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Postmodernism, Multiculturalism and Contemporary British Literature

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Just as critical discussions of British literature in the first decades of the twentieth century have come to be dominated by the topic of modernism, so too have discussions of literature and culture in the last decades of the twentieth century and first decades of the twenty-first century come to be dominated by the topic of postmodernism. This chapter will present a basic description of the phenomenon of postmodernism and of the ways in which it differs from postmodernism. It will also discuss some of the important works of British literature that can be best understood within the context of postmodernism. However, it will begin by discussing the basic aspects of British history since World War II that have been crucial to the development of British literature since World War II. It will then turn to a discussion of certain trends in British literature since 1945 that are *not* best understood within the context of postmodernism, before turning, finally, to a discussion of postmodernist British literature.

British History Since World War II

History generally proceeds through processes of slow and gradual development, though there are certainly are distinct and specific landmarks along the way. For example, one could argue that the dismantling of the British Empire has seeds that go back as far as the American Revolution, which occurred before the empire in its modern form had even been built. But the key landmark that locates the beginning of the end of the modern British Empire occurred when the British pulled out of India on August 15, 1947. This event marked a new stage in the history of Great Britain, a stage in which the British were forced to come

to terms with their diminishing influence in the world and to seek new forms of national cultural identity that were not crucially dependent on the fact of empire. As the process of decolonization proceeded apace through most of the rest of the empire in the 1950s and 1960s, this experience of redefinition was only intensified and made more complicated by the geopolitical situation in the Cold War. Indeed, as the British pulled out of one colony after another, one of their chief concerns was to try to ensure that the new nations that emerged from these colonies would not fall under the sway of Soviet Union (which had the strong advantage of having long been opposed to colonialism) but would instead remain within the democratic bloc of the West. That the latter came increasingly to be dominated by the United States, with Great Britain merely in a backup role, was also something with which the British had to come to terms.

It was, in fact, at the urging of the Americans that the British proceeded slowly with decolonization after the massive carnage caused by their rapid pullout from India. The Americans, with good reason, felt that a rapid withdrawal from most of the remaining colonies would be in danger of leaving pro-Soviet forces in control there, given that the most effective anticolonial forces had often been led by socialists with strong ties to the Soviet Union. So the British (often with financial support from America) undertook the project of trying to train a new pro-Western leadership to take charge in the colonies after independence. Many in the colonies, however, were dissatisfied with this approach, and the years after Indian independence were marked by considerable strife, even as the British sought a gradual and peaceful process of decolonization.

In Asia, a string of defeats at the hands of the Japanese during World War II had destroyed once and for all the notion of British invincibility. Thus, in the face of the decolonization of India, Britain's nearby Malayan colonies began to demand immediate independence. When these demands were not met, the allied forces of the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) and the Malayan National Liberation Army (MNLA), their troops already battled-hardened in the struggle to win freedom from Japanese occupation during the war, launched a guerrilla campaign designed to drive out the British, who had returned to the colony after the Japanese were finally defeated. The resultant conflict—which the British called the "Malayan Emergency" and which the Malayans called the "Anti-British National Liberation War"—lasted from 1948 until 1960. It has widely been seen as a precursor to the subsequent American intervention in Vietnam. Harsh measures taken by the British, including the forced incarceration of half a million Malays to relocation camps (to prevent them from providing support to the rebels, who never numbered more than perhaps 7,000–

8,000 fighters), did little to win sympathy for British colonial rule among the general population, though the fact that most of the insurgents were ethnic Chinese did help the British among the Malay population. Massacres, tortures, and beheadings became common British tactics in the course of the conflict. The British ultimately prevailed, though their numerous violations of the Geneva Convention did little to bring credit to the victors.

During roughly the same period, the British also faced an anticolonial insurgency in Kenya, in the conflict that came to be known as the Mau Mau Uprising (1952–1964). Here, the British employed many of the same tactics that had been developed to put down the rebellion in Malaysian and ultimately emerged victorious in the military conflict. These tactics, however, left a bitter taste in the mouths of many Kenyans and did little to prop up the wavering sense of British propriety back home or the flagging reputation of the British around the globe.

The capture of Mau Mau leader Dedan Kimathi on October 21, 1956 (he was subsequently executed on February 18, 1957) turned the tide in favor of the British in Kenya. However, on October 29, 1956 (only eight days after the capture of Kimathi), a chain of events would begin that dealt a crippling blow to the international prestige of the British. On this date, Israeli forces (through prior agreement with the British and French) invaded the Egyptian Sinai near the Suez Canal. On November 5, British and French paratroopers landed in the area and seized control of the canal, which had long been under British protection but which had been nationalized and seized by the Egyptian government of President Gamal Abdel Nasser. The resultant crisis led both the United States and the Soviet Union (which were engaged in a fierce competition for influence in the region) to demand that the British and French withdraw. British prestige was dealt a mortal blow, and British Prime Minister Anthony Eden was forced to resign. Most historians regard the Suez Crisis as the end of Britain's status as a genuine international superpower.

Soon afterward, the British were faced with what seemed to be an additional crisis (though it might perhaps have better been regarded as an opportunity) when their attempts to retain influence in their former colonies led to such strategies as the establishment of the British Commonwealth[1] and the institution of such policies as free immigration from Commonwealth nations to the United Kingdom. Though the roots of the Commonwealth go back to the Balfour Declaration of 1926, the Commonwealth was constituted in the basic form that still exists today in 1949—in what was clearly an attempt to build a bulwark against the global spread of communism in the wake of the unraveling of the British Empire.

