**Living inside history – novels that deal in real time**

**Pamela Bickley explores those contemporary novels that choose as their subject the world as it is now – a world that is close to the reader and seems to blur the boundaries between fact and fiction.**

Contemporary novels offer very different types of reading experiences: from strange and fantastical worlds to fictions which seem to take place just around the corner, in a familiar world, at a date the reader might clearly recall. Why might an author choose to locate a fictional world in a space and time so close to the reader’s experience? Does this have the effect of challenging clear demarcation lines between fiction and fact? It might be argued that this type of historical or geographical specificity brings the fictional world closer; conversely, it could be suggested that it makes the ‘real’ fictional.

**Saturday – hyper-reality**

Ian McEwan’s Saturday (2006) is an excellent example of a novel which deftly interweaves the factual into the overall scheme of the fiction. Henry Perowne, the protagonist, is a middle-aged neurosurgeon and precise descriptions of his medical world begin and conclude the text. The reader might find the lengthy accounts of surgical procedure baffling in a fictional context. Is this meticulous incorporation of detail a fictional form of hyper-realism? Perowne’s journeys across London, equally, are described with complete geographical accuracy. In common with two of the most highly-regarded Modernist novels, Joyce’s Ulysses and Woolf’s Mrs Dalloway, the action all takes place within a single day, Saturday 15th February 2003. This precise date makes a significant point, shaping the action and determining the characters’ responses. It is the date associated with international protest against war with Iraq. In Britain, the ‘Stop the War Coalition’ organised demonstrations in major cities, with London as the principal event. McEwan’s choice of date is clearly political: he is depicting an uncertain and troubled situation, one which has developed from another key date, the defining moment of the early 21st century: 9/11/2001. When Perowne wakes in the early hours of Saturday morning, he sees a plane on fire and automatically assumes disaster:

It’s already almost eighteen months since half the planet watched, and watched again the unseen captives driven through the sky to the slaughter, at which time there gathered round the innocent silhouette of any jet plane a novel association. Everyone agrees, airliners look different in the sky these days, predatory or doomed.

McEwan is identifying a generalised anxiety; an uneasy sense that time itself is threatened. In fact, the plane is safe, but Perowne confronts a far more immediate danger from a random urban encounter. As thousands of protestors peacefully file down Tottenham Court Road, Perowne is attacked by Baxter – a man whose own time is diminishing. As Perowne perceives, Baxter’s medical condition means that ‘he believes he has no future and is therefore free of consequences.’ There is irony in McEwan’s choice of date, and perhaps a more troubling implication. In Perowne’s civilized middle-class world, adults can debate and disagree over the protest or the government or the invasion of Iraq, but cannot insulate themselves against sudden, irrational violence which might erupt destructively at any moment. ‘Real time’ carries negative associations here, not framing but darkening the fictional world.

**The Kite Runner – the long shadow of time**

In Khaled Hosseini’s The Kite Runner (2003) time can seem remote and mythic, radically different from Western calendars:

In Afghanistan, yelda is the first night of the month of Jadi, the first night of winter, and the longest night of the year. As was the tradition, Hassan and I used to stay up late, our feet tucked under the kursi, while Ali ... told us ancient tales of sultans and thieves ... I learned the lore of yelda, that bedevilled moths flung themselves at candle flames, and wolves climbed mountains looking for the sun. Ali swore that if you ate watermelon the night of yelda, you wouldn’t get thirsty the coming summer**.**

Yet the novel unfolds through ‘real time’, moving across tracts of historical time to locate the life of the narrator, Amir, within the turbulent history of Afghanistan through the coup of 1973, the Russian invasion of September 1979 and the subsequent power struggles of the Muhjadeen and the fundamentalist Taliban. For the author himself, time within the novel is both personal and fictional: Hosseini, like Amir, grew up in Kabul, enjoying a carefree and privileged life. In contrast with Saturday, where events are interpreted through adult perspectives, The Kite Runner reveals the effects of racial and class hatreds on children, the chief victims of the tale being Hassan and then his son, Sohrab. Both novels are shaped by time, indeed they both emphasise ‘real time’ yet the connections between cause and effect unfold quite differently. Hosseini’s first-person narrator introduces himself in the opening lines of the text in terms of time, memory and morality:

I became what I am today at the age of twelve, on a frigid overcast day in the winter of 1975.

The events of that day will cast long shadows across both his own life and those of others, a ‘past of unatoned sins’ that haunts him until the conclusion of his story. Hosseini’s emphasis on ‘real time’ identifies a wider historic context which lies beyond the control of Amir or Sohrab but it also suggests that individual choices have been engaging with the nature of the contemporary urban world where actions and consequences are indiscriminate.

