London Fiction at the Millennium

Beyond Postmodernism

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For Mom and Dad, thank you for everything

PREFACE

This book is concerned with an analysis of London fiction at the millennium (leading up to and beyond the year 2000). It examines texts that can in some way be regarded as occupying a space beyond postmodernism. It explores how a selection of contemporary London novels can be considered as "second-wave" or "post-postmodern" considering their borrowing more from mainstream and classical genres as opposed to formally experimental avant-garde techniques. This investigation is conducted with a specific focus on writings about London in order to investigate how novelists utilise the cultural capital of London as a consistent metaphor in their texts as part of what can be read as an attempt to relocate the marginalised, subjugated or underrepresented character within the culturally dominant. The texts considered here are read in terms of post-postmodern discourse, critically evaluating how this selection of writers at the millennium is appropriating and adapting mainstream writing styles and genres such as realism, the historical novel and the bildungsroman, as well as char-acterisations such as that of the heroic.

Key novels by Martin Amis, Bella Bathurst, Bernardine Evaristo, Mark Haddon, Nick Hornby, Hanif Kureishi, Andrea Levy, Gautam Malkani, Timothy Mo, Will Self, Ali Smith, Zadie Smith, Rupert Thomson and Sarah Waters are considered. The millennium provides an apt symbolic opportunity to reflect on British fiction and to consider the direction in which these contemporary authors are moving. As postmodernism has

been such a dominant critical perspective throughout much of the twentieth century, it is in light of postmodernist challenges, disruptions and innovations to form that I analyse how texts can be read beyond a postmodern focus on form to instead consider how the writers engage with attempts to "open up" literature but do so with the use of mainstream styles.

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Mapping Millennial London Fiction

> *The rise of the city, in Britain, coincides with the rise of the novel itself, and the two have been inextricably linked ever since. As cities develop and mutate in the late twentieth century, subject to national and international population movements and political fissures, multiplying varieties of religion, race, history and politics increasingly contest each other for space and public visibility and legitimacy. New individual and collective identities struggle to emerge; new voices seek to find a hearing above the noisy crowd.*
> —Ken Worpole. "Mother to Legend (or going underground): The London Novel" 1995 181

This book is concerned with an analysis of London fiction at the millennium (leading up to and immediately after the year 2000). As the title suggests, this involves an exploration of texts that can in some way be regarded as occupying a space beyond postmodernism. I explore millennial London texts and argue that they should be considered as "second-wave" or "post-postmodern"[1] in relation to their style of storytelling and characterisation which borrows more from mainstream and classical genres than it does from formally experimental avant-garde techniques. The texts considered in this study are read as challenging the "centre" in terms of repopulating it with new or previously underrepresented voices via the adaptation and appropriation of mainstream forms. By using popular styles such as heroic characterisation and historic narratives, "marginalised"

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writers refrain from wholly subverting the form, but instead revise the novel in the light of previous subjugations. The reasons that writers might choose to represent characters from politically marginalised backgrounds but to employ traditional and conventional, rather than avant-garde or innovative forms are complex, and any investigation into this aspect of contemporary London writing must acknowledge a need to understand the text as a cultural and social artefact, not purely a literary one. As this study will explore, it is evidently still desirable for writers engaging with the periphery, in the form of the characters they write, to gain a foothold on traditional forms, rather than simply to reject them, and this may be due to the relative cultural capital that is still afforded conventional styles and forms in popular discourse, which has implications for the legacy of the postmodern endeavour. This is not to suggest that the writers considered here reject postmodernism entirely, rather that they are selective in their appropriation of some of the formal innovations that postmodernism ushered in, and instead of wholly embracing the postmodern, attempt to produce texts which form a synergy between a postmodern opening out of the form and a conventional, accessible style. I discuss and define the terms "second wave" and "post-postmodern" at length below, but initially I will address the specific temporal and spatial subject matter, that of London fiction at the millennium.

To an extent, millennial London fiction acts as a useful representative sample of wider trends within British fiction. In some texts the capital city acts as a highly charged symbol of the state of Britain at the dawn of an era in which the UK emerged a changed nation, having lost most of its empire, and still owing a debt to the USA from the Second World War. However, textual representations of London are often more complex than this model suggests, and in many texts the city functions as more than simply a metonym for the whole of Britain. Writers are often drawn to the uniqueness of the capital and in particular its ability to mutate: "It has rarely been just one thing at a time. Despite everyone from Inigo Jones to the GLC, it has never remained what its planners desired" (Roy Porter *London: A Social History* 9). As Porter suggests London developed through the amalgamation of many different cultures without much reverence for the art of urban planning. The nature of the mélange of London also derived from the city's complex history of governance: "not since the Romans has London possessed a unified government, a government relevant to all its needs" (Porter 3). These factors have combined to make London unique, and from the nineteenth century (and continuing in millennial fiction)

authors have consistently been drawn to the resulting mêlée of peoples, cultures and ideas. From Dickens's portrayal of the many versions of Covent Garden that one may experience (*Little Dorrit* 1855–1857), through Peter Ackroyd's layering of historical periods in a single space within London in *Hawksmoor* (1985) to Zadie Smith's depiction of the multicultural, hegemonic playground in Willesden in *White Teeth* (2000) and Sarah Waters's recreation of the "Blitz spirit" in *The Night Watch* (2006), writers have responded to and represented London's unique and complex character.