But many in Britain envisioned their island sinking, as a result of the free immigration policies, beneath the weight of a massive wave of dark-skinned immigrants in a sort of reverse colonization, accompanied by waves of mass violence. Perhaps the most famous statement on the matter was contained in the notorious and sensationalist "Rivers of Blood" speech given by Member of Parliament Enoch Powell (1912–1998) in Birmingham on April 20, 1968. Here, Powell decried Britain's liberal immigration policies (especially with respect to the Commonwealth). In the speech, Powell proclaimed that the British must put a stop to such free immigration for their own survival. In the speech's most famous passage, Powell began with an allusion to the Roman poet Virgil, then moved to a reference to the racial and unrest that were sweeping the United States at the time, then to a suggestion that Britain's racial problems would soon be as bad as America's if something wasn't done to quell the current tide of immigration:

"As I look ahead, I am filled with foreboding. Like the Roman, I seem to see 'the River Tiber[2] foaming with much blood'.[3] That tragic and intractable phenomenon which we watch with horror on the other side of the Atlantic but which there is interwoven with the history and existence of the States itself, is coming upon us here by our own volition and our own neglect. Indeed, it has all but come. In numerical terms, it will be of American proportions long before the end of the 20th century. Only resolute and urgent action will avert it even now. Whether there will be the public will to demand and obtain that action, I do not know. All I know is that to see, and not to speak, would be the great betrayal."

Powell's speech brought pre-existing fears on the part of many in Britain to the surface and stirred considerable popular opposition to the proposed 1968 Race Relations Bill (which made it illegal to refuse housing or work to anyone on the grounds of their ethnicity), though the bill passed nevertheless.

Powell's speech and the reaction to it revealed a number of ongoing racial tensions in British society, and many have felt that his speech was a key factor in the surprise electoral victory of the Conservative Party in the 1970 Parliamentary elections. And this victory was but the forerunner to the much more important Conservative victory of 1979, a victory that made Margaret Thatcher Britain's first woman Prime Minister, an office she would hold until 1990, thus becoming the longest-serving British Prime Minister of the twentieth century. Thatcher's staunchly pro-business policies (paralleling those of the contemporaneous Reagan administration in America) presaged the wave of neoliberalism that would eventually sweep the globe by the early years of the twenty-first century. Thatcher's

attitudes and policies were also not particularly hospitable to immigrants (she at times expressed sympathy for Powell's views even if she regretted the colorful way he had stated them), but the tide of history was toward a more multicultural Britain, and that tendency has continued to this day. In fact, much of the most interesting literature to have been produced in Britain in the past half-century—especially beginning with the work of Salman Rushdie—has specifically been aimed at exploring the immigrant experience in Britain, as well as the impact on British society of the increasingly multiracial and multicultural nature of Britain as a nation.

Postwar British Literature

Postwar British literature got off to a fast start with the publication of hGeorge Orwell's (1903–1950) *Animal Farm* on August 17, 1945 (just months after the surrender of Nazi Germany and actually two weeks before the surrender of Japan in the Pacific). *Animal Farm* is an allegorical commentary on the tendency of revolutions to lead not to utopian reform, but to dystopian oppression. As such, it resembles a number of dystopian works, particularly *We* (which first appeared as an English translation, in 1924), by the Russian writer Evgeny Zamyatin (1884–1937). Indeed, the most direct target of Orwell's satire is the descent of the utopian hopes of the Bolshevik Revolution into the tyranny of Stalinism, making the book a sort of look back at the events warned against in Zamyatin's dystopian classic. But Orwell's most important contribution to dystopian fiction came four years later, with the publication of *Nineteen Eighty-four*, which would go on to be one of the most widely read books of the twentieth century. One of the central works of modern dystopian fiction, *Nineteen Eighty-four* details a grim dybstopian future society in which most people live in gray, lifeless poverty with no hope of improving their conditions. All political power resides in the hands of a totalitarian regime that employs extensive programs of surveillance and propaganda to control the minds of individuals but has no qualms about using more brutal and violent means as well. This novel was again widely interpreted as a critique of the Stalinist Soviet Union and was extensively employed in the West as a tool of anti-Soviet propaganda, even though Orwell himself insisted that the book was aimed equally at the Soviet Union and at postwar conditions in the West, especially his own Britain.

Conditions in Britain certainly came under considerable criticism in British literature moving into the 1950s, a time of considerable crisis for British society. For example, in the midst of all of the political troubles of the postwar years, in the realm of culture the British had to come to terms

with the fact that Hollywood film had already outstripped the British film industry in terms of its global popularity even before World War II. Indeed, by the end of the 1930s, British colonial subjects all over the world were watching the glossy products of American cinema, the impressive nature of which made it all the harder for the British to maintain the aura of cultural superiority in which they had long attempted to wrap their colonial power. Indeed, by the 1950s, American cinema was becoming increasingly dominant even in Britain itself, where the popular music scene also came more and more to be dominated by the imported products of America's new rock 'n' roll culture.[4]

Literature responded in a variety of ways to the condition of British society in the 1950s. One kind of response can be found in the James Bond novels of Ian Fleming, which feature a protagonist who is a British super spy, placing Britain at the center of a variety of geopolitical intrigues. Beginning with *Casino Royale* in 1953, Fleming wrote a series of twelve novels and two collections of short stories featuring Bond. The Bond narratives look back to the days of the British Empire, when Britain was, in fact, centrally placed on the global stage, and thus can be seen as an example of colonial nostalgia. These novels would eventually inspire the hugely successful Bond film franchise, retroactively making Fleming's novels arguably the most important phenomenon in 1950s British literature, even if they are clearly not of first-rate literary merit.

Perhaps it is no surprise that British literature in the 1950s often took a dark turn. Indeed, one of the best-known and most widely-read British novels of the 1950s is dark indeed. William Golding's (1911–1993) *Lord of the Flies* (1954) deals with a group of British boys who, stranded on a deserted island, revert to primitive savagery. It has universal implications about human nature vs. human societies and has been widely read in both Britain and the U.S. and stands as a modern classic. Golding would later explore some of the same themes in his Booker Prize–winning *Rites of Passage* (1980), the first entry in his *To the Ends of the Earth* trilogy.

Golding sought for universality in his work, but there was at least one important movement in British literature in the 1950s that was more specifically British and that had virtually no counterpart (and little readership) in the United States, where the level of anti-communist hysteria was such that there was little place for the working-class-oriented kind of literature produced by Britain's "Angry Young Men," a group of young British writers who took their name from promotions for John Osborne's 1956 play *Look Back in Anger*. Osborne's play expressed strong dissatisfaction with the British status quo and outrage toward the tendency of British society to ignore the problems of its neediest citizens.

Its success helped to inspire a new wave of writing by working-class writers who, in subsequent years, produced a string of important works that made a lasting impact on British culture.

