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Now, Not Now: Counting Time in Contemporary Fiction Studies

James F. English

Abstract Scholars of contemporary fiction face special challenges in making the turn toward digitized corpora and empirical method. Their field is one of exceptionally large and uncertain scale, subject to ongoing transformation and dispute and shrouded in copyright. It is, however, possible to produce an illuminating map of the field through statistical analysis of midsize, handmade data sets. On such a map one sees a striking shift in the typical temporal setting of the novel, a shift that corresponds to major rearrangements of the relation of literary commerce to literary prestige. This correspondence between formal and institutional developments in turn lends empirical support to the argument that, where anglophone fiction is concerned, the "contemporary" period begins around 1980.

Keywords contemporary, prestige, periodization, temporality, quantitative

A Flight from the Present

How large is the field of "contemporary English-language fiction"? How many years into the past does it extend, and has it grown or shrunk during that time?[1] Which portions of the field, which sets of

[1] If we press matters beyond the standard death-of-the-novel narrative, we find complex and often conflicting indicators on the actual fate of contemporary fiction production. Even the National Endowment for the Arts, whose reports on the decline of literary reading as a pastime are cited as authoritative evidence of the novel's demise in contemporary America (National Endowment for the Arts 2004, 2007), has added a "new chapter" to this old story, describing a "decisive and unambiguous increase [in fiction readers] among virtually every group measured," with the "most inspiring

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actants and practices, connected to which texts, should count most for purposes of describing its distinctive features? How might the turn toward quantitative method and (relatively) big literary data assist us in that task of description? And if we take the measure of our object and discern some of its main contours and relational properties, how broad or narrow an explanatory logic, how grand or local a *récit* of historical change, should we employ to account for its emergence as a distinct phase in the evolving system of literary production?

These are the questions of scale at issue in a project I have been conducting with students at the University of Pennsylvania. They are also unavoidably questions of value, of what we regard as important and worthy of our attention versus what we are prepared to discard or depreciate. Scale and value are the entwined problems of any literary sociology and of any attempt such as ours to grasp the literary field in statistical terms.

To focalize these questions, I propose that the field of anglophone fiction has undergone a radical retemporalization, reorganizing itself around a choice between now and not-now, between a presumptive general preference for novels of the present and a countervalue attaching to noncontemporaneous settings. This is less a startlingly new hypothesis than a way to conjoin several familiar stories about the recent history of the novel. By putting these stories to an empirical test, I hope to show that conventional modes of critical practice may be enhanced by statistical analysis, even at the "middling" scale of my approach, which falls somewhere between ordinary human reading methods and emergent computational techniques.

For years book reviewers, literary journalists, and academic critics have noted, more or less impressionistically, a turn to the historical and/or the futuristic in anglophone fiction. The most compelling accounts have come from scholars interested in the fate of genres. Perry Anderson (2011) describes a stunning resurgence of historical fiction over the last

transformation" in the "crucial cohort" of young readers aged eighteen to twenty-four (National Endowment for the Arts 2009: 1). Publishing industry statistics are similarly ambiguous, with year-over-year sales volume for new fiction flat or slightly declining since the 1990s, but the number of new novels published each year rising dramatically throughout that period and the novel capturing a disproportionate share of growth in the booming e-book and audiobook sectors.

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several decades. Observing that for some thirty years after World War II the historical novel amounted to "a few antique jewels on a huge mound of trash," he declares that the scene then "abruptly . . . changed, in one of the most astonishing transformations in literary history." From Thomas Pynchon and Toni Morrison in the United States to Pat Barker and Hilary Mantel in Britain, from the Victoriana of A. S. Byatt and Peter Carey to the many novels that revisit American slavery, world war, or anticolonial struggle and its aftermath, fiction set in the past appears to have achieved a new preeminence. "At the upper ranges of fiction," writes Anderson, "the historical novel has become . . . more widespread than it was even at the height of its classical period in the early 19th century."

Anderson's account accords with the increased scholarly attention in recent decades to modes such as "historiographic metafiction" (Hutcheon 1988: 5), "postcolonial rewrite" (Marx 2004: 83), and the new "affirmative *bildungsroman*" of the global South (Slaughter 2007: 23). But alongside this putative turn to the past there are also assertions of the novel's turn to the future, as, for example, in Fredric Jameson's writings on science fiction. To be sure, Jameson (2013) has also written at length about a trend toward historical (or, as he generally sees it, ersatz historical) novels. But since he finds little merit in the works of a Carey, a Philip Roth, an Ian McEwan, he contends that the novel's more consequential reorientation in recent decades has been not toward the past but toward the near or distant future.[2] According to Jameson (2003: 105), the dominant strains of the novel form in the twentieth century, which he describes as "an exhausted realism" and "an [equally] exhausted modernism," have in effect fought each other to the ground, leaving the field open for an advance of science fiction. Sci-fi, he argues, has since the onset of the movement possessed a uniquely flexible "representational apparatus" (105), capable of radically retooling and recalibrating itself with each new wave of technological development. It stands today as the novel's one truly vital generic resource, still making itself new.

