an apocalyptic theme – in this case the vision of a major European war – unsettles Wilson's social comedy, producing an unnerving hybrid style. The fear of apocalypse reaches a culmination in Martin Amis's *Einstein's Monsters* (1987), which begins with a polemical essay designed to prompt a visceral horror in the reader at the prospect of imminent nuclear devastation. It seems incredible that this polemical intent, which was compelling in 1987, could become apparently anachronistic in little over a decade.

This note of caution about historical variability and the importance of context is written with an eye to the propensity of the novel to engage with history. If a claim can legitimately be made for the novel's role in a broader social process of imaginative liberation, its limitations are equally clear. The novel may make a tangible impact on contemporary culture, on our memory of recent social history, and on our perceptions of self-identity; but the novel cannot be said to make identifiable and immediate interventions in given social problems. The 'liberation' in which it participates is a complex process, a combination of a variety of forces and influences within the social superstructure. Thus, one can argue that a sympathetic reading of Sam Selvon in the 1950s may have produced recognition or fresh understanding; but, of course, *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) could not in itself eradicate racism.

Perhaps the most liberating feature of the post-war novel is the democratic conception of art it has come to embody. An increasingly well-educated population makes incremental advances towards an egalitarian literary culture possible, and the mass-market paperback supplies the practical route for its transmission.[7] It is the form of the novel, however, that gives it the uniquely privileged position of a serious art form – the novel is the major literary mode at the end of the twentieth century – and yet one that is *ordinary*. Anyone literate can become a novelist; and anyone who is sufficiently well read could even become a good one. There are no arcane rules of expression, since the novel, by its very nature, is a form that continually evolves; and in the computer age, generating the text of a novel is a simple enough matter. At the end of the century, it seems that the Internet, and the ebook, bucking the trend towards publishing conglomerates, could put publishing back into the hands of authors.

More important than this, however, is the status of the social novel as a form of discourse that can reach into all other areas of social experience.

Here there is a direct bridge between the seriousness of novels that scrutinize the status quo, and less reflective expressions of popular culture. The post-war novel has done much to discredit a rigid distinction between 'high' and 'low' culture, and, indeed, the prominent protagonists, from Jim Dixon to Bridget Jones – characters that have been rightly seen to typify new social moods – have invariably had popular, or at least middlebrow tastes.

The novel, in short, has managed to cultivate a new intellectual space: it is the middlebrow art form *par excellence*, with unique and unrivalled access to every corner of social life, but a form that retains that 'literary', or serious quality, defined as the ability to deliberate, or to stimulate reflection on social and cultural questions. Reviewing British fiction of the 1980s, D. J. Taylor, a prominent and important critic, detected a widening gap between 'the novel of ideas and the (usually comic) novel of action', or, put more crudely, between 'drawing-room twitter and the banana skin'.[8] My sense is that this gap between the novel of ideas and the more popular (especially comic) novel has become less, rather than more, distinct in the post-war years, as a natural consequence of the gradual democratization of narrative fiction.

Successive critics of the novel in Britain, and especially England, have been less sanguine about its state of health, however. Arthur Marwick states the social historian's view that the novel in the immediate post-war period is 'fading', characterized by 'a national, even parochial quality' in the inward-looking manner of contemporary political thought; and throughout the period literary critics have found cause for concern about the novel's future.[9] There is, for example, a perceived moment of crisis in David Lodge's famous declaration from 1969 that the 'English novelist' then stood at a crossroads, faced with the alternative routes of fabulation and experimental metafiction. Lodge's advice was to go straight on, remaining on the road of realism and adhering to the liberal ideology it enshrines.[10]

More pessimistic was Bernard Bergonzi's assessment of 1970, that 'English literature in the fifties and sixties has been both backward- and inward-looking', indicating that 'in literary terms, as in political ones, Britain is not a very important part of the world today'. Preoccupied with parochial matters, and less innovative than the novel elsewhere (especially in America), English fiction offers little, Bergonzi argued, 'that can be instantly translated into universal statements about the human condition'.[11] He was only able to mount a partial challenge to this overview (as in the case of Lodge, this was based on a defence of English liberalism), so that his negative suggestions retain some of their force. One has to grant, further, that the picture he painted has remained partially true of the post-war novel, notably the preoccupation with parochial themes and topics, and the distrust of experimentation and formal innovation.[12] A focus on the particular, however, need not be taken

to signify an inferior form of attention. As successive chapters in this survey seek to show, just such a focus might well produce a literature that is rich in its social relevance and historical density.