In addition to Osborne, several other Angry Young Men worked largely in drama, the most important of whom was Harold Pinter (1930–2008). Pinter's second play, *The Birthday Party* (1958) was not successful upon its initial stage presentation but went on to become one of the most important works of British drama in the second half of the twentieth century. It was a central work among his earlier "comedies of menace," which also included the more complex and ambiguous *The Homecoming* (1965), another classic. These early plays have an absurdist tinge and show the influence of such literary predecessors as Franz Kafka (1883–1924) and Samuel Beckett. In his middle period, Pinter wrote important "memory plays," such as *No Man's Land* (1975) and *Betrayal* (1978), forerunners of such later memory plays as Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990), an exemplary text in Chapter 3 of this volume. In his later years as a playwright, Pinter concentrated on more political plays that often focused on critiques of human rights abuses by those in power in the contemporary world.

Pinter was also one of the most important British screenwriters of the second half of the twentieth century, beginning with a series of collaborations with the American director Joseph Losey, driven to work in Britain because of the repressive political climate in the U.S. Pinter's screenplays for Losey include *The Servant* (1963), *Accident* (1967), and *The Go-Between* (1971), all of which were adapted from novels. Pinter also wrote screenplays for film adaptations of a number of his own stage plays, including *The Caretaker* (1963), directed by Clive Donner; *The Birthday Party* (1968), directed by William Friedkin; *The Homecoming* (1973), directed by Peter Hall; and *Betrayal* (1983), directed by David Jones. One of Pinter's most important screenplays was the highly clever and complex screen adaptation of John Fowles' novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1981), directed by Karel Reisz. That screenplay, as was the one for *Betrayal*, was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Screenplay, though Pinter never won that award. Pinter also worked extensively as a director and actor. He won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2005 and remains, as of this writing, the only English-born writer to have won that award since Golding won it in 1983. On the other hand, in a marker of the increasingly international flavor of English writing, three foreign-born English writers have won the Nobel in the twenty-first century, including V. S. Naipaul (2001, born in Trinidad and Tobago), Doris Lessing (2007, born in Iran and raised in what is now Zimbabwe), and Kazuo Ishiguro (2017, born in Japan).

Pinter was the foremost among a gifted group of British playwrights who produced work in the latter part of the twentieth century, including the Czech-born Tom Stoppard (1937–), whose 1966 absurdist tragicomedy *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* is a modern classic. An existentialist riff on *Hamlet*, this play was adapted to film in 1990, with Stoppard as the writer and director.[5] Stoppard's plays often have a strongly political edge, focusing on themes of human rights, censorship, and abuse of power. He is also an important screenwriter, having written or co-written a number of important films, including Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (1985) and John Madden's *Shakespeare in Love* (1998), the latter of which won an Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay. Also of special note among British playwrights of the second half of the twentieth century are Edward Bond (1934–), a politically-committed leftist dramatist (also associated with the Angry Young Men) whose 1965 play *Saved* was a landmark in the battle against theater censorship in Britain. Bond's *Lear* (1971), a socialist update of Shakespeare's *King Lear*, is also of particular importance. Caryl Churchill (1938–), whose often experimental plays focus on feminist issues, is the most important woman playwright of this generation. Her best-known plays are *Cloud Nine* (1979) and *Top Girls* (1982).

The Angry Young Men were never a particularly unified movement with a coherent set of ideas but instead expressed a range of perspectives that were united by an often-bitter resentment over what they saw as Britain's failed promise, as well as the hypocritical arrogance of the British upper-classes. Many of the leading works produced by this group were sympathetic portrayals of the hardships faced by the working class, often by writers who had experienced those hardships themselves. Many of these novels were also later adapted to film, forming a key element of the British New Wave in cinema. Key novelists in the group included Alan Sillitoe (1928–2010), whose novel *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958) was adapted to film by Karel Reisz in 1960 and whose short story *The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner* (1959) was adapted to film by Tony Richardson in 1962. David Storey (1933–2017) produced important work as a novelist, playwright, and screenwriter, including the script for Lindsay Anderson's 1963 film adaptation of his 1960s novel *This Sporting Life*. Storey later won the Booker Prize in 1976 for his novel *Saville*, thus becoming the first working-class writer to win that prestigious honor. *Saville* essentially deals with the growth and maturation of protagonist Colin Saville, a bright young working-class man who uses his intelligence and education to escape the pits in which his miner father works. As David Craig describes it, the book is "something like the complete history of the working-class child who changes class via schooling, told with the detailed lifelike fullness of classic naturalism"

(134). As such, it participates in a long tradition of British working-class fiction that goes back at least to D. H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*. However, Storey shows more respect for working-class life than does Lawrence, and it is clear that for him Saville's escape from the working-class is far from an unequivocal blessing. Indeed, Saville experiences a radical alienation that can be attributed largely to his estrangement from his family and their working-class culture, leaving him a man without a class. Or, as another character in the book puts it, he is "alienated from his class, and with nowhere to go" (439).

This tradition of working-class writing continued with the work of Barry Hines (1939–2016), whose 1968 novel *A Kestrel for a Knave* was made into a highly successful film (entitled *Kes*, co-written by Hines) by Ken Loach one year later. Hines also wrote the script for Loach's 1981 film *Looks and Smiles*, based on the novel by Hines. That film won the Best Contemporary Screenplay award at the Cannes Film Festival. Hines was also a noted author of television scripts, including the script for the noted postapocalyptic TV drama *Threads* (1984), which explored the stark horrors that might be brought about by a nuclear war.

Not all members of the Angry Young Men were strictly working class; some, in fact, occupied positions of considerable privilege. Perhaps the leading novelist among the Angry Young Men of the 1950s was Kingsley Amis (1922–1995), who came from a relatively modest middle-class background but was able, through a series of scholarships, to complete an Oxford education and to begin a career as a university lecturer in English. That work no doubt helped to inspire Amis's first novel, the hugely successful *Lucky Jim* (1954), which features a university lecturer but also manages, in a comic mode, to capture much of the spirit of Britain in the 1950s. Known both for the discipline of his work regime and the indiscipline of his personal life, Amis produced a number of works in a number of genres. As a critic, for example, he was a champion of the James Bond phenomenon. Amis was shortlisted for the Booker Prize for the novels *Ending Up* (1974) and *Jake's Thing* (1978); he won the prize for *The Old Devils* in 1986. Though once a member of the Communist Party, Amis turned more and more to the Right after the mid-1960s and was often accused of misogyny and anti-Semitism in his writing.