Certainly, quite a few celebrated contemporary authors have taken up the science fiction apparatus in dystopian or postapocalyptic works:

[2] Even the "historical" fictions to which Jameson attaches the most importance in *The Antinomies of Realism* tend to be science-fictional, such as the novel *Cloud Atlas* and the film *Inception*.

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the last decade alone has brought Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy, Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, Jeanette Winterson's *Stone Gods*, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, and more. Younger authors working in these modes have found critical success: there is Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story*, for example, or Charles Yu's *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe*. Meanwhile cyberpunk, far from fading away, has gone global, surfacing after a few clicks of the Casanovan world-literary clock in the vibrant spaces of the semiperiphery: witness the South African Lauren Beukes's *Moxyland* or the Australian Marianne de Pierres's Parrish Plessis trilogy.[3] Beukes's second novel, *Zoo City*, might be annexed as well to the emergent category of the "New Weird" novel, a hybrid of science fiction and retro urban noir (future joined with past) exemplified by the work of China Miéville, especially his brilliant 2009 novel *The City and the City*. In view of such works, it is not hard to share Jameson's sense that the various modes of science fiction are coming to shape the most auspicious contours of contemporary fiction in general.

In directing these remarks of Anderson and Jameson toward a general hypothesis of retemporalization, I am deliberately bracketing their concern with genre to isolate temporal setting as a more basic "genetic component" of the novel. (I am using here the language of the now defunct Book Genome Project, though that group never attempted to map this particular fragment of the novel's DNA.) The correspondences between time setting and genre are undoubtedly strong, but they are far from perfect. Novels set in the past, even the distant past, may not satisfy one's definition of "historical fiction," a category that traditionally excludes "mere costume drama," for example.[4] A novel set in the future may be less science-fictional than one set in the present;[5] subgenres such as steampunk may combine the historical with the science-fictional. Literary taxonomies are, as we know, blurry, full of internal overlaps, and

[3] "The literary meridian allows us to gauge the distance from the centre of the protagonists within literary space. It is the place where the measurement of literary time—that is, the assessment of aesthetic modernity—is crystallized, contested, elaborated" (Casanova 2005: 75).

[4] This is a foundational exclusion for Georg Lukács (1978: 72) and one with which many later scholars have quarreled.

[5] Jameson (2015: 17) declares that McCarthy's *The Road* and Jonathan Lethem's *As She Climbed across the Table* "are not of the same genre as Philip K. Dick." Nor, apparently, is Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy, though "Atwood managed to 'pass'" for a time.

subject to constant dispute and revision. This does not mean that they are incompatible with statistical methods. On the contrary, scholars at the Stanford Literary Lab have demonstrated the ease with which an algorithmic reading of a nineteenth-century novel corpus can chart the rise or fall of certain genres over time (Allison et al. 2011). But "historical novels" seem to present special difficulty for any project of enumeration, computational or human, and all the more so in recent decades as generic hybrids and mash-ups have become practically the norm. There is reason to believe that the historical setting has become a very weak genre marker, while the future setting remains a strong one. In any case, it has seemed to me methodologically prudent to organize the data of contemporary fiction according to temporal orientations without assuming any particular generic intentions. We are simply looking for strong tendencies on the literary field toward or away from narratives set in the present day.

"Upper Ranges" versus "Everything Else"

Persuasive statistical evidence for such tendencies will require a manageable-size set of contemporary novels to sample the literary field as a whole. Or rather, manageable-size sets, in the plural. A field, if we take the term in the sense developed by Pierre Bourdieu and his school, is not constituted by a static body of texts. It is a dynamic and relational system, a "field of forces" between more and less powerful players occupying more and less advantageous positions in a "game" or struggle for scarce rewards (Bourdieu 1993: 30, 33). These rewards take various forms, the most important of which are symbolic capital and economic capital, corresponding to the two main axes of domination and defining success on the two subfields of production—general or large-scale and restricted or small-scale—whose relationship provides constitutive tension for the entire system (39).

Anderson's "upper ranges of fiction" correspond more or less to what this sociological model labels the (sub)field of restricted production, where endowments of symbolic capital are relatively large and endowments of economic capital relatively small, and the struggles are waged over specifically literary rather than commercial stakes (the regard of

other writers, for example, or inclusion on university syllabi). Jameson's examples of science fiction (works by William Gibson or David Mitchell) appear to be drawn from the same symbolically elevated tier. Indeed, for most of us in the discipline, most of the time, these upper ranges are what we mean when we speak of "contemporary fiction." We generalize pretty freely about the fate of the novel based on our knowledge of just this one privileged fraction of a much, much larger system of forces.