Ken Worpole, during his discussion of the definition of the "London novel", as opposed to a novel simply set in London, suggests that we must ask: "Why, of the many dozens of novels published each year set in London, do so very few of them qualify even to be considered as a 'London novel'?" (183) He answers this question by suggesting that: "The main qualification, surely, is that the city is not simply a backdrop of the action, but an essential feature and dominating metaphor throughout" (183). In the novels considered here London is an "essential feature and dominating metaphor". Even though it does not always feature as "part of the very texture of the lives and thoughts of the characters, and constitutes the very air in which they live and breathe" (Worpole 184) in the same manner as it does in Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair*, Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, Iain Sinclair's *Downriver* or Michael Moorcock's *Mother London*; London is a significant metaphor in key novels by Martin Amis, Bella Bathurst, Bernardine Evaristo, Mark Haddon, Nick Hornby, Hanif Kureishi, Andrea Levy, Gautam Malkani, Timothy Mo, Will Self, Ali Smith, Zadie Smith, Rupert Thomson and Sarah Waters. For these authors a London setting provides a symbolic representation of the relationship between the centre (in the form of the capital city) and the marginalised characters that the texts portray. As such, for many authors in this study London forms an opportunity for a striking metaphorical repositioning of once marginalised voices (in the forms of their characters) within the centre.

The category of "London literature" is both long established and highly contested. For Lawrence Phillips in *The Swarming Streets* the category "literary London" has a particular relevance to the nineteenth century: "Nineteenth-century 'literary London' was an imaginative, physical and psychological space in which there was much to surprise, horrify, titillate and appal the polite reader, but it could be eminently known" (3). Bradbury makes a similar point, that it is during an earlier period that London literature has a distinct aesthetic identity,[2] describing London at

the beginning of the twentieth century as "a fruitful symbiosis of the cosmopolitan and the nativist [that became] a profoundly important aspect of the aesthetics of the entire period from the 1880s through to the First World War" (*Modernism* 175).

However, representations of urban life and the city also hold a prominent position within contemporary British fiction. Philip Tew argues that the changing relationship between the novel and the city has been a significant feature of the current era of literature: "If the contemporary novel has done anything consistently since the mid-1970s it has been to radicalize traditional understandings of the late capitalist cityscape and urban environment. … [N]ew voices have emerged and cartographized the complexity and heterogeneity of urban existence" (*The Contemporary British Novel* xi). The urban and the city therefore continue to be prominent areas for consideration and discussion within the contemporary novel. With such a focus on "the city" within contemporary British fiction, London, as the British capital, and as a city with a long history as a publishing centre (a place historically where writers both come to write and to have their works published) is an obvious point for discussion and must take its place within the debate about contemporary British fiction.

London had a renewed energy at the beginning of the new millennium as its status as a place of cultural significance was reasserted in the decision to focus much of England's millennial celebrations in the capital. London had recently enjoyed a revival, being at the forefront of popular culture through the success of "Brit Pop" of the 1990s, and was also the stage chosen for New Labour's election campaign, which simultaneously evoked images of "New Labour" and a "newly" rejuvenated English Capital.[3] At this time for many there was a cultural investment in the idea, by writers and critics, that there was something noteworthy occurring at this specific time and place.

Nick Bentley (*British Fiction of the 1990s*) suggests that "trying to identify the defining characteristics of any period of literary history is a difficult task" (1), a task which is further complicated, as Fredric Jameson comments, when that fiction is so contemporary: "[T]he grasping of the present from within is the most problematical task the mind can face" ("Afterword—Marxism and Postmodernism" 383–384). Though problematic, I consider that it is possible to begin to map some significant trends within millennial fiction. The contemporary should not be ignored or reserved for analysis in a future period, but instead forms an integral part of a vibrant, contemporary literary criticism as a topic which is

currently occupying the minds of an array of established critics.[4] Dominic Head, Tew, Bentley and Jago Morrison all draw attention to the contemporary novel as a ripe area for literary analysis, Tew asserts: "One important historical fact (set of observable and arguable circumstances) about contemporary British fiction is that it is being increasingly studied very widely in a range of institutions" (180). The field of contemporary fiction studies is expansive and within the scope of the term there can be found more discrete areas of study that are worthy of critical attention. Millennial London fiction is one such area; it represents an opportunity to analyse the myriad ways in which writers have interacted with the shifting narrative strategies that have come to the fore as the capital city was defined and redefined.

