British Literature Today: What to Read after Julian Barnes, Martin Amis and Ian McEwan

An ordinary pensioner in a small English town has an encounter that leads them to reconsider a relationship from their teens. An adolescent boy fantasises about his girlfriend – writing to and about her in a secret document – but the reality of their relationship isn’t what he expected. And a young woman is recruited as a spy, but a love affair complicates and compromises her actions.

You may recognise these stories already. They are *The Sense of an Ending* by Julian Barnes, *The Rachel Papers* by Martin Amis, and *Sweet Tooth* by Ian McEwan. But the first is also the premise for *Elizabeth Is Missing* by Emma Healey, in which it is not a retired man, but a woman with Alzheimer’s, who uncovers the truth about someone lost in their youth. The second also describes *Submarine* by Joe Dunthorne, which uses the writings of its narrator – half-diary, half-letter – to undermine his initial appearance and make him sympathetic, rather than turn him into a Martin Amis anti-hero. And the last is *Charlotte Gray* by Sebastian Faulks, about a World War Two spy in occupied France determined to find her missing lover, rather than the woman caught up in the Cold War in *Sweet Tooth*.

No-one could say these novels are directly inspired by the works of Barnes or McEwan – *Elizabeth Is Missing* was written before *The Sense of an Ending* was published, and Faulks’s *Charlotte Gray* predates *Sweet Tooth* by more than a decade – but they show that similarities between novels, the premises that appeal to us as readers, are actually stories told time and again, in new and various ways. The young man surprised by the reality of a relationship could be Troilus in Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*; the woman using another identity to enter a foreign land could be Viola in *Twelfth Night*. And what makes these stories, and these writers, so appealing – the style, insight, and abilities of the storyteller – can be found today in British authors of great diversity.
But what are the roots of contemporary British fiction? How does it continue the tradition of writers like Barnes, Amis and McEwan – known and admired the world over - and how does it react against it? What has changed in British society, and how has this influenced the voices and concerns of our writers? Here, in part, are the answers to those questions.

Amis and McEwan were first published in the 1970s, a decade of instability in Britain in which a Labour Prime Minister lost to the Conservatives in 1970, returned to power in 1974, then saw the Conservatives win again in 1979. These years had regular workers’ strikes and several high-profile bombings in the fight for Irish independence. In response, the decade’s emerging writers wrote books that reflected the tumult and uncertainty they had grown up with: Amis’s *Dead Babies* (1975) and McEwan’s *The Cement Garden* (1978) both aim to unsettle, provoking horror and disgust in the reader: their protagonists behave immorally, and the plots refuse neat conclusions.

Enormous social changes also took place, diversifying the UK population and, in turn, diversifying our literature. A rise in immigration – most notably when the Asian population was expelled from Uganda in 1972, resulting in almost 30,000 people seeking refuge in Britain – meant that Britain itself became more multicultural. Certain British authors increased their range of awareness, particularly Angela Carter, who travelled around Asia and Europe and incorporated their influences (such as surrealism, continental philosophy and feminist theory) into her novels. Carter’s impact radiates today in the work of Jeanette Winterson, whose novels *The Passion* and *The Stone Gods* display the self-awareness of “fiction... conscious of itself,” as Carter called it; Kirsty Logan, whose novel *The Gracekeepers* evolves the conversations about gender that Carter began in *The Passion of New Eve*; and Helen Oyeyemi, whose novel *Boy, Snow, Bird* reworks the story of Snow White to explore race and patriarchal control, a development of Carter’s technique in *The Bloody Chamber.*
But while Carter could be said to have incorporated outside influences into a predominantly white British literature, the changing racial profile of 1970s Britain is now being reflected in the concerns and voices of the generation of novelists currently establishing itself. Zadie Smith and Nikita Lalwani were both born in the mid-1970s, and their most recent novels, Smith’s *Swing Time* and Lalwani’s *The Village*, both follow the British-born daughter of an immigrant as she visits the country of her heritage, struggling to reconcile her identity with the society she feels both part of and apart from. Meanwhile, eight of the 20 writers chosen by Granta magazine as the “Best Young British Novelists” in 2013 were from ethnic minorities, including Xiaolu Guo, author of *I Am China*, and Tahmina Anam, a British Bangladeshi writer whose novel *The Bones of Grace* follows a character through Dhaka, Pakistan, and Boston, suggesting that in today’s society we are formed through our experiences on multiple continents.