One set of novels required by the project, then, would represent this upper, reputationally advantaged space of literary practice: the space of prestigious writers, influential critics, legitimate works of art, and others well-heeled in cultural capital and hence granted a certain degree of recognition or symbolic credit, along with the power to confer recognition, in turn, on as yet unrecognized works. If we accepted the doxa of the discipline of literary studies, that one set would be sufficient to capture everything of (genuinely literary) importance. But a sociological model needs at least one comparison set to establish the logic of relations, the rules or laws of the larger game of art within which local developments, even and especially the "important" ones, make sense. A brilliant illustration of how "contrastive sampling" across two fractions of the field can reveal hidden laws governing the distribution of literary prestige is the work of Ted Underwood and Jordan Sellers in this issue.[6] Comparing a "prestige" sample drawn from volumes reviewed in prominent British and American periodicals with a random sample drawn from "the rest of the literary field," they discover a surprisingly long-lasting basis of distinction in the privilege accorded works of unsentimental temper or "relatively dark" tone.

Scholars of contemporary literature cannot, unfortunately, perform a comparative analysis in quite this way. We, too, can use influential journals to define a set of prestigious texts; one of the sets curated by Andrew Piper and Eva Portelance (2016) in their computational analysis of twenty-first-century fiction—work that opens several productive lines of dialogue with the present article—consists of about two hundred novels reviewed in the *New York Times* over the last five years. As their work shows, there are also other ways to construct a sample of critically reputable contemporary works, which might be better or worse

[6] The term *contrastive sampling* is theirs.

depending on the nature of one's research questions. The major difficulty lies on the other side of the balance, with the set of comparatively unprestigious works that Underwood and Sellers speak of as a sample of "everything else."

Even with the very large corpus of digitized texts available for their period of study, *everything* here is a convenient shorthand for "everything that has survived and been digitized." The full body of works published in the century before 1920 would be several times larger, and there is nothing innocent about the drastic culling, itself partly a product of human judgments imposed over time. Books judged more worthy of preservation are, after all, more likely to survive catastrophe. And then further judgments as to quality or importance presumably underlie a selection of the novels standing at the front of the queue for digitization. The trove of nineteenth-century literature that computational book history has brought back into critical play is really more orphanage than "slaughterhouse" (Moretti 2000). Stranded and neglected though they have been, these "noncanonical" works enjoy the not inconsiderable privilege of having survived at all. Even when we turn away from the canon to focus attention on the great forgotten, the field we survey is in this sense still always biased toward the winners.

The selection bias is arguably less material for nineteenth-century scholarship.[7] A well-designed experiment like that of Underwood and Sellers has plenty of textual information to work with, and the "great divide" they are exploring would presumably appear even greater if their field were somehow extended all the way out to the literary cemetery. But for those of us working without the benefit of public domain, and especially on English-language fiction since the late twentieth century, the constraints are more extreme and require a different strategy for extracting a meaningful sample of "everything else." Copyright law makes it difficult to build and share full-text corpora at all. But scholars are chipping away at this obstacle. Richard Jean So and Hoyt Long have led an effort at the Chicago Text Lab to assemble a corpus that currently includes about three thousand novels published since 1960, roughly the

[7] Christof Schöch (2013) is right, however, to warn that dependence on such partial and nonrandomly gathered corpora presents us with complex problems of "sampling, representativeness, and canonization."

same size as the nineteenth-century corpus used to impressive effect by Moretti and others at the Stanford Literary Lab. The problem is that the scale of publishing has meanwhile become exponentially larger. Already by the late 1970s the industry was producing a nineteenth-century-size output every three or four years. Today it is doing so every three or four months. By even the most conservative estimate there have been between one and two million new works of adult fiction published in English in the last fifty years. Just since 1990, when the Chicago Text Lab data set ends, there have been more than half a million new novels published: that is two and a half millennia's worth by the standard of nineteenth-century Britain.[8] To make matters worse, this expansion is occurring along wild and uncharted pathways: print on demand, audio only, quasi-independently published Kindles (see McGurl in this issue), rogue e-books that lack even an ISBN.[9] Official figures from the publishing industry leave most or all of these novels out, but raw data on e-book sales released by Amazon in the first quarter of 2015 suggest something of the scale: by my rough count, about twenty thousand works of adult fiction copyrighted 2014 or 2015 appear among the top two hundred thousand Kindles, and this, believe it or not, is a "best seller" list, omitting at least 90 percent of all the e-books in the Amazon store.[10] What we are glimpsing in this huge and sketchy CSV file, in other words, are just the first few segments of the long tail of today's fiction market: hundreds of thousands of effectively readerless novels, extending far beyond any titles any of us will ever hear about, beyond the Google Books archive, and beyond the reach of even semireliable metadata. Given this

[8] These are my estimates, well shaded toward the conservative side. One may arrive at higher or lower figures, depending on assumptions about the degree of duplication in the new novels published by the United States, United Kingdom, and other anglophone industries; the percentage of new e-book novels that are simply editions of public domain works; the number of e-book novels, such as those lacking ISBNs, that are flying under the radar of all available statistics (see also n. 9). One's decisions about how to handle "young adult" novels and the growing number of self-classified "adult/young adult" e-books can also dramatically affect the numbers.

[9] According to Author Earnings (2015), "30% of the ebooks being purchased in the U.S. do not use ISBN numbers and are invisible to the industry's official market surveys and reports."

[10] The data file may be accessed from a link on the Author Earnings blog at authorearnings.com/report/may-2015-author-earnings-report.