The years leading up to the millennium were a significant period for British fiction; "the last decade of the old millennium was seeing some striking changes" (Bradbury *The Modern British Novel 1878–2001* 515). As Bradbury goes on to note, in some ways this involved a natural ending of an era as a "significant number of the leading writers who had shaped the course of post-war British fiction died in the decade" (515).[5] Although, as Bradbury also comments, "[a] 'Millennium' is an artificial invention […] millennial sentiments are, and always have been real enough" (502). The inevitable feelings of change associated with fin de siècle reflection, and the careers of many of the key figures of post-war British literature coming to an end in the final two decades of the twentieth century combined to contribute towards a sense of an end of a literary era. As such, the beginning of the new century, and a new millennium, offers an appropriate moment to focus our attention in order to reflect upon the trends and characteristics of British fiction at the time. Garry Potter and José López (*After Postmodernism: An Introduction to Critical Realism* 2001) concur, highlighting the opportunity the new millennium provided for reflection: "It is a year similar to many, but yet unlike any that has come before. It is the year two thousand, the gateway to a new millennium and as such an opportune time to pause and attempt to reassess" (3). Similarly, John Brannigan in *Orwell to the Present*, whilst acknowledging the artificial nature of the construct, states the turn of the millennium "afforded some opportunities" for "reflection" (65).

This book therefore seeks to consider and explore millennial literature, but with a focused consideration on London literature. The specific concentration on London literature needs to be contextualised in relation to the existing body of critical work on the specific topic, such as that by

Phillips, John McLeod and Alex Murray. Phillips has written extensively on the topic of London fiction[6] and I extend his trajectory to a consideration of the post-1990 novel. Murray's approach in *Recalling London* (2007) is to examine the specific developments of London fiction through the authors Sinclair and Ackroyd, this book seeks to build upon Murray's work to consider a range of contemporary authors. Similarly, I broaden some of the work of McLeod's *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* (2004) which focuses on post-1950s immigrant writing, to consider the wider contexts of style, structure and characterisation of a range of authors in the millennial period. If there is one aspect within the critical literature that constantly recurs, it is the idea that the city is a continuously changing entity—what Phillips calls "the city in performance" (*London Narratives* 159). Through a focus on a selection of key millennial texts, this study extends a critical focus on the literary re-imagining of the capital, one that is forever "in process" (*London Narratives* 159).

CONTEXT: THE POSTMODERN DEBATE

This book approaches millennial London texts through a theoretical positioning of the post-postmodern. It is necessary for any discussion and definition of post-postmodernism to first engage with postmodernism. Postmodernism has dominated much critical thinking since the middle of the last century and is a term which by its very nature defies easy definition. Fredric Jameson makes such a point about the elusive nature of a single definition of postmodernism in *Postmodernism, Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991): "The problem of postmodernism—how its fundamental characteristics are to be described, whether it even exists in the first place, whether the very concept is of any use, or is, on the contrary a mystification—this problem is at one and the same time an aesthetic and a political one" (55). Postmodernism is such an extensive category that I focus only on those aspects which are most relevant to London millennial fiction. These include many of the aspects of postmodernism discussed by both Jameson and Jean-François Lyotard, for example, the distrust and questioning of narrative as a viable form through varying techniques of linguistic play or narrative self-reflexivity; the celebration of the fragmented and multiple, specifically in relation to the notion of the "loss of the self" in terms of a single identity; a fascination with artifice, schlock and kitsch; and the subversion of "high culture". I investigate contemporary texts which share a desire to express the

subjugated voice, but that significantly stop short of the destruction of the principle of narrative as a viable and valuable cultural discourse and thence take us beyond the assumptions of postmodernism.

Lyotard, in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984), lays out the difference as he sees it between modernism and postmodernism in terms of aesthetics: "modern aesthetics is an aesthetic of the sublime, though a nostalgic one. It allows the unpresentable to be put forward only as the missing contents; but the form, because of its recognizable consistency, continues to offer to the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure" (81). In contrast:

> The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forwards the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable. (81)

Therefore, it is within the mode of presentation and an essential attitude that Lyotard locates the difference. Edward Soja, in the opening "Preface and Postscript" to his collection of essays *Postmodern Geographies* (1989), is clearly influenced by Jameson's work and points to how specific aspects of postmodernist theory manifest themselves within literature, and more specifically within a disruption of form observing that one aspect of postmodern fiction is a narrative which "signals right from the start an intention to tamper with the familiar modalities of time, to shake up the normal flow of the linear text" (1). Hans Peter-Wagner also associates postmodernism with a challenge to modes of representation which: "undermin[es] the ideas of logical coherence in narration, formal plot, regular time sequence, and psychologically explained characters" (94). Though the notion of "missing contexts" remains a relevant force within the post-postmodern, the boundaries of a postmodern project which seeks to evoke such notions of the ultimately "unpresentable", or to disrupt any "logical coherence" or "psychologically explained character", are transcended by the authors who are the focus of this study. Evaristo, Waters, Levy, *et al.*[7] offer an alternate approach to the postmodern, eschewing challenges to form and the notion of the unreliability of narrative or the unobtainable nature of representation, to reinstate the more straightforward temporal flow of storytelling (as opposed to chronological juxtapositions) and

archetypal characterisation. The writing of the hero or the heroine arche-type, whose quests for knowledge and understanding can be fulfilled, demonstrates this point (as discussed in Chaps. 3 and 4) as the texts considered here repopulate popular style with previously missing or subjugated voices. Yet a nod to postmodern perspective within these texts means that they are not offering a simple return, but are rather revisiting, adapting and appropriating certain aspects of postmodernism alongside selected elements of classical styles for their own means in order to express voices which have previously been occluded.

