

2202441 British Fiction from the Twentieth Century to the Present
Semester II, 2019
Thursday, May 7, 2020, 1–4 p.m.
Final Examination

The exam is three hours long, with ten to fifteen minutes for thinking and proofreading for each part included.

Part I: Inside the Narrative (40 minutes) Delve quickly inside **three** of the nineteen excerpts given, choosing each from a different decade, and point out notable characteristics such as techniques, preoccupations, and stories being constructed. Include in your probe a brief observation and assessment of how valid or distinctive you find the features and narrative.

1. Perhaps my uncles and father's acquaintances found his passion eccentric because Asian people in Britain hadn't uprooted themselves to pursue the notoriously badly paid and indulgent profession of 'artist'. They had come to Britain to make lives for themselves that were impossible at home. At that time, in the mid-1960s, the images of India that we saw on television were of poverty, starvation and illness. In contrast, in the south of Britain people who had survived the war and the miserable 1950s, were busily acquiring fridges, cars, televisions, washing-machines.

For immigrants and their families, disorder and strangeness is the condition of their existence. They want a new life and the material advancement that goes with it. But having been ripped from one world and flung into another, what they also require, to keep everything together, is tradition, habitual ideas, stasis. Life in the country you have left may move on, but life in the diaspora is often held in a strange suspension, as if the act of moving has provided too much disturbance as it is.

(Hanif Kureishi, "Something Given: Reflections on Writing" pp. 2–3)

2. My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost. I am often considered to be a funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were, having emerged from two old histories. But I don't care—Englishman I am (though not proud of it), from the South London suburbs and going somewhere. Perhaps it is the odd mixture of continents and blood, of here and there, of belonging and not, that makes me restless and easily bored. Or perhaps it was being brought up in the suburbs that did it. Anyway, why search the inner room when it's enough to say that I was looking for trouble, any kind of movement, action and sexual interest I could find, because things were so gloomy, so slow and heavy, in our family, I don't know why. Quite frankly, it was all getting me down and I was ready for anything.

Then one day everything changed. In the morning things were one way and by bedtime another. I was seventeen.

(Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* p. 3)

3. 'I feel better. I can feel myself coming old, you see.' He softened. 'By the way, Margaret, coming to Mrs Kay's tonight?' She shook her head. 'Come on, sweetie. Let's go out together and enjoy ourselves, eh?'

'But it isn't me that Eva wants to see,' Mum said. 'She ignores me. Can't you see that? She treats me like dog's muck, Haroon. I'm not Indian enough for her. I'm only English.'

'I know you're only English, but you could wear a sari.' He laughed. He loved to tease, but Mum wasn't a satisfactory teasing victim, not realizing you were supposed to laugh when mocked.

(Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* p. 5)

4. Charlie was lying on his back on the attic floor. I took the joint from him, removed my boots and lay down.

‘Come and lie beside me,’ he said. ‘Closer.’ He put his hand on my arm. ‘Now, you’re not to take this badly.’

‘No, never, whatever it is, Charlie.’

‘You’ve got to wear less.’

‘Wear less, Charlie?’

‘Dress less. Yes.’

He got up on to one elbow and concentrated on me. His mouth was close. I sunbathed under his face.

‘Levi’s, I suggest, with an open-necked shirt, maybe in pink or purple, and a thick brown belt. Forget the headband.’

‘Forget the headband?’

‘Forget it.’

I ripped my headband off and tossed it across the floor.

‘For your mum.’

‘You see, Karim, you tend to look a bit like a pearly queen.’

I, who wanted only to be like Charlie—as clever, as cool in every part of my soul—tattooed his words on to my brain. Levi’s, with an open-necked shirt, maybe in a very modest pink or purple. I would never go out in anything else for the rest of my life.

(Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* pp. 16–17)

5. Literary fictions and the identities they shaped and interrogated increasingly came to operate within a marketplace that was rapidly colonizing British culture. Indeed, the famed instability of identity is not just an aloof theoretical point, but a key feature of British writing and identity formation in the lukewarm interval between the onslaught of neoliberalism under Thatcher and its rebranding as Cool Britannia.
(Pieter Vermeulen, “The 1990s” pp. 32–33)

6. But why do I mount to poets? Take plain prose—
Dealers in common sense, set these at work,
What can they do without their helpful lies?
Each states the law and fact and face o’ the thing
Just as he’d have them, finds what he thinks fit,
Is blind to what missuits him, just records
What makes his case out, quite ignores the rest.
It’s a History of the World, the Lizard Age,
The Early Indians, the Old Country War,
Jerome Napoleon, whatsoever you please.
All as the author wants it. Such a scribe
You pay and praise for putting life in stones,
Fire into fog, making the past your world.
There’s plenty of ‘How did you contrive to grasp
The thread which led you through this labyrinth?
How build such solid fabric out of air?
How on so slight foundation found this tale,
Biography, narrative?’ or, in other words,
‘How many lies did it require to make
The portly truth you here present us with?’
(A. S. Byatt, *Possession* epigraph)