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scenario, it would be folly to speak of a sample scientifically drawn from "everything else."

Yet the runaway scale of publishing presents an insurmountable problem only if our research actually demands a sample drawn at random from the entire array of published novels, that is, a sample gathered on the principle that every individual work of new fiction must hold equal value in the analysis. Such an approach might be suited to certain narrow lines of research in the history of authorship, where the most meaningful unit of literary practice is the bare act of writing or publishing. It is much less suitable for a sociology of literary production, where "production" is understood to mean not merely (or even primarily) the production of certain kinds of texts by authors but the production of certain kinds of value by a social system, whose agents include readers, reviewers, editors and booksellers, professors and teachers, and all the many moving pieces of literature's institutional apparatus. For this latter line of research, a good set of novels to compare with the "upper ranges" of fiction—the novels that experts have deemed worthy of critical attention—is not a sample of anything and everything that the world's aspiring authors have declared to be a novel but a sample of the novels that "ordinary" readers, who *lack* standing as experts, have deemed worthy of their time and attention. The relevant unit, for statistical purposes, is in this case not the novel written but the novel circulated and consumed: not the type but the token.

Here recent developments in the publishing industry have actually made our task easier. The tremendous concentration of book sales on a relative handful of multimillion-selling blockbusters means that these days just the top ten best sellers account for more sales volume—as much as 20 percent of total sales—than all the tens of thousands of titles in the long tail of the book trade (and most of its starving body as well).[11] A very simply constructed sample consisting only of the novels on annual best seller lists might thus serve as a reasonable proxy for the kind of fiction that is being bought and read but (aside from rare instances of overlap) is excluded from the "upper ranges."

[11] Jason Epstein (2001: 33) illustrates the point with a telling statistic: between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s "sixty-three of the one hundred best-selling titles were written by a mere six writers."

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That, at any rate, has been the procedure in my study. One comparison set consists of the top ten best-selling novels in the combined US and UK markets for each year from 1960 to the present.[12] But 1960 is not assumed to be the starting point for contemporary fiction. It is chosen, rather, as a point sufficiently far in the past that, as we consider the data moving forward, we will be in position to discern abrupt and significant shifts such as might be interpreted to mark a break with literary-historical precedent: a "transformation," as Anderson puts it.

But what of the other set, representing the space of critical legitimacy or prestige? We can think of that space as itself segmented and hierarchized. Underwood and Sellers's sample of prestigious works includes poetry that was reviewed negatively alongside poetry that earned critical praise. They conjecture, and their results seem to confirm, that the mere fact of being reviewed in an "especially selective" journal confers a degree of distinction that the vast majority of works will never achieve. This we might describe as the lowest order of prestige, that modicum of recognition that gets authors into the literary game proper but by no means assures them a place on the podium of winners. A different approach is taken by Mark Algee-Hewitt and Mark McGurl (2015) in their experiment in contrastive sampling of twentieth-century fiction. They gathered several critics' lists of the hundred twentieth-century novels judged to occupy the highest end of the prestige spectrum, those deemed not just respectable but "canonical" (comparing these top-hundred lists to each other as well as to a list of one hundred annual best sellers and a reader's-choice poll). This orientation toward high-level prestige changes the whole analysis significantly, however, since the determining critical judgments are now necessarily retrospective, arrived at by well-positioned critics at the start of the twenty-first century. The project can tell us a lot about competing regimes of literary value at that one moment in time, but, unlike the Underwood and Sellers approach, it cannot track changes (or continuities) in critical preferences over time,

[12] For now we are using the annual *Publishers Weekly* list of the year's best-selling American novels as a proxy for the combined US and UK market. Sample tabulations indicate that the US market is so much larger, and exerts so much gravitational pull on the mass UK readership, that in practice the combined markets scarcely differ from the American top ten (though divergence does become significant in the top twenty to thirty).

charting the struggles from which these later versions of the canon emerged. It cannot help us locate a pivot point or a period break (if there is one) when the field drops into alignment with its current configuration: a point at which the field of contemporary fiction might be said properly to begin.[13]

I have taken a third approach that can provide this kind of taste timeline, rather than lock us into a single moment of retrospect, but that represents fiction more elevated in critical reputation, closer to the status of canonicity (according to standards and judgments prevailing in each given year) than the average novel reviewed in the *New York Times*.[14] The set consists of all novels either awarded or short-listed for a major novel-of-the-year prize in the English-speaking world, from 1960 to the present.[15] Considered in the aggregate, differences between the winners and close runners-up are insignificant; a novel that makes the short list (even, I would expect, the long list) has been judged to be "of the sort" worthy of a prize even if it fails to win one.[16] This is good, because including the short lists gives us a much larger set of texts to work with, especially in the early years before the major boom in literary awards (English 2005: 17–27). That larger set not only raises our confidence about distinctions between novels specially valued by critics and novels widely read by ordinary readers but also enables us to draw further

[13] The same is true of the current Canon/Archive project at the Stanford Literary Lab, which gauges the prestige of nineteenth-century authors by the number of mentions as "main subject" in twentieth-century *PMLA* articles and by the length of entries in the *Dictionary of National Biography* (Algee-Hewitt et al. 2016). This establishes Jane Austen as far more prestigious than Walter Scott, obviously an inversion of the hierarchy that obtained in their lifetimes and for some decades after.