Postmodernism in part represents a democratisation of culture because the centre is challenged along with the idea of "absolute truths".[8] Ihab Hassan in *The Dismemberment of Orpheus: Toward a Postmodern Literature* (1971) and *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture* (1987) refers to postmodernism as an impulse to decentre, to unmask that which has always been present, but previously repressed. Chris Snipp-Walmsley ("Postmodernism", 2006) succinctly summarises Hassan's proposal that postmodernism is "a celebration of silence and otherness that was always present" (407). Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak ("Can the Subaltern Speak?" 1988) also links the postmodern with an expression of the "unheard" as she engages with deconstructionist aspects of postmodern thought in order to suggest an aesthetics which "opens up" Western scholarship to "subaltern" voices, concerning herself with the tendency of institutional and culturally dominant discourses and practices to exclude marginalised voices, particularly those of subaltern women. Critics such as Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic* (1993) argue that a process of reassessment and the "laying bare" of the practices which leads to the subjugation of narratives can allow such voices to form a counter to the dominant discourse (1) and, as theorists such as Alison Lee in *Realism and Power*[9] (1990) and Patricia Waugh in *Feminine Fictions: Revisiting the Postmodern* (1989), amongst many others, propose, postmodernism provides an interpretive framework for some of these voices to be heard.

However, Bentley notes a growing scepticism about postmodernism towards the end of the twentieth century among literary and cultural theorists such as Fredric Jameson, bell hooks, Seyla Benhabib, John O'Neil and Terry Eagleton. bell hooks notes in "Postmodern Blackness" (1994) how a complete rejection of dominant forms in the new celebration of "difference" (that postmodernism in part embarks on) can have complicated consequences for those previously marginalised. hooks suggests that one needs to make a careful consideration of the implications for the

marginalised of any critique or destabilising of the notion of identity. She considers how within the critical arena some African-Americans welcome a disruption of essentialist notions that much postmodern theory brought to the fore through a focus on the expression of "difference": "Abandoning essentialist notions would be a serious challenge to racism" (NPg). But yet she is also keen to note that a debunking of the notion of "identity" may in fact have contradictory effects from the supposed liberatory potential: "Any critic exploring the radical potential of postmodernism as it relates to racial difference and racial domination would need to consider the implications of a critique of identity for oppressed groups" (NPg). Though hooks is here writing in direct relation to those marginalised in terms of race, she later states, that the theories are capable of: "cutting across boundaries of race, class, gender, and sexual practice" (NPg). hooks elucidates her argument that the rejection of the concept of "identity" may have different consequences for different peoples using Lawrence Grossberg's discussion of rap music in his essay "Putting the Pop Back into Postmodernism":

> Considering that it is as a subject that one comes to voice, then the postmodernist focus on the critique of identity appears, at first glance, to threaten and close down the possibility that this discourse and practice will allow those who have suffered the crippling effects of colonization and domination to gain or regain a hearing. (NPg)

As hooks notes, even though this is to an extent a "misunderstanding of the postmodernist political project", these very worrying consequences need to be considered since such misunderstandings "nevertheless shape responses". hooks further argues: "It never surprises me when black folk respond to the critique of essentialism, especially when it denies the validity of identity politics, by saying 'yeah, it's easy to give up identity, when you got one'" (NPg). hooks, while accepting that such a response may in part be a misappropriation of postmodern theories, further warns: "We should indeed [be] suspicious of postmodern critiques of the 'subject' when they surface at a historical moment when many subjugated people feel themselves coming to voice for the first time" (NPg).

Bentley is alert to this sort of issue when he charts postmodernism's development from "the first phase [which] corresponds roughly to the 1960s and 1970s" to a second phase in the 1980s (4). In particular Bentley's suggestion that the later phase questions "the liberatory

potential of postmodernism's scepticism towards 'grand narratives'" (4) describes the textual responses to the situation hooks outlines above. These particular concerns raised about postmodernism are especially illuminating when considering the London millennial texts by writers such as Amis, Bathurst, Evaristo, Haddon, Hornby, Levy, Kureishi, Mo, Malkani, Self, Ali Smith, Zadie Smith, Thomson and Waters who engage with the process of expressing the marginal voice, but they do not necessarily seek such "liberation" through a postmodern "scepticism towards grand narratives" (Bentley 4).