7. There were now two Vals. One sat silently at home in old jeans and unevenly hanging long crêpey shirts, splashed with murky black and purple flowers. This one had lustreless brown hair, very straight, hanging about a pale, underground face. Just sometimes, this one had crimson nails, left over from the other, who wore a tight black skirt and a black jacket with padded shoulders over a pink silk shirt and was carefully made up with pink and brown eyeshadow, brushed blusher along the cheekbone and plummy lips. This mournfully bright menial Val wore high heels and a black beret. She had beautiful ankles, invisible under the domestic jeans. Her hair was rolled into a passable pageboy and sometimes tied with a black ribbon. She stopped short of perfume. She was not constructed to be attractive. Roland half wished that she was, that a merchant banker would take her out to dinner, or a shady solicitor to the Playboy Club. He hated himself for these demeaning fantasies, and was reasonably afraid that she might suspect he nourished them.
(A. S. Byatt, *Possession* p. 17)
8. The look of amusement Manet had captured now took on an almost teasing aspect, a challenge: “So you think you know me?” And the urgency of the unfinished letters gave a new energy to the solid dark body, as though it might after all be capable of violent movement. The known Ash shifted a little, and Roland felt flickers of excitement of his own. A kind of readiness. A kind of fear.
(A. S. Byatt, *Possession* p. 21)
9. “[...] You have this thing about this dead man. Who had a thing about dead people. That’s OK but not everyone is very bothered about all that. I see some things, from my menial vantage point. Last week, when I was in that ceramics export place, I found some photographs under a file in my boss’s desk. Things being done to little boys. With chains and gags and—dirt— This week, ever so efficiently filing records for this surgeon, I just happened to come across a sixteen-year-old who had his leg off last year—they’re fitting him with an artificial one, it takes months, they’re incredibly slow—and it’s started up for certain now in his other leg, he doesn’t know, but I know, I know lots of things. None of them fit together, none of them makes any sense. There was a man who went off to Amsterdam to buy some diamonds, I helped his secretary book his ticket, first class, and his limousine, smooth as clockwork, and as he’s walking along a canal admiring the housefronts someone stabs him in the back, destroys a kidney, gangrene sets in, now he’s dead. Just like that. Chaps like those use my menial services, here today, gone tomorrow. Randolph Henry Ash wrote long ago. Forgive me if I don’t care what he wrote in his Vico.”
(A. S. Byatt, *Possession* pp. 23–24)
10. The world since the millennium has seen the destructive rise of populist nationalisms, numerous acts of genocide, the challenge to the nation-state from supranational forces, whether of global capital or religious fundamentalism, migration, the speedy rise in the power and effects of digital technology, and the planetary scale of climate change.
(Leigh Wilson, “Post-Millennial Literature” p. 49)
11. Keith’s head is by my head. He is speaking into my right ear.
Your first brief, Keith is saying, is a piece replying to the article in the British-based Independent newspaper this morning, which you’ll have seen –
(I haven’t. Oh God.)

– about how bottled water uses much less stringent testing than tap water. DDR, ah, ah.

DD ...? I say.

Deny Disparage Rephrase, Keith says. Use your initiative. Your imagination.

(Ali Smith, *Girl Meets Boy* part Them p. 122)

12. Nothing and everything is what happened, I say. And at Pure, everything's wrong. Everything in the world. But you know this already.

Seriously? she says.

Honest to goodness, I say.

Wow, she says. When did it happen?

What? I say.

The miracle. The celestial exchange of my sister for you, whoever you are.

A glass of water given in kindness, that's what did it, I say.

(Ali Smith, *Girl Meets Boy* part Them p. 144)

13. Easy come, easy go, she said, and meant it. Later, looking back, I wondered if something in me wasn't shocked by this very easiness, and didn't require more complication as proof of ... what? Depth, seriousness? Although, God knows you can have complication and difficulty without any compensating depth or seriousness. Much later, I also found myself debating whether "Easy come, easy go" wasn't a way of asking a question, and looking for a particular answer I wasn't able to supply. Still, that's all by the by. Annie was part of my story, but not of this story.

(Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* p. 46)

14. It puzzled me that she had suggested a meeting. Why not use Royal Mail and so avoid an encounter which she clearly found distasteful? Why this face-to-face? Because she was curious to set eyes on me again after all these years, even if it made her shudder? I rather doubted it. I ran through the ten minutes or so we had spent in one another's company—the location, the change of location, the anxiety to be gone from both, what was said and what was unsaid. Eventually, I came up with a theory. If she didn't need the meeting for what she had done—which was give me the envelope—then she needed it for what she had said. Which was that she had burnt Adrian's diary. And why did she have to put that into words by the grey Thameside? Because it was deniable. She didn't want the corroboration of the printed-out email. If she could falsely assert that I was the one who had asked for a meeting, it wouldn't be a stretch for her to deny that she had ever admitted arson..

(Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* p. 94)

15. You're doing it for yourself, of course. You're wanting to leave that final memory, and make it a pleasant one. You want to be well thought of—in case your plane turns out to be the one that's less safe than walking to the corner shop.

And if this is how we behave before a five-night winter break in Mallorca, then why should there not be a broader process at work towards the end of life, as that final journey—the motorised trundle through the crematorium's curtains—approaches? Don't think ill of me, remember me well. Tell people you were fond of me, that you loved me, that I wasn't a bad guy. Even if, perhaps, none of this was the case.

(Julian Barnes, *The Sense of an Ending* p. 108)

16. He happened into my life over eight years ago, waking a dream of fatherhood which took me completely by surprise when it presented itself out of the blue some time before my thirtieth birthday. Before that all my visions of children came with a completeness about them which Jamie's arrival had totally confounded. Nothing in my idea of fatherhood had warned me against the fact that children do not drop fully formed out of the sky, nor of the ad hoc nature of fatherhood, which is its day-to-day idiom; basically, nothing had warned me against screw-ups like this.
(Mike McCormack, "Of One Mind" p. 405)
17. 'Let me sit with you a while. There's a story I must tell you. You know, there was one time we met, but you don't remember.'
'I meet a lot of people,' said Attila.
'Of course, of course,' said Komba. 'Anyway in those days I was a small boy. Nobody would have noticed me except that I carried a big gun.'
Attila smiled. 'You were with the rebel fighters.' He liked Komba.
'I saw you at the checkpoint. It was my job to guard the checkpoint to check each car that passed. You had two madmen with you. One was naked. The other one was dressed like an Englishman from a long time ago.'
'John Bull,' said Attila. 'He thought he was John Bull.'
'The commander was very suspicious of the naked one, he said he looked like a foreigner. He smoked so much ganja, that commander, he had started to become suspicious of everybody. I could see how he was changing his mind, he wanted to stop you again and maybe keep you there, maybe he was even going to shoot you all. But I let you through the checkpoint. He was too slow. Later he punished me, he said I was not checking the cars thoroughly. But then there was nothing he could do but curse.'
(Aminatta Forna, *Happiness* chapter 21 pp. 288–89)
18. 'Dead tree.' He scanned and found the words he was looking for. 'Safety hazard, it says right here. It could come down, hurt someone.'
The young man looked up at the tree. He knew trees, this tree was solid, would stand another ten years. But it wasn't his job to argue. That the paperwork was in order was all he needed to know.
(Aminatta Forna, *Happiness* chapter 22 p. 295)
19. My mother happily respected his decision, whereas my sister and brothers were disappointed and downright angry. They said many things; mainly bitterly complaining about their lack of inheritance, violation of their rights and the complete injustice of the situation.
(Maxine Sinclair, "Falling on Deaf Ears")

Part II: The Academic Meets the Literary (40 minutes) Futurist critic Claire Verne recently published an article predicting the demise of British fiction. An excerpt appears below:

The complacent world is in for a rude awakening. Climate disruption, mass migration, food overhaul, undependable and inequitable electricity—these are no condition for humans to flourish, let alone literature. Where will be the demand, place or need for the creative imagination when people are sick with and profiting from the next superbug? The universe timescale is in the billions of light years, the geologic timescale in the billions of years but the human lifespan is less than a hundred, and their attention span in the seconds. Who will have the attention to read a novel? Fiction will be dead. Reality challenges our imagination with multi-dimensions and fungi that speak to each other and other living things underground, yet the British imagination, still reeling from the fallen empire, only has the capacity to ask, via digital pixels, when can we get back to normal? We are at a creative dead end, and even reality intruding into our lives is no competition for the comfortable fantasy we want to stay in.

Write a short response to Dr. Verne's assertions (ex. literary readership, the resources of fiction, and the form, vehicle or medium of texts). Where do you find her portrait of doom valid and where not? Explain with textual evidence to support your points.

Part III: At Home in the World (60 minutes) Answer one of the following two prompts.

1. How much of the world is reflected in the fiction? It is a truism that literature is a product of its time. Look at two or more of the texts we have read in the second half of the semester and examine how the external world figures in the fictional one. What aspects of the 1990s to the present make their way into the short stories or novels of the period? How does literature make sense of them? You might consider: intellectual movements, scientific and technological discoveries, the nature of various media, local and global events and realities. How are the storytelling techniques and flow, composition of the fictional world, language, ideas, etc. influenced by or saying something about these external forces and possibilities?
2. Recent fiction sees a rise in representation of women and characters or entities previously minor, absent or silent. Women, for instance, are the open secret in the contemporary literary world. They comprise nearly 75% in the production industry, and on the consumption side, they outspend and outread men 3:2. How far has representation come? Investigate women or other previously underrepresented entities in at least two of the post-midterm works we have read. How do they figure in the texts? What is the same or different about their treatment in fiction?