The late 1970s also saw the election of Margaret Thatcher, Britain’s first female Prime Minister, who left a legacy with which UK still contends. “Thatcher’s Britain” is regarded by many as a socially divided country: unemployment reached a 50-year high, and the economy entered a recession in 1983, but for others she presented a rationale and way out for those who shared her priorities. She reduced social housing and privatised public services, encouraging instead a focus on the individual, which valued skills and achievements for their financial contribution. Though Martin Amis most notably satirised the idea of each person having a fixed economic worth in *Money* (1984), it was Jonathan Coe in 1995 who presented a new perspective on this, looking at those who were left behind in his novel *What a Carve Up!*. His latest novel, *Number 11*, explores the long-term effects of Thatcherism, touching on closure of public libraries, growth in reliance on food banks, and lack of humanitarian values in the financial sector.

Yet Thatcher’s influence can be seen in another way: the cult of the individual, we could argue, has affected British fiction’s own priorities. It is an author’s voice that reviewers often talk about: does this author write like no other? In
his introduction to Deborah Levy’s 2012 novel *Swimming Home*, Tom McCarthy wrote that as a literary figure she “[stands] out from all the rest”; Hilary Mantel was awarded an honorary doctorate this year by University College Dublin “in recognition of her unique and compelling... fiction”. Thatcher’s heyday of the 1980s – she was Prime Minister throughout the decade – began and ended with huge success for two authors renowned for their command of voice, and their influence still stands today.

The first was Salman Rushdie. His 1981 novel *Midnight’s Children* marries a beguiling use of language to a magical realist story in order to tell a vastly ambitious state-of-the-nation plot exploring India after independence. Rushdie’s effect on literature is huge, especially on novels about the effects of Britain’s colonial power. Sunjeev Sahota’s Booker-shortlisted *The Year of the Runaways* weaves together the pasts and present of four Indian migrants working in the UK. He has said that *Midnight’s Children* was the first novel he read. Neel Mukherjee who is an Indian-born writer now living in London, built on Rushdie’s expansive structure to explore the fortunes of the Indian middle-class in the 1960s and 70s in his recent novel *The Lives of Others*.

At the end of the decade, in 1989, it was Kazuo Ishiguro who almost single-handedly created a new genre from the way he handled voice. Ishiguro is continually praised for the ways in which his narrators’ characteristics – their flaws, delusions, and what they take for granted – are woven into his novels’ style, subject and structure. In *The Remains of the Day* we only learn that the emotionally detached narrator is crying because another character offers him a handkerchief; in *Never Let Me Go* Cathy refers to people “completing”, leaving readers to deduce the meaning of this for themselves. But why does this technique strike a chord with readers? For this we could look at two novels that have used it: Emma Healey’s recent *Elizabeth Is Missing*, which we have already mentioned, sees a narrator with Alzheimer’s forget what she has been told, so the reader knows more than she does as the novel progresses. Zoe Heller’s celebrated *Notes on a Scandal* presents the reader with one woman’s version of the public events that her friend – and possible object of her
affection – is caught up in. The truth, we discern, lies as much outside her version as anyone else’s. In contemporary Britain, where our newspapers openly campaign for or against politicians during elections and referendums, and where we can access multiple conflicting reports on any public situation online, the rise of the unreliable narrator perhaps reflects our growing conviction that no story is ever the official version, and we cannot trust our sources.

Ishiguro won the Booker Prize in 1989, when the Conservative party was declining in popularity. But it would be another eight years before a change in government, and the social issues affecting the country – the fight for Irish independence, fears of inflation and recession – were continuations of those from the previous decade. After the end of the Cold War and the brief Gulf War, current events began to focus on scientific developments such as cloning and spaceflight, and literary fiction began either to look back, to see how the past had brought us here, or into the future and its various possible worlds.