Post-Postmodernism

"Post-postmodernism" and "second wave" postmodernism are terms which have only recently come into usage within literary criticism and are still very much in the process of being developed and argued over. Building upon the work of critics such as Gavin Keulks, López and Potter I will engage with notions of the post-postmodern and apply them to my reading of London millennial fiction. I argue that there is a discernible trend among the group of authors[10] identified for this study in their use of narrative, storytelling techniques and characterisation that can be interpreted as a significant move away from narrative and stylistic experimentalism. Therefore, just as the distinction described above between modernism and postmodernism may be understood in terms of attitudes towards form and presentation, so too can the difference between postmodernism and post-postmodernism be interpreted in relation to form and the tone of the use of formal innovation and experimentation. Potter and López suggest that the current aspiration to move beyond postmodernism and define what will "come next" can in part be explained by a process of the natural progression due to the longevity of postmodernism:

> [W]hy is it necessary for something to 'come after' postmodernism? The answer is double-sided. First, it simply seems to be a sociological fact that intellectual and academic life has its fashions and enthusiasms. One can cynically observe that the demise of one 'exciting new' trend or school of thought generally means that another will soon be born. (4)

However, the other "side" to their argument offers a much more definite commentary on postmodernism itself: "a new and different intellectual direction *must* come after postmodernism, simply because postmodernism

is inadequate as an intellectual response to the times we live in" (original emphasis 4). What Potter and López articulate above may read like a debunking of the postmodern, yet to some extent their words simply acknowledge the inherent limitations in any theoretical endeavour. Once the limitations of any theory are exposed, the creative response to this "gap" often ushers in a new wave of artistic and critical responses. In this manner, though Potter and López may seem harsh, they articulate an inevitable part of every intellectual response to cultural and social events. Their critique of the limitations of postmodern theory has been accompanied by an artistic and creative departure from first-wave postmodernism, in response to a lack of faith in postmodernism, writers are attempting to move beyond a disruption of narrative form. These writers are notably borrowing from more "classic" or at least more formally conventional (perhaps even aesthetically conservative) narrative styles in order to situate marginalised voices within such traditions, rather than laying down a challenge at the level of form, and thus can be understood in part to be offering a "return" at the level of style. However, this change is complex and attempts to provide a definition in terms of a simple return are not entirely adequate, as these texts do not engage with a compliant return to traditional forms, but rather they are appropriated and adapted (but not rejected or debunked, a subtle, yet significant difference) enabling the previously underrepresented voice a purchase upon the centre.

Postmodern perspectives often involve a discernible consideration of the processes of narrative and a discussion of form within the creative work itself. However, as Rachel Falconer comments in *The Crossover Novel* (2009), this is not always regarded as having a positive effect on the storytelling process: "postmodern writers become trapped in the self-absorbed art of demonstrating their artistry" (5). Martin Amis comments on how such a focus on form resulted in what he perceived to be the "huge boredom" of narrative tricks and the "self-reflection" of the postmodern text (as quoted in Keulks "W(h)ither Postmodernism" 159). Amis asks: "Why did writers stop telling stories and start going on about how they were telling them?" (159).[11] Though Amis's *Money: A Suicide Note* (1984) and *London Fields* (1989) were very successful, "two of the decade's most incisive portraits of apocalyptic anxieties, nuclear fear, and bristling individualism" (Keulks, "Introduction" 2), texts which demonstrate overt interrogation of the processes of narrative, and contain such "trickiness" as an unreliable narrator and metafictional devices such as the author appearing within the novel, these techniques have now, to some extent,

"gone out of fashion" (López and Potter 4). Keulks remarks that *Time's Arrow, or, The Nature of the Offence* (1991) was met with scepticism because "some readers objected to Amis's subjugation of history to style, labelling his efforts artistically callous or indulgent" (2). Whether as a response to such accusations and changing attitudes, or as an inevitable literary development, writers have begun a process of return to more "classic" storytelling models. Falconer comments specifically on the work of Philip Pullman and describes his move towards "put[ting] the interests of his readers first" (5). In 1996 Pullman himself commented that in contemporary fiction: "stories are there on sufferance. … Other things are felt to be more important; technique, style, literary knowingness. … The present day George Eliots take up their stories as if with a pair of tongs. They are embarrassed by them" (in Nigel Reynolds, "Writers are losing the plot" 1996 NPg).[12] However, in London millennium fiction writers engage with, rather than seemingly being "embarrassed" by, traditional styles. A return to more classical reading and writing models allows readers to participate in familiar storytelling modes, as opposed to being an observer of an author's critique on form.

Although attempts at defining the post-postmodern are as equally contentious and difficult as attempts to define its predecessor, it is possible to note that since the early 2000s, within theoretical arenas, there have been a few moves towards an articulation of a successor term. One meaningful theme recurrent within these attempts is the notion that trust, dialogue, performance or sincerity can work to transcend postmodern irony. Raoul Eshelman offers such a definition in *Performatism, or the End of Postmodernism* (2008). Eshelman coined the term "performatism" in 2000, as a means of describing the more unified, aesthetically mediated experience of transcendence that he feels can be found in millennial works. It is such a desire to move beyond postmodern irony and reengage with more "classical" processes of storytelling yet maintaining the desire to express the marginal or previously subjugated, which is a common theme throughout the texts considered in this book. Though a turning towards mainstream styles and the use of conventional forms may seem to be at the expense of formal innovation, and thus, for some, such texts may compromise the aesthetic credibility and credentials of the resulting art, I suggest that it is possible to read this shift in more positive terms. The use of popular forms by writers who are engaging with or depicting marginalised characters still constitutes a subversion of the centre ground, as writers engaging with the periphery attempt to fill the dominant centre with

previously underrepresented or absent voices. This is not to deny that the margins have long been a locale for fiction. Peter Childs in *Contemporary Novelists* (2005) remarks: "The novel has perhaps always flourished most at the margin" (274), but the texts considered in this book constitute an attempt to resituate the outsider figure within the culturally dominant centre through an appropriation of dominant styles, rather than (as has been previously attempted) through a radicalisation of form.

