

ENGL 4431: Contemporary Literature
“Fiction and the Question of Contemporary Britain”

Fall 2017
T/R, 11:20 – 12:45
Dr. Carey Mickalites

How have British writers responded to the legacy of two world wars, the end of empire, Cold War, economic decline (coupled with globalization), and radical changes in racial and sexual politics? This course offers an introduction to contemporary British fiction in an era of profound political and economic change and social upheaval. We will focus on fiction (novels and at least one film) profoundly influenced by the shadow of war, by immigration from the former colonies, by dramatic shifts in gender relations and sexuality, by class conflict and deindustrialization, by the impact of global capitalism, by media obsessions with urban violence and the underclass, and by the so-called war on terror after the events of 2001. Caught between an ambivalent “special relationship” with America and a technocratic European superstate, how has British culture adapted to its uneasy geopolitical position? How does a nation that is often nostalgically obsessed with images of its past power and traditions produce literature that might imagine alternative, post-imperial futures? As that last question suggests, “contemporary literature” is a field still in the making, and in attending to how authors engage with questions about what Britain today *is*, we will see how fiction also works to shape the present and future national imaginary.

The course will cover the period from the 1980s rise of Thatcherism and the New Right through the first decade of the twenty-first century. Our reading, though, will not be chronological; rather, we will approach the period according to several thematic units. We will likely begin with a postmodern “condition of England” novel from the 1980s (Amis’s *Money* or Lodge’s *Nice Work*—hilarious send-ups of Thatcher-era consumerism and the corporatization of universities, respectively). We will then move on to writers working in the wake of postmodernism and developing equally experimental techniques with historical fiction, realism, and popular genres. Thus, we will discuss: War, Empire, and Memory (Pat Barker, Kazuo Ishiguro); Domestic Violence (Martin Amis, Patrick McCabe); Multicultural Britain? (Hanif Kureishi, Zadie Smith); and Terror: British Fiction after 9/11 (Ian McEwan, Salman Rushdie).

In order to deepen our engagement with the material and the period, the primary readings will be supplemented with short lectures as well as some secondary reading.

Assignments: In addition to regular and engaged participation in class discussion, students will either write a series of 3 short essays over the course of the semester, *or* keep a reading journal and write a longer (7-8 pp.) research paper. All students will take a final comprehensive exam.

Possible Reading List (*Note: this is subject to change, so if anyone would like to suggest a particular author and/or text, please let me know. Email me at cjmcklts@memphis.edu.)

Martin Amis, *Lionel Asbo*
*---. *Money* (or Lodge, below)
Pat Barker, *The Eye in the Door*
Kazuo Ishiguro, *When We Were Orphans*
Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*
*David Lodge, *Nice Work*
Patrick McCabe, *The Butcher Boy*

Ian McEwan, *The Innocent* or *Saturday*
Salman Rushdie, *Shalimar the Clown*
Zadie Smith, *White Teeth*

[Finalized reading list with ISBNs will be posted by the end of May. -cm]