The success of British historical fiction at this time – by writers including Sarah Waters, Hilary Mantel and Tracey Chevalier – was perhaps best explained by Julian Barnes when he described his 2004 novel Arthur and George as “a contemporary novel set in the past”. Using modern techniques and styles, these novels evoked a faded society and gave psychological depth to the people within it, inviting the reader to find the universal in their struggles, or to connect with them and reconsider the present. Both Sarah Waters in Tipping the Velvet and Alan Hollinghurst in The Line of Beauty looked at how class boundaries could be transcended and exploited by homosexuals; Jim Crace’s novel Quarantine dramatized the life of Jesus, encouraging believers to see him as a fallible human and atheists to question their dismissal of his actions. And while post-war British novelists such as Paul Scott and Lawrence Durrell had once crafted stories about Englishmen abroad at the end of the empire, Caryl Phillips’s novel Crossing the River and Andrea Levy’s Small Island reversed this gaze and addressed the diaspora from a black perspective, as did Bernardine Evaristo’s verse-novel Lara.
But the future also began to concern novelists, as well as the alternative realities that could have been. David Mitchell and China Mieville both published their first books at the end of the 1990s, and their subsequent novels – most notably Mitchell’s *Cloud Atlas* and Mieville’s *The City & The City* – embrace the depth and variation of science fiction and fantasy, shifting through different realities and timelines, and incorporating other genres such as horror, the supernatural, and the police procedural into the far-reaching repertoire of their fiction.

They were not the only authors to play with genre: McEwan, through the 90s and early 2000s, created twists on the revenge plot with *Amsterdam* and spliced wartime romance with the coming-of-age drama in *Atonement* to ask questions about authorial intent and morality. Scarlett Thomas’s 2007 novel *The End of Mr Y* used tropes from mystery novels and supernatural thrillers to illustrate the thought experiments of the philosopher Jacques Derrida. In this vein we now find writers like Andrew Michael Hurley, whose 2015 novel *The Loney* takes the horror genre’s haunted house to a place of real fears and moral quandaries; and Louise Welsh, whose *Plague Times* trilogy uses the trappings of crime fiction to create unsettlingly precise psychological portraits of murderers, victims, and those affected by tragedy. Sarah Hall, who began by publishing historical fiction, has more recently used future and alternative realities to explore contemporary issues. *The Carhullan Army* takes inspiration from the Iraq War, climate change and growing fears of radicalisation to create a story in which a young woman, living in a flooded Britain under totalitarian control, is indoctrinated into a rebel uprising; her 2015 novel *The Wolf Border* is set after the Scottish referendum, but in a Britain where the vote was for independence.

This marrying of genre fiction to philosophical thought also brought new depth to Young Adult Fiction. A genre once classed as "teen read“ in libraries was revitalised in the 1990s not just by *Harry Potter* but by Philip Pullman’s *His Dark Materials*, which introduced readers to a gothic-tinged fantasy world
where complex ideas of moral philosophy were played out, with characters engaged in a reversal of *Paradise Lost*. This concept of marrying historical fantasy with challenging ideas continues with the author Frances Hardinge, whose novel *The Lie Tree* – about a magical tree that grows when lies are spread, but whose fruit, when eaten, reveals a larger truth – won the Costa Book Award in 2015. David Almond, meanwhile, has published novels that sit somewhere between social realism and gothic fantasy, placing his characters in the real north of England but investing their stories with myth and fable, so that the supernatural lurks on the novel’s periphery.

In the last decade, the publishing industry has experienced ups and downs of its own. The high sales of non-fiction, and the success of novels using real-life stories as the basis for their plots – such as Stephen Kelman’s *Pigeon English*, inspired by the murder of a young black boy, Damilola Taylor, and Nicola Barker’s *Clear*, which dramatized magician David Blaine’s attempt to live in a glass box above the River Thames – have resulted in predictable declarations about “the death of the novel”. The rise of eBooks and digital downloads has forced publishers to rethink how they sell their titles. It has been the smaller and younger UK publishers that have adapted quickly to this model, or emerged because of it: publishers Unbound and And Other Stories have both funded novels through donations from readers, who then receive the book upon publication; Galley Beggar Press publishes “singles” – short stories in eBook form – to which readers can subscribe, being sent them monthly.