[14] Using a similar though smaller, exclusively twenty-first-century set of short-listed novels, Piper and Portelance (2016) show that while these novels may enjoy much greater status than most novels reviewed in the *New York Times*, they are nearly impossible to distinguish from them algorithmically. For purposes of machine-reading, Piper and Portelance suggest, it may not matter much whether we use prize short lists or prestigious journals of review as the basis for a corpus of contemporary high-status fiction.

[15] The terminology applying to runners-up varies among prizes. My category of "short-listed" novels includes whatever slightly expanded list of contenders is released by an awarding institution: "nominated" works, "finalists," or the like.

[16] Piper (2015) provides empirical support for this contention in his attempt to predict the Giller Prize winner algorithmically, as well as in his work with Portelance (2016).

contrasts involving subsets of both fractions: for example, novels by male versus female, US versus "global anglophone" authors, or novels featuring white protagonists versus protagonists of color. The ultimate goal of a project like this one is not, after all, simply to confirm or refute the retemporalization hypothesis but to find firmer empirical ground from which to survey and discuss the whole field of social forces that we call contemporary fiction.

A Double Divergence

The two main sets of novels I am comparing are tiny next to the output of the fiction publishing industry—475 best sellers and 1,244 short-listed novels (corresponding to 1,379 short-list appearances).[17] But even a corpus of this scale has proved too difficult and expensive for me to render in digital form. That could be done in the future (with some loss of the more obscure texts), and perhaps at that stage there will also be a way to guess a novel's predominant temporal setting algorithmically.[18] But for now I have proceeded otherwise, comparing the sets via handmade metadata entered into a spreadsheet and performing no machine-reading of the texts themselves. The metadata on temporal settings are based on whether a novel is predominantly set more than twenty years prior to publication, within twenty years of publication, or in the near to distant future. Novels split between two or more time periods, such as Junot Díaz's *Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (past/present) or Jennifer Egan's *Visit from the Goon Squad* (past/present/future), are counted into each temporal category as fractions (as well as constituting an interesting category in their own right). Novels that merely impose a contemporary

[17] Short story collections are omitted from the tabulations for both sets. As regards the prestige set, the basic unit is the short-listing for or receiving of an award, not the novel itself. Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* was a finalist for the National Book Award and won the Pulitzer, so it counts as two instances of a novel with historical setting being selected by a prize jury.

[18] Though only about half the novels in my corpus are included in the HathiTrust collection, that half is statistically quite similar to the full set with respect to temporal settings (the only significant variance occurring, for some reason, in the 1980s). If permission were granted for nonconsumptive access to HathiTrust's library, an adequate full-text corpus would be ready to hand.

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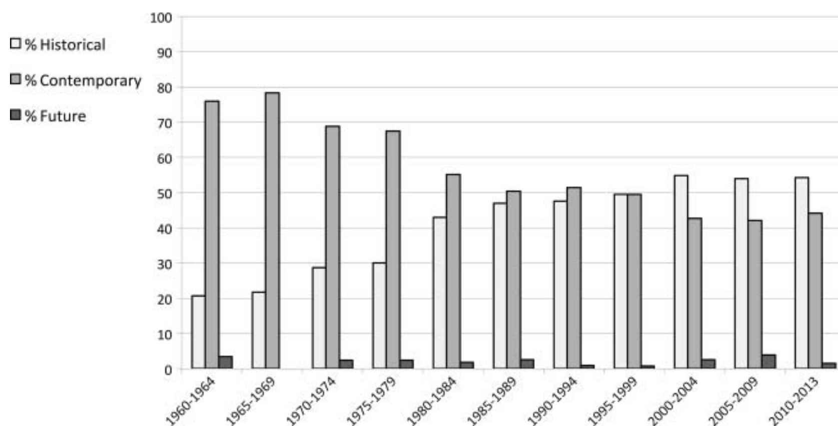

Figure 1. Temporal settings of prize-nominated novels, 1960–2013

frame around a narrative whose entire action is set in the past, such as McEwan's *Atonement*, are counted as set in the past.[19] Percentages are calculated for each decade and half decade and outputted as pivot tables and timeline charts. What we see when we look at these is a striking picture of divergence.

Back in the 1960s, if you picked up a new work of fiction—either because it was a critics' darling and a finalist for the National Book Award (fig. 1) or because everyone else on the beach seemed to be reading it that summer (fig. 2)—the odds were good, about 75 percent, that the novel's setting and action were contemporaneous with your own recent lived experience. The contemporary fiction of the 1960s was, in this crudely literal sense, "about" the contemporary moment. This remained true for the most part in the 1970s, though both types of novel shifted slightly away from contemporaneity, with best sellers dipping in percentage of present-day settings from the low 70s to about 60 and

[19] For determining temporal settings, existing metadata such as that of the Library of Congress Form/Genre and Subject headings is rarely helpful. (According to the Library of Congress, Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* may be classified as "war stories" and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* as "domestic fiction" and "psychological fiction"—but neither of them as "historical.") My team and I have had to chase down information about the novels by looking at reviews, blurbs, sample pages, and readers' plot summaries and, in some cases, by locating a physical book and actually reading it.

