

Contemporary Fiction: A Very Short Introduction

By Robert Eaglestone

Questions for Thought and Discussion

- In the introduction, I say that I think that novels are the closest art form to us (because they use only language, like us, because they tell stories, as we do, and because they are so 'immersive': we 'lose ourselves in a book'). Is this right? Are (for example) computer games more immersive? Do we lose ourselves in films?
- What does it mean, to 'know about' a novel? To know facts about an author? To know how you feel about it? To summarise the plot?
- I argued that there was no one definition of the novel that covered all cases. What does this mean?
- Novels used to be thought of as embodying 'national traditions' (English, American, Indian). Is this still so? Was it ever the case?
- What do you think is the 'next big thing' in fiction?
- Why is 'realism' so pervasive in our culture?
- Closure is what Frank Kermode, one of the leading literary critics of the twentieth century, called the 'sense of an ending' and he argued that it was one of the most important and enduring features of fiction. Why? What happens when 'the last page is missing'?
- Do you enjoy – or not enjoy – 'postmodern' novels? Why? Why not?
- I've suggested that there are three linked 'waves' going on in contemporary fiction: a sort of tamed 'postmodernism'; a return to experimental modernism; and a response to 'reality hunger'? What novels have you read that meet (or challenge) these categories?
- How important is a 'family tree' of novels to an author? Which writers does the novel you are reading now imitate or ignore?
- Imagine writing a cook book with a plot. How might that work? Imagine writing a hardboiled detective plot in a 'Mills and Boon' style. Play with genres.
- Many people used to think 'genre' fiction was worse than literary fiction. This view is now very dated. What do you think? I argue that there *is* something special and 'open' about literary fiction. What do you think?
- "The past is never dead. It's not even past": much contemporary fiction explores very different ways in which this is true. What novels you've read do this?
- Do you read historical fiction for the story (although you already know what happens?) or for the history? Or does this distinction not really matter?
- Have you read *War and Peace*? Ignore the all the people saying you should (and implying it's very hard) and read it anyway. It's a masterpiece. It took me three months to get to page 80 but after that I literally couldn't put it down (I read it secretly at work when I was supposed to be, er, working). Same for *Middlemarch*, incidentally.
- Are historical novels always anachronistic? Does it matter? Does it matter in some cases and not in others?
- How do historical novels relate to 'public memory'? Are we remembering the First World War or novels about the First World War?
- What do novels teach us about the present? Can any novel really be a 'State of the Nation' novel in a 'globalised' world?
- How successfully do novels deal with terrorism? With 'endless war'? With 9/11? With contemporary evil?

- Novels offer different views about religion. They also seem to offer different experiences of religion. How do they contrast and why?
- I've suggested that much contemporary fiction realises that "brutality is brutality and excess is excess and that's all there is to it" and, rather than imagining it can save the world, demonstrates a sort of humility in the face of terrible events. What do you think?
- Is 'science fiction' just like 'historical fiction' but, as it were, *the other way around*?
- Lots of fiction about the future is very grim. Why?
- We made technology: but technology also made us. Did it?
- Is what an author thinks important in shaping your opinion of their work?
- Do 'academic literary critics' kill "everything they touch"? Why?
- Should criticism be more personal?
- "To enjoy art one needs time, patience, and a generous heart, and criticism is done, by and large, by impatient people who have axes to grind. The worst sort of critics are (analogy coming) butterfly collectors - they chase something, ostensibly out of their search for beauty, then, once they get close, they catch that beautiful something, they kill it, they stick a pin through its abdomen, dissect it and label it. The whole process, I find, is not a happy or healthy one". What should criticism do?

Other books by Robert Eaglestone

Blackwell Encyclopaedia of Literary and Cultural Theory Volume 2 (1966 to Present Day) (Editor) (Blackwell, 2010)

Doing English: A Guide for Literature Students 3rd Ed. (Routledge, 2009)

J.M. Coetzee in Context and Theory (Co-editor, with Elleke Boehmer and Katy Iddiols) (Continuum, 2009)

Legacies of Derrida: Literature and Philosophy (Co-editor, with Simon Glendinning) (Routledge, 2008)

Teaching Holocaust Literature and Film (Co-editor, with Barry Langford) (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008)

Reading The Lord of the Rings (Continuum, 2005)

Postmodernism and Holocaust Denial (Icon Books, 2001)

Ethical Criticism: Reading After Levinas (Edinburgh University Press, 1997)

Further Reading

Please see pages 109-110 of *Contemporary Fiction: A Very Short Introduction*