Prior to *Lucky Jim*, Amis had worked primarily as a poet, and it is also clear that the title character of his first novel is at least partly based on Amis's close friend, the poet Philip Larkin (1922–1985). Amis and Larkin were key members of the group of 1950s English poets collectively known as The Movement. Writing anti-romantic verse that was simple and straightforward, but controlled, the Movement poets reflected a sense of

Britain's diminished status as a global power. Of these poets, Larkin is the one whose reputation has best survived. He had already published one book of poetry and two novels when he came to prominence in 1955 with the publication of his second collection of poems, *The Less Deceived*. This volume was followed by additional important collections, including *The Whitsun Weddings* (1964) and *High Windows* (1974), the latter of which contains what is perhaps Larkin's best-known poem, "This Be the Verse," the full text of which can be found at https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48419/this-be-the-verse. Here, Larkin employs his characteristically nasty wit to decry the damage parents do to their children ("They fuck you up, your mum and dad"), but then reminds his readers that these parents' parents also damaged them in turn, and so on. His final advice? "Get out as early as you can, / And don't have any kids yourself."

In 2008, *The Times* ranked Larkin first on its list of the fifty greatest British writers since 1945, just ahead of Orwell and Golding. In fourth place was a slightly younger poet, Ted Hughes (1930–1948), who also came to be known as a member of the Movement. In America, Hughes is also particularly well known as the husband of American poet Sylvia Plath (1932–1963), whom he married on June 16, 1956. The couple chose the date in honor of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, which is set on June 16 (otherwise known as Bloomsday). The marriage was a rocky one, though, and ended, first in their separation, then with Plath's suicide. Hughes became the British Poet Laureate in 1984, after the position was declined by Larkin. Hughes remained in that capacity until his death in 1998. He left behind a large volume of poetry, including the 1998 collection *Birthday Letters*, much of which deals with his relationship with Plath. His *Collected Poems*, published in 2003, run more than 1,300 pages. He was also well-known as an author of children's books. His children's science fiction novel *The Iron Man* (1968), originally written to comfort his children in the wake of Plath's suicide, is itself a classic of children's literature, as well as the basis for the highly successful American film adaptation, *The Iron Giant* (1999, directed by Brad Bird).

Science fiction in general played a key role in British literature in the 1960s. Amis, for example, not only wrote science fiction but also authored an important earlier critical study of the genre *New Maps of Hell: A Survey of Science Fiction* (1960), based on lectures he gave at Princeton University and emphasizing the dystopian aspects of the genre. Still, after the foundational work of H. G. Welles in the 1890s, that genre had come to be dominated by American writers, with the only truly major British science fiction author of the immediate postwar years being Arthur C. Clarke (1917–2008), who stands with Americans Isaac Asimov and Robert

A. Heinlein as the three leading figures of the Golden Age of Science Fiction. Clarke got his start immediately after the war, when his first professional science fiction stories were published in the American pulp magazine *Astounding Science-Fiction* in 1946. In 1948, he wrote the story "The Sentinel," which would later inspire the 1968 science fiction film *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the screenplay for which was written by Clarke in collaboration with American director Stanley Kubrick, though the film was made almost entirely in England, where Kubrick lived at the time. Clarke also wrote a novelization of the story in parallel with the production of the film, which would grow into the series *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *2010: Odyssey Two* (1982), *2061: Odyssey Three* (1987), and *3001: The Final Odyssey* (1997). This series is typical of Clarke's fiction, much of which involves encounters between humans and more technologically-advanced aliens, often in ways that trigger a transformative evolutionary leap in the human species. The early novels *Childhood's End* (1953) and *The City and the Stars* (1956) address this theme as well. Important later novels by Clarke include *Rendezvous with Rama* (1973) and *The Fountains of Paradise* (1979).

Moving into the 1960s, however, both British and American science fiction, in tune with the social upheavals of the decade, were seeking a way to become more relevant to the real world around them and more respectable in a literary sense. These twin goals led to revolutionary changes in science fiction writing, collectively known as science fiction's New Wave, taking the genre in important new directions in the 1960s and 1970s. New Wave science fiction is characterized by an attempt both to explore more complex and mature subject matter (including sexuality and drug use, as well as social issues such as racism) and to convey that subject matter in a more sophisticated literary style. It was also characterized by a return to prominence of British sf writers, and one could argue that the leading force behind the movement was the British magazine *New Worlds*, edited by British science fiction and fantasy writer Michael Moorcock (1939–) from 1964 until 1971, and then from 1976 to 1996. In *New Worlds*, young British sf writers such as Brian Aldiss (1925–2017), J. G. Ballard (1930–2009), John Brunner (1934–1995), and M. John Harrison (1945–) found a place to publish sophisticated sf stories that would never have been welcome in the earlier pulps. All also subsequently became important novelists, with Ballard's strange, postmodern visions of postapocalyptic landscapes and Brunner's dystopian tales being particularly important.

New Worlds also published rising American sf authors such as Samuel R. Delany, Thomas Disch, Harlan Ellison, Ursula K. Le Guin, Robert Silverberg, and Norman Spinrad, indicating the increasingly transatlantic

nature of sf in English. Indeed, one American counterpart to *New Worlds*, edited by Judith Merril, was a New Wave anthology entitled *England Swings SF* (1968), which acknowledged a British influence, much as American rock music was being influenced by the "British invasion" of the time.[6]

Harrison, who served as the editor of *New Worlds* during Moorcock's hiatus, rose to prominence as an author with the "Viriconium" sequence of fantasy novels and stories, published between 1971 and 1984. This sequence presents a new form of fantasy that is very much opposed to the dominant Tolkien-Lewis tradition. Harrison's complex, intellectual, and highly literary fictions are primarily set not in an idealized rural past, but in a teeming and decaying city of the far future. They set the stage for important new anti-Tolkien trends in British fantasy that would eventually come to full fruition in works such as Philip Pullman's (1946–) *His Dark Materials* trilogy (1995–2000) and in the novels of China Miéville (1972–), especially beginning with *Perdido Street Station* (2000), the first volume in his "Bas-Lag" trilogy, all three volumes of which were nominated for the Hugo Award[7]. Miéville, whose works straddle the boundary between science fiction and fantasy, has become one of the most awarded authors of the twenty-first century. For example, his novels *The City & The City* (2009) and *Embassytown* (2011) both won the Hugo Award for Best Novel. Miéville was the key figure in the so-called British Boom, a wave of impressive new British writers in fantasy and science fiction that began at the end of the twentieth century and is still going strong after two decades.

Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism

To a large extent, the dominant trend in British fiction (as in all Western fiction) from the 1970s forward can be encompassed within the rubric of "postmodernism," though that term itself is complex and has been widely contested. It is clear, however, that many observers, in the 1960s and 1970s, noted that a new form of cultural production seemed to be emerging. Many also noted that the formal characteristics of this new cultural form—its self-conscious experimentalism, its violations of the conventions of realism—resembled those of modernism. Thus, this new phenomenon came to be called "postmodernism," indicating both its similarities to modernism and the fact that it seemed aware of its belatedness—as opposed to the modernist sense of seeking to do something new. In any case, postmodernism occurred under very

different historical circumstances than did modernism and seemed to take a different—less serious, more playful—attitude toward its own project.

Actually, the phenomenon of postmodernism in its contemporary sense was first noticed (and named) in the 1950s in relation to architecture, where the turn to a new style of production was immediately obvious. Modernist architecture—the so-called "international style"—was marked by simplicity and practicality, by the kinds of stark, rectangular forms to be found in the conventional skyscrapers that sprang up around the world in the early and middle part of the twentieth century and in phenomena such as the "Bauhaus" architecture in Germany and the designs of Frank Lloyd Wright (1867–1959) in America. However, while Wright's designs employed many of the efficient, economical aspects of modernist architecture, his insistence on developing designs that were in harmony with the natural environment and with the natural inclinations of human beings acknowledged some of the dehumanizing limitations of modernist architecture. These limitations, by the 1950s, led to the development of new forms of architecture that were less rigidly functional and more ornamental, combining aspects of different architectural styles from different historical periods.

This new, self-consciously eclectic form of architecture came to be recognized as a genuine departure, especially as theorized by architect Robert Venturi, who countered the telling dictum of the important modernist architect Mies van der Rohe (1866–1969) that "less is more" with his own declaration that "less is a bore." Venturi's principal theorization of this new form of architecture is contained in his influential 1972 book (co-authored with his wife Denise Scott Brown and with Steven Izenour) *Leaving Las Vegas*.

Venturi and his associates correctly surmised that something was happening here in contemporary architecture though what it was wasn't exactly clear. It was Charles Jencks, with *Language of Post-modern Architecture* (1977) who for the first time clearly articulated these new developments within the context of what he called postmodernism. Though Jencks was at first hesitant to apply the term "postmodernism" in a positive sense (preferring terms such as "radical eclecticism"), he soon adopted postmodernism as a positive designation, revising his book a year later to include a vision of the postmodern as a new kind of "double-coding," in which architecture could employ both modern and historical aspects in a single structure.

Meanwhile, by the time the work of architects such as Venturi and Jencks was published, other observers were beginning to detect similar

developments outside of architecture. The recognition of postmodernism as a new literary phenomenon was spearheaded by the Egyptian-born American critic Ihab Hassan (1925–2015), who, in a series of critical works, attempted to describe the new phenomenon. Clearly influenced by the carnivalesque, anti-authoritarian energies of the oppositional political movements of the 1960s, Hassan saw postmodernism as a radical, subversive tendency through which literature could challenge both the cultural and the political status quo. As noted in Chapter 2 of this volume, he saw modernism and postmodernism as employing many of the same aesthetic strategies, but for vastly different purposes, with postmodernism becoming a sort of ultra-modernism that was more daring than modernism and that overcame the conservative limitations of mainstream modernism. Modernism ultimately emerges in the view of Hassan (and many others) as a conservative, elitist movement, while postmodernism emerges as a brash challenge to the very values that modernism supports. In works such as the essay "POSTmodernISM" (1971) and the volumes *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* (1971), *The Right Promethean Fire: Imagination, Science, and Cultural Change* (1980), and *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* (1987), Hassan outlined his influential theory of the subversive nature of postmodernist literature. However, by the end of the 1980s, his enthusiasm for the revolutionary possibilities of the movement seemed to have waned.

Meanwhile, in France, Jean-François Lyotard (1924–1998), especially in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979), gave the theorization of postmodernism a more philosophical turn. Envisioning postmodernism as a challenge to the rationalist principles of the Enlightenment, Lyotard saw it as being particularly informed by a strong skepticism toward grand "totalizing metanarratives," which he explicitly associated with authoritarian structures of power. As opposed to this totalizing tendency, Lyotard (here and elsewhere in his work) celebrated the tendency toward fragmentation in postmodernist art and literature as an anti-authoritarian gesture.

The critical literature on postmodernism is vast and diverse. Much of it, like Lyotard, envisions postmodernism as a radical new cultural challenge to authority, though few have been able to articulate exactly what this new art really does to change the social and political status quo. Indeed, Perry Anderson convincing argues in his careful examination of the origins of the historical concept of postmodernity that the work of theorists such as Hassan, Lyotard, and Jencks (and even the ostensible leftist Jürgen Habermas), while ostensibly viewing postmodernism as emancipatory, is thoroughly underwritten (and undermined) by a thinly-disguised, Cold

War–informed polemic against Marxism and socialism. Indeed, the grand metanarratives decried by Lyotard and other postmodern champions of fragmentation are, for Anderson, simply coded stand-ins for the Marxist model of history. Thus, despite their seeming diversity (and its overt celebration of diversity) Anderson sees in most earlier theorizations of postmodernism and postmodernity a strange ideological consistency in their aversion to the central principles of classical Marxism:

"The idea of the postmodern, as it took hold in this conjuncture, was in one way or another an appanage of the Right. Hassan, lauding play and indeterminacy as hallmarks of the postmodern, made no secret of his aversion to the sensibility that was their antithesis: the iron yoke of the Left. Jencks celebrated the passing of the modern as the liberation of consumer choice, a quietus to planning in a world where painters could trade as freely and globally as bankers. For Lyotard the very parameters of the new condition were set by the discrediting of socialism as the last grand narrative—ultimate version of an emancipation that no longer held meaning. Habermas, resisting allegiance to the postmodern, from a position still on the Left, nevertheless conceded the idea to the Right, construing it as a figure of neo-conservatism. Common to all was a subscription to the principles of what Lyotard—once the most radical—called liberal democracy, as the unsurpassable horizon of the time. There could be nothing but capitalism. The postmodern was a sentence on alternative illusions" (45–46).