The success of these “singles” also highlights another change in British fiction: the rise of the short story. While American literature has had a thriving short story culture for decades, in the 1990s one could perhaps only name Helen Simpson and Adam Mars-Jones as writers whose reputations rested on short stories; Simpson in particular published in *Vogue*, *Cosmopolitan* and *The Women’s Journal*, as literary outlets for her work were in short supply. Yet in recent years we have seen the introduction of the BBC National Short Story Award and Philip Hensher’s two-volume anthology *The Penguin Book of the British Short Story*, while writers debuting with highly-praised collections
include Lucy Wood with *Diving Belles*, Rebecca F John with *Clown Shoes*, and Claire-Louise Bennett with *Pond* – the latter two from small publishers, Parthian and Fitzcarraldo Editions respectively.

Small publishers have also provided the UK with several of its most interesting experimental writers. Most famously Galley Beggar published Eimear McBride’s *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing*, a novel in a fractured, modernist narrative voice that won the Baileys, Goldsmiths and Desmond Elliott Prizes. The Goldsmiths Prize has a particular focus for British literature: it rewards “fiction that breaks the mould or extends the possibilities of the novel form”, and each shortlist in the past few years has been a place where large and small publishers collide. Ali Smith, one of British literature’s major voices, won it in 2014 with *How to be Both*, which also won the Costa Novel Award, a prize that makes “readability” its priority. The Goldsmiths Prize, then, can be seen as proof that experimental literature does not mean a book that is hard to read or of minority interest – a theory strengthened by the Man Booker Prize - shortlistings of Will Self for his one-sentence novel *Umbrella* and Nicola Barker for her self-reflexive postmodern fictions – and its shortlist is as likely to include Rachel Cusk and Magnus Mills, authors whose style is more traditional but whose novels challenge our ideas of what stories should be and why we tell them, as Paul Kingsnorth’s *The Wake*, written in Old English, and Sarah Landipo Manyika, whose work blends Nigerian history with a contemporary western setting and is published by the small press Cassava Republic.

Cassava Republic, as a case in point, is a publisher set up to redress an imbalance in literature. The conversations about British fiction – its diversity for women and authors from black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds – is still evolving, and will continue to do so for decades. In *Silences*, her 1978 study of the social and economic pressures facing writers and their creativity, Tillie Olsen estimated that only one in twelve books published was by a woman. Today, at least half our best-seller list is female, but publication is still only part of the issue. A 2015 study by Vida found that only 58 books featured in *The London Review of Books*, out of 250 in total, were by women, while Tramp Press found that when novelists were submitting to them, they tended to
name their influences as men, which suggested that they were caught in the mindset that generally men were the credible authors of serious fiction.

But, authors from ethnic minorities still struggle to find publishers, let alone receive attention from critics. The Bookseller recently reported that Kazuo Ishiguro is the only writer of colour in the UK’s Top 100 best-selling books of 2016. As with publishers like Cassava Republic, it is the projects currently being set up whose effects we will see reshaping British literature in the coming decades: the Jhalak Prize for Black, Asian and minority ethnic writers, Penguin’s WriteNow mentoring scheme, and Own it!, a publishing and lifestyle brand that focuses on readers and writers of colour.

As the UK population continues to change, the publishers who succeed are the ones who find ways to access the emerging voices, and who recognise the ways in which our authors – across genres and styles – react to and explore society’s issues. Ali Smith and Will Self can be considered alongside Eimear McBride and Sarah Landipo Manyika; historical novels and science fiction sell when they speak to readers about universal issues, and are not time-locked by the future or the past. As the class, gender and racial profile of the UK changes, as new writers emerge from it or are inspired to write about it, we, as readers, can only benefit – but we benefit by reading widely, and giving new time to the authors with whom we are not yet familiar. These writers, such as those mentioned here, have more in common with Barnes, Amis, McEwan, Rushdie, Ishiguro and Carter than we might initially have thought, but they have even more that is unique to themselves, too.

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