Bergonzi's appraisal set the tone for critical discussion throughout the 1970s, the decade that is generally held to embody the nadir of British fiction, since the gathering economic crisis had a deleterious effect on publishing, and on the range of fiction that found an outlet; but from the longer perspective of literary history (and we may just be able to glimpse this now) it is hard to see how even the 1970s will go down as a period of suppressed creativity. On the contrary, this was a decade which saw the publication of important novels by Iris Murdoch, John Fowles, J. G. Farrell, and David Storey, among others. It also witnessed the first books by Martin Amis and Ian McEwan.

Yet the sense of a literary malaise has persisted beyond the 1970s, with Taylor characterizing the literary scene of the 1980s as 'a sprawling landscape of underachievement', and reformulating Bergonzi's impression of the innate superiority of American fiction.[13] The critic who most clearly stands in opposition to the Jeremiahs of British fiction is Malcolm Bradbury, who sadly died as I was completing this book; in the course of my research, I have found myself agreeing more and more with his assessment of a vigorous post-war novel, which stands up well to international comparison.[14] The range and diversity I have continued to uncover seems to support this opinion.

An interesting novel in connection with the international reputation of fiction in Britain is Bradbury's own *Stepping Westward* (1965), in which the comparison with the American novel supplies the thematic core. James Walker, a provincial novelist from Nottingham, associated with the Angry Young Men, finds his liberal attitudes tested, and his literary amateurism exposed, when he takes up the post of resident writer at a university 'on the edge of the middle' West (pp. 113–14). Here, the professional approach to analysing and teaching creative writing forces Walker into the first explicit assessment of his own convictions. Bradbury, who subsequently was to pioneer an MA in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia, a course which produced a number of distinguished novelists, including Ian McEwan and Kazuo Ishiguro, has Walker observe the absence of creative writing courses in English universities (p. 244);[15] but the relative professionalism of the American approach is also subject to scrutiny. The careerist and libertine Bernard Froelich, who has engineered Walker's invitation, seeks also to manipulate Walker's period of tenure as creative writing fellow at Benedict Arnold University. Froelich, who is planning a book on contemporary fiction, intends to write a chapter on Walker and the liberal's dilemma, but only after witnessing the personal dilemma of the English liberal at first hand. Walker walks out of his post when the full implications of Froelich's

experiment become clear, and his return to his mundane life in England seems a repudiation of self-serving and unethical professionalism.

Froelich, however, also stands for Bradbury in the sense that the novel is composed to test the adequacy of the liberal English novelist. Here, too, there are ethical shortcomings. The 'Anger' with which he is associated seems a sham, whilst Walker's own behaviour is often pusillanimous. He embodies a confused, and self-divided code, the 'very English brand of liberalism' that Froelich considers 'a faith of unbelief' (p. 317). Yet the lessons he learns suggest the need for more rather than less hesitancy: 'I've learned that literature is a bit more precarious in the future than I expected, that the new world of technology is one I don't understand at all, that democracy is not what I thought it was, and that there's more than one way of being a writer' (p. 360). This is a position that is quite distinct from the one suggested by Walker's own three novels in which he has projected heroes moulded on himself, 'trapped by their remoteness from history', but inclined to condemn social corruption (pp. 32–3). Walker thus becomes a figure of literary renaissance, formerly the epitome of mannered provincialism, but now on the cusp of change, embracing the uncertainties of the post-war novel, and anticipating the catholic range of contemporary British fiction.[16]

The focus of this survey, on the novel that concerns itself with contemporary social life in Britain since 1950, necessarily excludes a distinguished body of Second World War fiction, including Olivia Manning's *Balkan Trilogy* (1960–5), Evelyn Waugh's *Sword of Honour Trilogy* (1952–61), and Lawrence Durrell's *The Alexandria Quartet* (1957–60). Also omitted is the growing and equally distinguished corpus of First World War fiction, of which Pat Barker's *Regeneration Trilogy* (1991–5) is the most prominent example. Malcolm Lowry's mystical and symbolic late modernist *tour de force*, *Under the Volcano* (1947), is deemed to belong to an earlier period, by temperament as well as date, while Graham Greene's fictional concerns have floated free of particular social issues, and towards an engagement with larger religious and philosophical dilemmas.

The established parameters throw into relief the distinctive impulses of a half-century of creativity; and the pertinent themes and topics that present themselves establish my chapter divisions. The first chapter demonstrates how the tradition of 'the state of the nation' novel has been reconfigured in the years since 1950: a sense of social atomization is reflected in the difficulty novelists have had in sustaining an authoritative 'whole picture' of society. The political novel of public life has been largely eclipsed by the novel that concentrates on isolated individual lives, and that registers the fractured and complex nature of post-war society. This shift is epitomized in Margaret Drabble's exploratory shift from 'nurture' to 'nature' in her treatments of society.