In short, the liberation driven by postmodernism is merely the false freedom of the "free" market, as captured by alternative suggestion by Mark Fisher that a better term for postmodernism might be "capitalist realism," underwritten by the notion of the famous Thatcherite slogan that "there is no alternative" to capitalism.

Anderson cites with approval the theorization of postmodernism by the American Marxist theorist Fredric Jameson, which sees postmodernism not as a radical, subversive gesture, but just the opposite. For Jameson, postmodernism is the direct expression of the "cultural logic of late capitalism." It is the artistic form that arises when capitalist modernization nears completion and when commodification has engulfed virtually everything, including art and culture. Jameson's vision of postmodernism, developed throughout the 1980s, is summed up in his 1991 book *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, where he outlines what he sees as the important formal characteristics of postmodernist art and (more importantly) suggests the ways in which those characteristics relate to larger trends in the globalized world of late

capitalism. Jameson's book still stands as the single most important theoretical analysis of postmodernism as a cultural phenomenon.

For Jameson, the most important compositional strategy of postmodernist art and literature is pastiche, by which he means the borrowing of styles and motifs from the art and literature of the past. These borrowings, however, are carried out without any attempt to engage the original source in critical dialogue. Moreover, they ignore the fact that these originals were produced in a different historical context, so that the strategies used within them might mean something completely different than what they mean in the contemporary world. Styles and motifs borrowed from different cultures and (particularly, as emphasized by Jameson) from different time periods can be freely intermixed within the same postmodernist work, which tends to give postmodernist works a markedly ahistorical quality, with little or no sense of the historical process. Indeed, this loss of historical sense is a crucial characteristic of postmodernist literature for Jameson. It encompasses not just an inability to envision the past as a different time that led to the present by specific historical processes, but also an inability to imagine historical processes that lead to a future that is fundamentally different from the present. In short, postmodernist art is particularly lacking in the kind of utopian energies through which art, in the past, has helped to inspire social and political change.

Jameson also emphasizes that postmodernist artists employ this technique of pastiche because they are incapable of developing and maintaining the kind of distinct, individual styles that marked the work of the great modernist artists. Indeed, as noted in Chapter 2 of this volume, Jameson is consistently positive in his figuration of modernism as a sort of last wave of artistic resistance to the growing hegemony of capitalism in the modern world. Postmodernism, then, is the art that appears after this resistance has collapsed, leaving capitalism free to advance without opposition from this art, which, among other things, leads to a radical fragmentation of experience—both because of the tendency of capitalism to compartmentalize various phenomena for more efficient management and because the emphasis on innovation and expansion in capitalism lends an ephemeral quality to all aspects of existence. Importantly, Jameson relates the lack of distinct individual styles among postmodernist artists to the fact that they themselves lack the kind of stable, continuous identity that is needed to anchor such a style.

The psychic fragmentation that Jameson sees as central to the lives of individuals under late capitalism is also directly related to the formal fragmentation that he sees as crucial to postmodernism art. In

postmodernist literature, in particular, narratives, characters, and even language itself tend to be fragmented and unstable, in dramatic opposition to the stable, autonomous characters and linear, rational narratives that are typical of realist literature. Importantly, however, while modernist literature is also often formally fragmented, this fragmentation is enlisted in a battle against the ideology of realism, which is essentially the same as the ideology of capitalism in its classic stage. In the postmodern era, however, the ideology of capitalism has become powerful and versatile enough to encompass both realism and anti-realism, leaving literature no position from which to mount a subversive assault on capitalism unless it arises from a cultural position that is distinctly outside the capitalist norm. By this view, much postcolonial literature would qualify as a sort of pocket of resistance to the global spread of capitalism, as might marginalized Western literatures such as gay or lesbian literature.

Postmodernism, Multiculturalism, and British Literature

One can detect many of the formal characteristics of postmodernism in British literature as early as something like Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928), with its disavowal of realism and historical logic. One could, however, argue that the challenges to gender conventions within *Orlando* place it more within the orbit of modernism—or at least within one of those localized pockets of resistance to late capitalism described by Jameson. Meanwhile, a great deal of the literature produced in Britain since the 1960s matches Jameson's descriptions of postmodernism quite well, though often with particularly British intonations, as when Jean Rhys's[8] (1890–1979) *The Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) engages in a complex intertextual dialogue with Charlotte Brontë's (1816–1855) *Jane Eyre* (1847). Indeed, while *Wide Sargasso Sea* employs a relatively straightforward mode of narration, it is clearly set in a world that represents, not the real world, but the fictional world of *Jane Eyre*, aligning it with postmodernism.

Transgressions of the boundary between fiction and reality also occur in such texts as *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969), by John Fowles (1926–2005), which, on one level, is an historical novel set during the Victorian period; on another level, however, it is a complex metafictional[9] construct that comments on the ways in which texts (especially Victorian novels) are constructed. Fowles would also go on to produce other works of postmodernist fiction, including *The Magus* (1973) and *A Maggot* (1985). Ultimately, however, *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is his most important work. As I myself have noted

elsewhere, this novel "provides striking demonstrations of how both sexuality and textuality lead to irreducible ambiguities in interpretation" (*Techniques* 102). And it achieves these effects largely by setting the two genres that inform it—realistic fiction and metafiction—against one another:

"As a Victorian novel, the book demands that the reader suspend disbelief and agree to pretend that the words in the text represent real events. As a metafictional novel, the book demands that the reader suspend belief and participate in the rhetorical games involved in producing the text, agreeing not to be taken in by the seductive lure of the narrative" (*Techniques* 123).