Hosseini interweaves fictional and historic time insistently throughout the text: interestingly, where McEwan begins with the 9/11 attacks, to establish a tone from the beginning of the novel, the event forms part of Hosseini’s conclusion:

While Sohrab was silent, the world was not. One Tuesday morning last September, the Twin Towers came crumbling down and, overnight, the world changed.

The fragile beginnings of Sohrab’s recovery appear the following spring and, typically, Hosseini identifies the timing of the event, ‘four days ago, on a cool rainy day in March 2002 ...’ referring also to the first day of Spring, ‘the previous Thursday ... the Afghan New Year’s Day – the Sawl-e-Nau’. This merging of the factual and fictional can create something of a documentary effect; Hosseini’s chief concern is what has happened to his country in the last quarter of the 20th century, and his fiction is a means of communicating his pain and anger. The Kite Runner shows fiction engaging with events that remain troubled and, currently, unresolved. Malcolm Bradbury, in his survey of modern writing, identifies the contemporary as ‘an age of the disastrous, the unpresentable, the nihilistic’ where the novel is a ‘vehicle of popular and serious narrative expression’.

**White Teeth – playing with time**

Time is a concept playfully treated by Zadie Smith in White Teeth (2000) where Hortense and her fellow Witnesses believe that time itself will come to a full stop with the millennium. At the beginning of the novel Archie, rescued from suicide, joins an ‘End of the World’ party where there is a drugged recognition that the anticipated apocalypse has not occurred. Later, Hortense announces to her grand-daughter, Irie, that God ‘never intended a third millennium’ and that she will experience the final judgement, at the beginning of 2000, back in Jamaica, concluding appropriately a life begun with the Kingston earthquake of 1907. Paralleling this comic treatment of eccentric Christian fundamentalism, ‘real time’ is seen to structure the text: each section of the novel is prefaced with two dates, one historical and one contemporary with the late 20th-century fictional world of the characters. Millat’s excursion to Bradford, 14th January 1989, is an excellent example of Smith merging the factual and fictional. Although Millat lives a wholly secular life in his Willesden world, he identifies completely with the rage and despair articulated in Islamic book-burning protests against Salman Rushdie’s Satanic Verses. ‘Real time’ has become Millat’s defining moment. The third section of the novel, Irie, is prefaced with a quotation which draws attention to Smith’s narrative method:

In this wrought-iron world of criss-cross cause and effect …

In White Teeth, ‘what’s past is prologue’ and Smith’s intention is to signify that the contemporary, post-colonial lives of Irie and her fictional contemporaries are inextricably connected with the historic events of the Indian Mutiny, the Kingston Earthquake and, notably, World War II.

**The Woman Who Walked into Doors – personal time**

All three of the texts cited here use real time and actual dates for more than a generalised effect of contemporaneity: their authors are seeking to represent the complexity of the present and convey its uniqueness. But, of course, there may be different reasons for locating a novel in a precisely defined time scale. In Roddy Doyle’s The Woman Who Walked into Doors (1996) the protagonist, Paula Spencer, has spent most of her adult life in a world of lies and negation. Her husband beats her but there is no acknowledgement or recognition of this: when she visits the hospital, no nurse or doctor asks the source of her injuries; her priest will not look at her; her mother will not express pity for her. She is literally invisible. When she seeks consolation in alcohol, time and pain cease to be immediate. Days and weeks blur into years of suffering, endured because she has no alternative. Doyle is not concerned here to articulate the zeitgeist or explore the political and historical moment. He is interested in portraying a woman who struggles to retain belief in a world of facts while her life disintegrates:

I had once been a girl. I used to read my stories out in class. I used to drink only at the weekends. My hair was nearly long enough for me to sit on. I believed it when I prayed ... I cooked great Sunday dinners ... My past was real. I could stand on it and it wouldn’t collapse under me. It was there.

Paula’s dates are all personal: the key date is February 17th 1994 when her husband, guilty of murder, is killed by the Guards and Paula is forced to reconsider her attitude to the domestic violence she has suffered.   
Contemporary readers are perhaps accustomed to a fiction of anxiety in which real events cannot be ignored. For the novelist Martin Amis this is because our relationship with time itself has altered:

We used to live outside of history. But now we’re all coterminous. We’re inside history now all right, on its leading edge, with the wind ripping past outrears. *London Fields (1990)*

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