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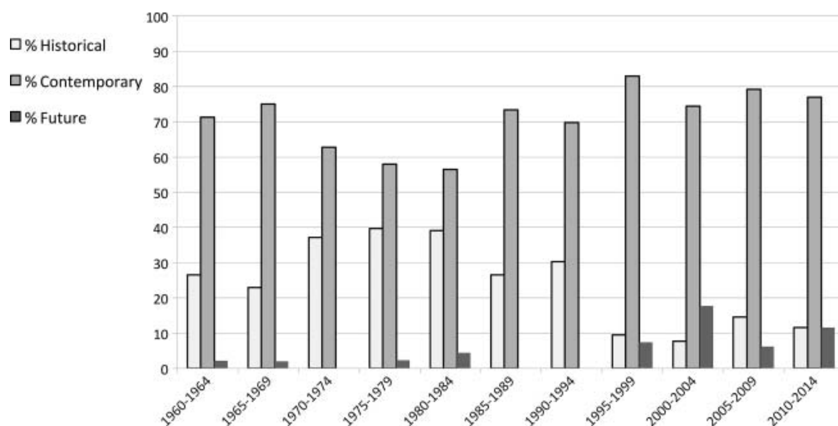

Figure 2. Temporal settings of best sellers, 1960–2015

short-listed novels from the high 70s to the high 60s. But then things changed, and the two curves suddenly moved in different directions. Best sellers halted their retreat from the present in the early 1980s, pausing for a few years and then rising rapidly back to the earlier ratio and beyond, to the point that 80 percent of them were set in the present, a level that has held steady now for two decades. In contrast, short-listed novels accelerated their abandonment of the present from the late 1970s on. By the mid-1980s half of them were set in the past or the future, and by the late 1990s contemporary settings had clearly become—in the precincts of high critical esteem—a minority taste.

Perhaps surprisingly, novels set in the future play only a small role in this striking post-1970s rearrangement. Yet that role has something important to tell us about how genre operates with respect to both temporality and status. The orientation of best sellers has become so overwhelmingly contemporary that neither past nor future settings command more than a small share of them. But within that fraction, futuristic settings have become more common, assisting novels of the present to drive the "historical" fraction down toward single digits.[20] Among short-listed works, novels set in the future have shown no such tendency to increase but rather hover around the low level of the 1960s

[20] A linear trend line mapped onto the data for best sellers with future settings rises from 0 percent in 1965 to 10 percent today.

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and 1970s: about 2–3 percent of all short-listings. Significantly, not one of the eighteen short-listed novels set in the future was ever short-listed for either of the leading science fiction prizes, the Hugo or the Nebula.[21] Their special distinction lies precisely in being judged to depict an imagined future *without* assimilating themselves to science fiction as such. The rarity of this feat attests to the strength of the futuristic setting as a genre marker for science fiction and to the enduring antagonism between genre fiction and the "literary." As Jameson (2015: 17) observes, for all the philosophical power and formal vitality of science fiction, it remains stigmatized as a *genre* and thus lacks the necessary "quotient of Bourdieusian 'distinction'" to warrant recognition as "literary" or "experimental"—terms that mean, in essence, nongeneric. Indeed, on Piper and Portelance's (2016) statistical maps of the field of contemporary fiction, only the romance genre lies farther than science fiction from prizewinners.

A historical setting, whether thirty years in the past or three hundred, does not appear to function as a genre marker in this way. There are, of course, many, many prizes for genre fiction: the Edgars for mystery novels, the Dagger for crime fiction, the RITAs for romance, and so on. We find novels set in the past scattered across the short lists for all these prizes (albeit far more sparsely than on the short lists for the Booker or the Pulitzer). But there are no genre prizes for historical fiction itself. Or rather, there were none until recently. Founded in 2010, Britain's (what else?) Walter Scott Prize is the exception whose immediate redundancy with nongenre prizes proves the rule. Its first four recipients—Hilary Mantel, Andrea Levy, Sebastian Barry, and Tan Twan Eng—were all past winners or short-list veterans of the Booker, and the novels for which they won the Scott all received loftier accolades in recognition of their extrageneric excellence.