The Victorian period has, in fact, often been mined for material by contemporary British writers. For example, A. S. Byatt's (1936–) Booker Prize–winning *Possession* (1990) cleverly blends stories concerning two contemporary scholars of Victorian literature with another plot line set in the Victorian period itself. And Alan Moore's (1953-) *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* series (1999–2007), which features heroes drawn from well-known works of Victorian fiction (such as Allan Quatermain and Sherlock Holmes) was one of the highlights of graphic fiction around the turn of the twenty-first century.

Often working in a similar mode of updating materials from the past is Angela Carter (1940–1992), who has produced works clearly informed by postmodernist textual strategies but that, like the work of Woolf, have feminist energies that set them apart from much postmodernist fiction. She is perhaps best known for *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), a series of modern retellings of classic fairy tales and folk tales, with a strong feminist message. Perhaps her most clearly postmodernist text is the novel *Nights at the Circus* (1984), co-winner (along with Ballard's *Empire of the Sun*) of the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for fiction, one of Britain's oldest literary awards. Like *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, *Nights at the Circus* employs a number of strategies to undermine any attempt at a final, authoritative interpretation of the text, while challenging conventional gender roles along the way—though Carter's novel has a much more powerful feminist slant than does Fowles'.

The work of Salman Rushdie (discussed in more detail elsewhere in this project) announced the full-blown amalgamation of postmodernist technique with British multiculturalism. The combination, of course, is not surprising: one of the key characteristics of postmodernism, according to Jameson, is its tendency toward globalization, in keeping with the increasingly global nature of late capitalism itself. Indeed, though it deals

explicitly with Indian history, including the experience of colonization and decolonization, *Midnight's Children* (1981) is an almost paradigmatic postmodernist text. I have, in fact, argued elsewhere that it is far better considered a postmodernist novel than a postcolonial one, largely because of its almost total lack of any genuine subversive challenge to capitalism (and because it even includes thinly veiled assaults on socialism).[10] Whatever its political charge, though, Rushdie has proved an important influence on the British writers who came after him and has definitely contributed to making contemporary British literature more multicultural.

Hanif Kureishi (1954–), an English-born writer of mixed English and Pakistani descent, has been particularly influential in the growth of multicultural British literature as well. The son of a Pakistani father who went to the same exclusive prep school in India as did Rushdie, Kureishi is also a writer whose work sometimes resembles Rushdie's, especially in its creative and often amusing use of images from popular culture. His highly successful first novel, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990, winner of the Whitbread Award for best first novel), is a highly postmodern evocation of contemporary multicultural London, infused with elements of contemporary popular culture. This novel was adapted to television in a BBC series for which David Bowie provided the soundtrack. Kureishi's novel *Intimacy* (1998) was adapted to film by Patrice Chéreau in 2001. Kureishi himself is as well known as a screenwriter as he is as a novelist. His scripts for *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985, directed by Stephen Frears) and *Sammy and Rosie Get Laid* (1987, also directed by Frears) were both highly successful. In addition, Kureishi both wrote and directed the 1991 feature film *London Kills Me*, a dark-but-comic story about homeless drug addicts that is a clear forerunner to *Trainspotting* (1996), which is an exemplary text in this project.

At the turn of the twenty-first century, British fiction received another infusion of multicultural energy in the early work of Zadie Smith (1975–), the London-born daughter of an English father and a Jamaican mother, who burst on the scene with the publication of the much-heralded novel *White Teeth* in 2000. *White Teeth* is a vivid evocation of multicultural London that features characters from a wide variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. A best-seller that was also a hit with critics, it won both the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for fiction and the Whitbread Award for best first novel. It is discussed in detail as an exemplary text elsewhere in this project. Her second novel, *The Autograph Man* (2002), sold well, but was less well received by critics than *White Teeth* had been. Smith then made something of a critical comeback with her novel *On Beauty* (2005), which was shortlisted for the

Booker Prize. *NW* (2012), Smith's most formally complex and experimental novel, and *Swing Time* (2016), which draws heavily upon classical Hollywood musicals, also met with extensive critical approval, and Smith remains a major voice in British fiction, though she spends much of her time in New York, where she has been a tenured faculty member at New York University since 2010.

The Bangladesh-born Monica Ali (1967–) also received critical acclaim with the publication of her first novel, *Brick Lane* (2003), which focuses on the Bangladeshi immigrant community in London. Some in that community (and some outsiders) criticized the description of the Bangladeshi immigrant community in the book as inauthentic and stereotypical, noting that Ali, the daughter of a Bangladeshi father and an English mother, had lived in England since the age of three and did not live in the kind of immigrant enclave described in the novel. Others, including Rushdie, defended Ali, and the novel was shortlisted for the Booker Prize; a 2016 poll by the BBC of critics outside the United Kingdom ranked it the 29th greatest British novel of all time, thus placing it seventeen slots ahead of *Midnight's Children* and only four slots behind *White Teeth*. *Brick Lane* was also successfully adapted to film by Sarah Gavron in 2007. Ali has since authored three additional novels, showing considerable versatility. These include *Alentejo Blue* (2006), set in a small village in Portugal that finds itself a part of an increasingly global world; *In the Kitchen* (2009), which follows the multi-ethnic kitchen staff of a large hotel in the midst of sweeping social changes; and *Untold Story* (2011), which imagines the life of Princess Diana had she not been killed in a car crash in 1997.

Finally, no survey of recent fiction from the United Kingdom would be complete without a mention of the important work that has come out of Scotland in recent years, especially beginning with the publication of Alasdair Gray's (1934–) *Lanark* in 1981. A complex combination of realism, fantasy, and science fiction, *Lanark* also employs a number of classic examples of postmodernist textual play. It mixes a variety of genres, modes, and styles, and is composed of four books, in the order 3, 1, 2, 4, indicating the fragmentation of its narrative. Also a painter, poet, and playwright, Gray has authored a number of additional novels as well, including *Poor Things* (1992), which won both the Whitbread Novel Award and the Guardian Fiction Prize.