It is possible to read a move towards mainstream styles and a lack of formal innovation as a betrayal of an artist's responsibility to challenge and innovate at the level of form, and as a bowing to market forces, as by using more recognisable styles these writers are also producing more marketable and commercially attractive texts in an increasingly competitive publishing arena. Though this is a valid interpretation of the use of mainstream styles such as the hero archetype and the historic narrative, I read this trend in a more positive manner. A consequence of the margins appropriating such styles necessarily represents a challenge to the demographic of the centre ground, and thus the process of revising the culturally dominant from the perspective of the periphery (that was begun by postmodernism) exists in a mutated, less aesthetically radical form in many contemporary texts, yet the challenge to open out the form to previously marginalised voices is still consolidated in the millennial era. In the millennial novels of Kureishi and Haddon for example there is a certain reengagement with the "grand narrative" of moral absolutism, following a period of discussion and often rejection of universalising metanarratives, such as morality, as will be discussed in detail in Chap. 3. This move towards classical styles reflects a shift towards something which is more aesthetically or culturally conservative, but it retains a desire to "open up" classical forms and the centre ground to underrepresented voices after a period of intense interrogation of, and often movement away from, the use of such styles.

The key difference between postmodernism and post-postmodernism can therefore be understood in terms of a reassertion of an older, perhaps even neo-humanist thematic. Keulks discusses this process in relation to the work of Martin Amis[13] and suggests that *Night Train* (1997) and *Yellow Dog* (2003) can be viewed as Amis's "tentative forays toward constructing a post-ironic, 'post-postmodern' voice … such a voice rejects the extremist claims of radical (or vulgar) postmodernism and strives to recuperate select humanist themes" (158). Keulks further defines post-postmodernism as "striving to *sanitize* postmodernism of its nihilist excess while restoring a degree of *sanity*, of emotional value and sincerity, to its

fictional worlds" (original italics 161). Keulks' use of the term "sanitize" is worthy of interrogation since the term will have negative connotations for many readers and may even seem reminiscent of fascistic ideologies of cultural "cleanliness", yet Keulks is describing something more subtle and less absolutist. Keulks goes on to explain that:

> My suggestion of second, or late-phase postmodernism seeks to mollify the extremism of its radical "first-phase" configuration—especially the "end of history" theories of Jean Baudrillard and Francis Fukuyama—as well as to recuperate, however problematically, essentialist concepts of agency, subjectivity and authenticity. (161)

The phrase "however problematically" is significant in Keulks's statement above; he acknowledges that any exercise that involves the recuperation of "essentialist concepts of agency, subjectivity and authenticity" is necessarily fraught with difficulties, and yet it is one with which many millennial authors are engaged. What Keulks articulates here is an attempt to "reshape postmodernism … to revive and rehumanize … the dehumanized subject" (161). In terms of form, writers who fit into this category can be considered to be more conservative than their predecessors as they attempt to reengage with classical linear narratives which on the surface are not very distinct from nineteenth-century realism, or the familiar bildungsroman. In their search to move away from the experimental and the concentration on self-awareness of style, authors revisit narrative traditions, just as Porter suggests is a key characteristic of the city, that "Everywhere continuity and change coalesce; forms and functions mutate; past buildings and townscapes enhance but inhibit the present; the future refashions the debris of the past" (9). Reengaging with more conservative forms can in part therefore be read as analogous to, and thus a fictional representation of, that which Porter suggests is a key aspect of London's character. Amis, Bathurst, Evaristo, Hornby, Kureishi, Levy, Self, Ali Smith, Zadie Smith and Waters "refashion" fictional styles but do not perform an extreme disruption of narrative. Instead they use familiar styles to resituate the marginal and in so doing move away from the decentred subject prevalent within much postmodern focus on form. Therefore, these London writers can be seen to be engaged with a process which, as Porter suggests, is a characteristic of the city as past styles influence the present. Postmodernism often informs these writers' works even though they may be read as also moving beyond the formal experimentation so often associated with it,

and thus furthers an understanding of them in light of the post-postmodern as opposed to a simple rejection of postmodernism or a return to modernist perspectives.