This is one example of how the empirical approach of comparative sampling can help refine the generalizations arrived at by more

[21] These eighteen novels do not include Mitchell's *Cloud Atlas* (counted as only one-third set in the future in my metadata), short-listed for the Nebula as well as the Booker. There is slightly more overlap between my short-listed corpus and Britain's Arthur C. Clarke Award, a later and less important science fiction prize that announces a comparatively long list of "nominees."

traditional methods. The latter methods are certainly not to be underestimated. A scholar with as finely tuned a *sens pratique* or feel for the literary game as Anderson or Jameson has effectively internalized its complex and changing system of rules and can offer empirically sound "readings" of the field. In this case, yes, historical narratives have made an "astonishing" comeback within "the upper ranges of fiction," while science fiction, however much it may contribute to the *techne* of formally ambitious contemporary-fiction writing, mostly remains outside the compass of consecration. But such observations can radically misconstrue those portions of the field that are less visible to the academic vantage, as when Jameson (2013: 259), summarizing Anderson, asserts that "the historical novel has never been so popular nor so abundantly produced as at the present time"—a statement directly contradicted by data on the last fifty years of best sellers. It would be more accurate to say that historical novels have never been so *unpopular* or so *rarely* produced as at the present time. Even where scholarly habitus does afford a fairly accurate perspective, it can leave much of the best action out of view. There is nothing especially astonishing about the return to critical respectability of a previously dormant or deprecated genre. What we see in the data are signs of a more momentous and far-reaching shift, affecting the status of works that bear different relationships to the established categories of genre and involving not just a sudden elevation of certain features of novels on the terrain of serious critical regard but their equally sudden and virtually simultaneous repudiation on the wider field of fiction. What is truly astonishing is this appearance of powerful but contrary tendencies, taking hold around the late 1970s and early 1980s and effecting a double divergence where before there had been parity.

A more comprehensive look at our metadata shows that nearly everyone on the field is swept up in this general rearrangement of relational forces. The crisscrossing trend lines of temporal setting for best sellers and prize contenders are almost identical for male and female novelists, and neither the gender of the protagonist nor its identity or nonidentity with that of the author (a very rough proxy for autobiographical orientation) substantially alters the probability of a novel's being set, or not, in the present day. First-person narratives follow the

curves right alongside third-person narratives.[22] Though the trends involving critically esteemed fiction are observable in the United Kingdom before they are in the United States, the two national fields achieved approximate symmetry by the mid- to late 1980s. For neither country is there any particular time period—such as that of the near past or "contemporary past," as Peter Childs (2014) theorizes it—that accounts for any disproportionate share of the rise in historical setting.[23] Indeed, the field's retemporalization is so decisive and encompassing that we may be justified in using it to mark a period break. If, sometime around 1980, the literary field underwent a sweeping change that brought its temporal dispositions into the configuration to which we are today habituated, then perhaps this—not 1945, not 1968, not 2001—is the moment when the contemporary period really begins, at least for the anglophone novel.

[22] Within each comparison set (best sellers and short lists), the overall trend toward or away from contemporary settings applies with equal force to first- and third-person novels (as it does to male and female authors and to novels with male and female protagonists). But whereas a substantial majority of best sellers, anywhere from 70 percent to 85 percent, depending on the decade, are written in the third person, the short-listed novels are divided fairly evenly between the two modes, with the third person tending to account for no more than 55 percent of them. We can compare these figures to the distributions tracked algorithmically through a large corpus of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction by Underwood et al. (2013) at the University of Illinois. Not surprisingly, they observe a sharp decline in the use of the first person, from about 50 percent in the mid-eighteenth century (heyday of the epistolary novel) to less than half that level in the mid-nineteenth (heyday of realism). If we accept best sellers as a representative sample of the "general" field of literary production today, then it appears that little has changed over the past hundred years. The third-person narrative has maintained its clear dominance, comprising more than 70 percent of the most widely read novels since 1960 and as many as 85 percent in some decades. Yet, for whatever reasons, the tranche of high-status fiction has maintained a more balanced ratio, appearing in this regard as a kind of throwback to the eighteenth century.

[23] Childs argues that in the twenty-first century there has been a proliferation of novels set in a moment distinctly earlier than that of the present (perhaps twenty to thirty years prior to the time of writing) but not long enough ago to warrant the label "historical." No overall trend of this sort is visible in my data for short-listed novels, which show those set between twenty and thirty-five years prior to publication maintaining a steady 15–20 percent share of all novels set in the past. A similarly modest and unchanging fraction of novels are set before the turn of the twentieth century. The majority, about 60 percent, are set in between, more than thirty-five years before publication but not earlier than 1900.

Explanatory Scales

It remains, of course, to *explain* this transformation. Why should a break have occurred around 1980? And why should temporality be at the heart of it? Here again we are confronted with one of our discipline's core methodological quandaries involving the question of appropriate scale. If we seek a large-scale explanation for these developments, we need look no farther than "the cultural logic of late capitalism" as described by Jameson (1992). The passage from the 1970s into the 1980s is the very moment when neoliberal governance is decisively imposed in both the United States and the United Kingdom, marking a capitulation to the "postmodern" cultural order extending across the entire anglophone empire. A signal feature of that new regime, Jameson famously argues, is that "society has become incapable of dealing with time and history"; the postmodern subject "has lost its capacity to organize its past and future into coherent experience" (25). It is precisely as "symptom and as symbolic compensation" for this "present-day enfeeblement of historical consciousness" (Jameson 2013: 259) that our culture offers up its frantic proliferation of historical pastiches and nostalgic vignettes, including "historical novels" that are, in this account, mostly no more than the literary equivalent of heritage films, their notion of history all cozy period detail and fancy dress.