Among other things, Gray's work has exercised an important influence on his fellow Glasgow writer James Kelman (1946–), who has extended Gray's sometime use of working-class Glaswegian dialect into an artform of its own. In so doing, Kelman has established a reputation throughout

his career for representation of the experience of working-class Scotsmen with energy, humor, and humanity. This is particularly the case in the Booker Prize–winning *How Late It Was, How Late*, an outburst of profane working-class energy that is narrated through a mixture of internal monologue and indirect free style, presenting all of the events from the perspective of the protagonist, thirty-eight-year-old Sammy Samuels. In that sense, it does not seem very different from any number of modern novels, beginning with James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. However, the downtrodden, working-class Sammy differs dramatically from the tormented artists and intellectuals typical of the modernist novel. While he has some skill and experience in the construction trade, he spends most of his time unemployed within the context of the depressed economy of contemporary Glasgow. Moreover, he has spent eleven of the past eighteen years in prison for crimes committed in an attempt simply to get by. To make matters worse, as the book begins, Sammy awakes from a weekend binge immediately to become involved in an altercation with the police that leaves him not only badly beaten but entirely blind.

Sammy's blindness only furthers his alienation from the world around him, creating an estranged perspective that has been compared with the perspectives of characters from modern absurdist writers such as Beckett and Kafka. However, Sammy's resolutely working-class perspective and (especially) his language set him strongly apart from such characters—too strongly for some critics (including Kingsley Amis), who found the language of the novel excessively obscene. As one character in the book itself tells Sammy, cautioning him about his language and exaggerating very little, "every second word's fuck" (238). Indeed, the "obscenity" of the book's earthy language was the center of considerable controversy when *How Late It Was, How Late* was awarded the Booker Prize, though it is hard to see how the book could have represented Sammy's perspective so convincingly without employing the language he would be likely to use.

Kelman's earlier novel, *A Disaffection* (1989), was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and won the James Tait Black Memorial Prize for Fiction. Among his other novels, *Kieron Smith, Boy* (2008), a story of growing up in urban Glasgow, won the Saltire Society's Book of the Year and the Scottish Arts Council Book of the Year, the two biggest literary awards in Scotland. Kelman is also noted for his political activism in support of working-class causes. Numerous book-length academic studies of his work have now been published.

Kelman's use of dialect has been cited by the Edinburgh-based Scottish writer Irvine Welsh (1958–) as an important influence. Welsh burst on

the British literary scene in 1993 with the publication of his first novel, *Trainspotting*. A seriocomic tale of the misadventures of a group of Edinburgh heroin addicts, *Trainspotting* has since achieved cult status for both its style and its content. It was adapted to a highly successful film in 1996 by Danny Boyle. One of the highlights of 1990s British cinema, that film is discussed as an exemplary text at the end of the following chapter. Among Welsh's numerous other novels is *Porno* (2002), a sequel to *Trainspotting*, and *Skagboys* (2012), a prequel.

These Scottish novelists—along with such writers as Ishiguro, Smith, and Ali—demonstrate the intensely multicultural nature of British fiction in the past three decades. Writers from more conventionally central cultural positions continue to thrive as well, including Martin Amis (1949–), the son of Kingsley Amis, whose work has been a particularly strong influence on Smith. Amis's opinions have often been controversial, but his fiction—in such novels as *Money* (1984) and *London Fields* (1989)—has provided some of the leading examples of British postmodernist fiction. Amis's close contemporary Julian Barnes (1946–) has also been particularly successful (and particularly postmodern) in such works as the Booker Prize–winning *The Sense of an Ending* (2011) and three novels that were shortlisted for the Booker— *Flaubert's Parrot* (1984), *England, England* (1998), and *Arthur & George* (2005). All in all, British fiction seems to be in good hands as we move forward into the twenty-first century.

NOTES

[1] The British Commonwealth is an organization of loosely aligned states (currently numbering 53), most of which were formerly territories of the British Empire. The members of the Commonwealth have no specific legal obligations to one another but are united by their shared legacy dating back to the British Empire. Populations of Commonwealth nations constitute nearly one-third of the world's population, though over half the population of the Commonwealth is in India alone. Advanced Western nations such as Australia and Canada are members, though the United States is not, and over 90% of the total population of the Commonwealth live in Africa or Asia.

[2] The Tiber is a river that flows through Rome.

[3] The quotation here is taken from a passage in Virgil's *Aeneid* in which the Greek Delphic Apollo, via his priestess at the Greek colony of Cumae, near Naples. She told Aeneas, who was seeking to move into Italy, that such a foreign incursion into Italy would lead to much trouble: 'I see wars, horrid wars, and the Tiber foaming with much blood' ('*bella, horrida bella / et Thybrim multo spumantem sanguine cerno*' (*Aeneid* 6.86-7).

[4] For an excellent dramatization of the growing power of American music in Britain in the 1950s, see the BBC miniseries *Lipstick on Your Collar* (1993), written by Dennis Potter, one of the most creative voices in British television in the last decades of the twentieth century. Tellingly set in the time of the Suez Crisis of 1956, this miniseries—in its title and in its content—shows a Britain that is not only beginning to take a back seat to America in terms of global economic and military power but is also increasingly finding the texture of its daily life infiltrated by the sounds of American music.

[5] See also the 2009 American vampire-film version, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Undead*. *Hamlet* is a very rich source of material.

[6] Merril's anthology actually takes its title from a 1965 American pop song entitle "England Swings,' by Roger Miller, which was a riff on the notion of "Swinging London," a term popularly applied to the hip, youth-oriented English culture of the time.

[7] First given in 1953, the Hugo Awards are the most coveted awards given for science fiction writing. Named for pioneering sf editor Hugo Gernsback and administered by the World Science Fiction Society, the Hugo Awards are given at the annual World Science Fiction Convention (Worldcon). Voted on by registrants at that convention, the Hugos thus are essentially a fan-based award, though many attendees at the convention are themselves science fiction professionals.

[8] Rhys was born on the Caribbean island of Dominica, but lived mostly in England from age 16 onward.

[9] The concept of metafiction is crucial to many accounts of the postmodern. Metafiction is fiction that not only calls attention to its fictional status but also to the literary techniques through which it was produced. Metafiction can be used to challenges the conventions of traditional fiction, though postmodernist metafiction is typically playful, employing its self-consciousness more for comic than for critical value.

[10] See my essay "*Midnight's Children,* History, and Complexity: Reading Rushdie after the Cold War."