It should be noted that this stance is only possible because postmodernism helped to debunk some of the restrictive aspects of traditional forms. This has enabled authors to return to utilising more "classical" techniques of storytelling but to do so with fresh eyes and to reconsider and reconfigure the political and aesthetic implications of their use. They reposition the "outsider" within and alongside traditional forms, thereby allowing the subjugated (in relation to the character represented) access to, even ownership of, those "economies of discourse"[14] which had previously marginalized them. In terms of form Amis, Bathurst, Evaristo, Haddon, Hornby, Kureishi, Levy, Malkani, Mo, Self, Ali Smith, Zadie Smith, Thomson and Waters[15] are more closely aligned to the nineteenth-century works of George Eliot or Elizabeth Gaskell than their more experimental counterparts such as Michael Moorcock, Iain Sinclair or B.S. Johnson. Sinclair's style for example is almost instantly recognisable yet equally as confusing, as Peter Barry admits in his article "You Can't Get It from the Street" (2007): "The content and ambience of his works is compulsively fascinating to many, though it is possible (for me, usual[sic]) to read his novels with little idea of what is going on" (44–45). As Barry comments during his analysis of Sinclair's style, the form of his sentence structures and syntactic techniques creates confusion for the reader: "Syntactically, his prose is *disjunctive* and *pronominalized*: lexically it is what I'll call '*kennistic'* and '*registerially fluid'* … the prose often seems to consist of brief, sawn-off sentences which are placed end-to-end without connectives" (original emphasis 45). Barry likens Sinclair's style to what Marorie Perloff and Peter Quartermain describe as "disjunctive poetics" which is phrasal and "post-linear".[16] Traditional narrative structure is either disrupted or annulled by these experimental writers/texts. There is no predefined narration in *The Unfortunates* (1969) by B.S. Johnson which attacks the random nature of narration, allowing his reader to read the unbound fragments of his text—famously released in a box without binding—in whatever way they choose; consequently, one of the roles of the author is questioned. This style is far removed from that of authors and texts considered in this study which re-instate concepts of authorial authority as they reengage with a style more familiar to literary realism.

Motifs and Themes

In Chap. 2 I discuss millennial London fiction which engages with the process of writing history. In particular I consider a group of female writers—Evaristo, Levy and Waters—who in their different ways embark upon a reengagement with history to offer a process of re-writing and readdressing absences within dominant accounts of the city's past. Ackroyd, Moorcock, and Sinclair led the London literary scene for almost thirty years and still enjoy much popular and critical success. In novels such as *The Night Watch* and *Soul Tourist*, akin to Ackroyd's endeavour, Waters and Evaristo engage with alternative histories. The manner in which these female authors approach this task however can be read in line with the post-postmodern. They do not as Moorcock and Sinclair often do attempt to disrupt narrative itself; instead they use linear narrative forms and engage with the process of traditional story-telling modes and the rediscovery of underrepresented voices. They do not challenge the very concept of historical fiction through a disruption of temporal modes or the rupturing of principal discourse methods. Instead they engage with the "dominant" and the "centre" in terms of stylistic conventions in order to reposition the "outsider" within the centre in a neo-humanist endeavour to strive for universal equality.

Michel Foucault's work on power and its relationships to knowledge and discourse has a particular relevance to my discussion of the repositioning of the marginal through a reimagining of history in fiction. What allows these texts to be read as post-postmodern is that they move beyond the narrative techniques of their postmodern predecessors, though they continue to strive for some similar political ends. Murray notes: "Sinclair's texts are, on a political level, concerned with challenging both the manipulation of history in contemporary Britain, and the restrictive and inequitable nature of British society" (*City Visions* 3). The "manipulation of history" is a key concern for Waters, Levy and Evaristo, but they do not respond to this concern with experimental narrative. Sinclair's readers must navigate their way through incomplete sentences and vast amounts of "implicitness", which, at least according to Barry, can be confusing. Sinclair himself suggests that you can gain an understanding, a relationship with his words, by experiencing a "romp" around London: "You can get it from the streets" ('If I Turn and Run' 17), to which Barry remarks: "if you have to ask what "it" is exactly, then obviously you *don't* get it" (original emphasis 46). Waters, Levy and Evaristo use styles more akin to

classical realism and thereby, in terms of narrative form and structure, make their texts seem more familiar to many readers. Their concern is the manipulation of history and so focus on a repositioning of those voices which were previously excluded as opposed to a direct challenge to the narrative form itself. This stance may be problematic and is inevitably in danger of substituting one partial reading for another. To some extent, therefore, these texts depend upon the legacy of first-wave postmodernism and rely on the hope that it has sufficiently shifted readers' understanding of the authority of historical narrative in order to avoid the traps identified above, thereby complicating the texts' relationship to both the traditional and the postmodern forms that they follow.

Novels such as *Divided Kingdom* (2005) by Thomson, *Tipping the Velvet* (1998) by Waters, or Evaristo's *Lara* (1997) reinstate heroes and heroines, character types which can also be read in the light of a neo-humanist thinking, as the function of the hero can be understood in relation to principles of searching for universal (or at least societal) good as opposed to singular self-interest. I investigate this trend in Chaps. 3 and 4 in which I draw on Joseph Campbell's description of the archetypal heroic character to demonstrate how millennial London authors return to a more classical composition of the hero (Chap. 3) and the heroine (Chap. 4) after a popular movement away from the depiction of the hero/heroine figure in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Writers like Kureishi, Thomson, Evaristo and Waters provide alternative characterisations of millennial youth which are situated away from an engagement with multiple and fragmented identities. Gabriel for instance in Kureishi's *Gabriel's Gift* can be read as a heroic character (according to Campbell's theories); he faces many obstacles he has to overcome, but because he works hard and helps others he is rewarded by being given a valuable piece of art, and then by the prospect of a successful career as a film director in his adult life (see Chap. 3). This process of mythologising contemporary discourses on youth through the application of the heroic figure and the quest narrative allows authors to move beyond the multitude of micro-narratives that postmodernist discourse proposes, and instead allows them to offer an alternative to postmodern narratives which tend towards a decentring of essentialist concepts of agency and a decentred subject rather than a requisition of agency such as can be found within the heroic characterisation.