Chapter Two traces the tension between economic and ideological perceptions of class status, and the mood of confusion that results, a mood reflected most tellingly, perhaps, in the novels of David Storey. The gradual waning of class-consciousness generates anxiety in the treatment of both working- and middle-class experience, and a growing recognition that traditional divisions no longer apply. The gritty working-class realism of the 1950s and 1960s looks, with hindsight, like the swansong of a dying genre. However, the rise of the underclass from the 1980s onwards denotes a new kind of social division that has attracted the disapprobation of novelists. (Livi Michael is a prominent writer in this connection.) More hopefully, this is also an era in which the self-conscious process of class formation supplants the older, given divisions, and this has a particular bearing on the role of the intellectual, as Raymond Williams has cogently shown.

The dramatic shift in post-war gender relations was given an unstoppable impetus by the war effort, which depended upon the toil of women, disrupting, in the process, traditional perceptions of the home and the workplace. As Chapter Three explains, however, the precise articulation of feminist concerns – notably in the fiction of Fay Weldon – only became manifest in the fiction of the 1970s, though an incipient feminism is found in some important novels of the 1960s. The 1990s saw the emergence of post-feminism, and a re-evaluation of feminism's oppositional stance undertaken by several significant feminist commentators, including Weldon. The general drift was towards a more inclusive projection of 'human' rather than 'women's rights'. Gay fiction, in an arresting contrast, is shown to have established a self-defined tradition of its own, in reaction to a prejudiced and inhospitable culture.

The focus of Chapter Four is the fictional investigation of national identity, which has repeatedly produced treatments suggestive of a kind of post-nationalism, a trend that reveals a vein of idealism in the novel that is not reflected in the prevailing popular mood. For Welsh and Scottish writers, and for Irish migrant writers in Britain, a reappraisal of traditional nationalist convictions and a relinquishment of old shibboleths, are the inevitable consequences of mongrelization – both cultural and genetic. The most noteworthy engagements with Englishness emphasize either the constructed nature of the English persona, or the dissolution of the colonial self. The displacement of English identity, however, can be viewed as an opportunity, the space in which the multicultural novel might flourish, as the appropriate legacy of the imperial past.

The term 'British', of course, is fraught with difficulties. Used to identify a geographical aggregation, it has a suitable looseness that acknowledges the separate development of four nations.[17] (The new subject area 'British Studies', in accordance with this non-prescriptive usage, has been

conceived in such a way as to examine competing traditions and diverse cultural identities.[18]) As a modern political concept, however, Britishness has often been deployed in questionable ways. The articulation of the Empire as British enabled England to 'avow and disavow its empire' by making the colonial British subordinate to England, whilst also establishing their difference.[19] Britishness, in this conception, begins as a tool of subjection, but evolves into a slippery non-category that facilitates the evasion of responsibility. For similar reasons, Britishness, in the view of some Welsh nationalists, is simply another word for Englishness. Despite these connotations, however, British identity remains open to contestation, and is available for appropriation, as in 'Black British' or 'Jewish British': it is this more fluid and inclusive understanding that my title is intended to register.

Chapter Five considers the extent to which a genuine mode of multicultural expression has already established itself. The more extravagant hybridized novel – associated especially with Salman Rushdie at the end of the period – implies the eventual emergence of a productive cultural intermingling. More typically, however, the migrant identities that are represented in the novel are faced with hostility. Post-war multicultural writing is thus often restricted in its modes of expression by a society that is slow to embrace the human inheritance of Empire. The mood of post-nationalism exemplified by Zadie Smith, however, betrays the emergence of a 'planetary humanism' to enshrine the hopes of the new millennium.[20]

The area of experience that has proved most elusive to the post-war novelist has been geographical transformation. As Chapter Six shows, the rapid alteration of the countryside and the dramatic expansion of suburbia have made definitions of 'urban' and 'rural', and the relationship between them, intensely problematic. As a consequence, the period has witnessed the demise of a clearly differentiated 'Nature Novel', and the development of self-conscious re-evaluations of pastoral, in which ideas of rural life are seen to have an impact on urban experience. Often the spread of urbanization gives rise to a dystopian vision, though more positive – even partly celebratory – representations have come from both Jim Crace and Hanif Kureishi.

In the final chapter I seek to anticipate the topics that might preoccupy novelists and critics in the twenty-first century by charting the treatment of additional topics that remain current. Thus, a retrospective demonstration of the falsity of the realism/experimentalism dichotomy implies that new hybrids, and fresh extensions of realism, can be expected. Similarly, the general trend away from third-person narrative, and towards a first-person 'confessional' style, promotes the special capacity of narrative fiction to capture personal moods in an increasingly fragmented historical period. The predominantly sceptical treatment of science and technology projects a