The appropriation of the mythic—in terms of the heroic monomyth—offers an alternative framework for interacting with representations of

young characters, as opposed to hedonistic, drug-fuelled schemas which previously dominated much of 1980s and 1990s British fiction and criticism. As Tew argues of the post-war novel, one of the main "visions" of the city was "as a site for the ebullience or the threatening disruptions of youth and hedonism" (*The Contemporary British Novel* 2004 93). Joseph Henderson suggests that the use of the hero acts as a universally recognisable subject: "The myth of the hero figure is the most common and the best known myth in the world" (*'Ancient Myths and Modern Man'* 101). Henderson's argument reflects Keulks' comments that the post-postmodern represents a kind of humanism that has to an extent been liberated from its "postmodern excess" and nihilism. By using the heroic monomyth Kureishi demonstrates a clearer sense that his characters constitute a unified "self" and, because of the very nature of the monomyth, the text is able to provide its reader with a happy ending. As such Kureishi engages with a more positive storytelling process which reaches towards the notion of a universal set of values that can be collectively understood and accepted.

In Chap. 4 I continue to discuss millennial London authors' engagement with heroic characterisation in relation to Campbell's theories through a consideration of the depiction of the heroine figure in *Special, Lara* and *Tipping the Velvet*. Bathurst, Evaristo and Waters utilise an archetypal characterisation in their readdressing of subjugated voices, in terms of gender, sexuality and race. Evaristo and Waters (in these novels) highlight a gender-specific experience of London. For Evaristo this comes in the form of the protagonist Lara struggling to find out about her family history as a consequence of the difficulties in tracing a female family line, as well as the difficulties of tracing a family's history which is located within the slave trade. Waters's heroine Nancy, by dressing both as a male and as a female, experiences gender-specific aspects to London life; the text suggests that a young female travelling alone in the city cannot enjoy the same freedoms as a man, or even a heterosexual couple. Whereas Bathurst reworks the traditional schoolgirl narrative in what has the potential to be a female version of the *Lord of the Flies*. Bathurst takes her characters outside of London in order for them to explore their liminality in age, location and self. Bathurst, Waters and Evaristo turn to archetypal storytelling and characterisation to reinforce this point, making the texts feel recognisable to the reader, but with an under-represented aspect.[17]

In Chap. 5 I consider "new identities" for London's men in contemporary fiction by contemplating a movement beyond the postmodern in

relation to constructions of identity. In this chapter I consider how Timothy Mo's *Sour Sweet* (1982), Hanif Kureishi's novella *Intimacy* (1998) and Gautam Malkani's *Londonstani* (2006) can be read in light of a perceived "crisis of masculinity"[18] and apply a post-postmodern reading to the texts. Implicit within my approach is a consideration of London literature's relationship to postcolonial perspectives, as I seek to move beyond a focus on the already extensively discussed area of postcolonialism to instead investigate a contemporary trend for the depiction of alternative identities for the postcolonial subject (or a subject with an ancestral purchase upon such a past). Instead the primary focus for this chapter is the text's engagement with the performance of and changing nature of masculinities.

In Chap. 6 I consider the notion of "cultural negativities". Throughout the rest of this book, I consider what I have termed marginalised characters who are in some way excluded from the culturally dominant often in relation to gender, class, age, sexuality, race or ideology (such as conscientious objectors to war). However, we can see contemporary writers addressing the notion of marginality on alternative grounds, writers who use characters who fulfil the role of the outsider or those excluded from society, but by dealing with difficult issues—some perhaps more shocking and difficult than others. The characters in these novels may not simply be struggling against the norm or authority in various guises, but can actually be dealing with very difficult topics, which society can't ignore, but simultaneously may find difficult to address, especially in narrative terms. As such I focus on Martin Amis's *Yellow Dog* (2003), Will Self's *The Book of Dave* (2006) and *Umbrella* (2012), Ali Smith's *The Accidental* (2005) and *There but for* the (2011), and Zadie Smith's *NW* (2012).

These novelists all in various ways deal with characters on the margins of society, such as drug addicts, paedophiles and pornographers, but also characters marginalised in less culturally shocking ways, such as Dave the taxi driver in *The Book of Dave*, who through his insane and medication-induced hallucinations unwittingly creates a new religion for the future dystopian world Self creates in his double-helix narrative; or Amber from *The Accidental* who invades the life of a family as unexplained force. In this selection of texts, London can be observed from within and considered from the outside, as Ali Smith writes about a family leaving London for a holiday, and therefore London becomes a symbol in relation to a negative or absence, in terms of the process of not being within the city's confines.