This critical stance toward the historical orientation of contemporary "literary" fiction finds possible empirical support in the work of Piper and Portelance (2016). Based on algorithmic analysis of the most distinctive words in samples of twenty-first-century fiction, they find that "as we move up the cultural scale" from popular genres like romance and mystery, to mainstream best sellers, to works reviewed in respected journals, to novels selected for major awards, "we see an increase of nostalgic narrativity . . . with prizewinners representing something like a high-cultural apex." At this upper register of literary status, a high proportion of works seems "to cohere around the language and tropes of nostalgia and retrospection." Ignoring temporal setting as such, and working exclusively with novels of the twenty-first century, Piper and Portelance are not attempting to validate Jameson's causal argument about the cultural effects of neoliberalism since the 1970s. But their critique of the "nostalgia" that imbues today's critically esteemed novels

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with a "highly constrained and conventional . . . system of values" accords with Jameson's view that the past-obsession of contemporary fiction is less a genuine engagement with history than a compensatory symptom of the anxious, hurry-up hyperpresentism of late capitalist society.

I wonder, though, whether we are justified in labeling these texts "nostalgic" on the basis of their predominantly historical settings and/or their disproportionately retrospective vocabularies. The term seems to drop into Piper and Portelance's discussion from an evaluative framework constructed outside the empirical analysis, while in Jameson's case it arises from the very paradigm of ideology critique, which can only ever read the favored tropes of the late capitalist era as symptoms of false historical consciousness. Even if we accept the term as descriptively apt, we need not assign it so pejorative a valence. Svetlana Boym (2001) calls our attention to nostalgia's vital importance for critical reflection and ideological disruption. It is not clear what prevents us from considering the shift of temporality in literary fiction since the 1970s as a form of resistance, a strategy such as Timothy Bewes (2012: 159; 2007: 275) describes for "temporalizing the present" in new ways, aimed at achieving a rupture with the "ideology of contemporaneity" itself. Of course, that resistance may still be folded into the grand Jamesonian narrative, late capitalism producing, along with everything else in the cultural sphere, its own heterodoxies. But this is the trouble with large-scale explanations: they explain too much. If we found that novels set in the past had actually become much *less* frequent on the short lists of major fiction prizes since the 1970s, as they have on the literary field generally, the appeal to a history-destroying logic of late capitalism would serve just as well to explain this redoubled presentism as it does to explain the opposite. As Bruno Latour (2005: 7) has influentially argued, such an approach to cultural study can be all too circular, amounting to what he disparages as "the sociology of the social," the pseudo-explaining of social phenomena by appeal to a great engine of hidden but omnipresent "social forces."

The small-scale alternative method proposed by Latour, a local sociology of concrete actors and their interconnections and interactions that is conducted by a willfully "myopic" researcher (one who stays as close and attentive to the ground as an "ant"), may seem an overcorrection, even perhaps a parodic inversion of large-scale critique. It

can be difficult to envision an actual project of literary-historical research undertaken in this nearsighted way. What would it mean to account for the suddenly divergent temporal trajectories of high- and low-status fiction by tracing "associations" and "flows of actions" on the ground level of literary production?

My provisional efforts along these lines have focused on what seems to be a time lag between Britain and America with respect to the withdrawal of credit from novels set in the present. In Britain there is a busy traffic of new actors arriving on the literary scene in the late 1970s and early 1980s. This is when, within a few months of each other, *Granta* reemerges under Bill Buford's editorial and entrepreneurial stewardship as the organ of a new literary generation representing "the end of the English novel and the beginning of the British one" (Buford 1980: 16), and the *London Review of Books* is founded during the *Times* strike as a "consistently radical" alternative to the *Literary Supplement* (Bennett 1996). Within a year both journals have discovered thirty-three-year-old Salman Rushdie. *Granta* leads off its third issue with an excerpt from *Midnight's Children*, and when that novel is published a few months later, the *London Review of Books* is the only British journal to grant it a solus review, hailing it as the "most remarkable" of all India's many contributions to British fiction (Taubman 1981: 6). Rushdie becomes a regular contributor to the journal, and also to *Granta*, which names him one of the Best of Young British Novelists in the first iteration of that hugely influential list. In late 1981, when it is presented on television for the first time, the Booker Prize achieves escape velocity in its rise to preeminence (brilliantly orchestrated by administrator Martyn Goff) among the world's fiction prizes. It is awarded that year to *Midnight's Children*, which will go on to be proclaimed the "Best of the Bookers" (1990) and the "Booker of Bookers" (2005): the very epitome of the prizewinning novel in our time. Just as the Booker becomes the model for numerous so-called baby bookers in the 1980s and early 1990s, Rushdie's novel becomes the model for countless prize-contending works of anglophone magic-historical realism, while his essays and interviews help forge a new constellation or bloc of literary, political, and academic actors, knitting together historical fictions of the Global South with an emergent strain of Black British activism and an emergent academic field of postcolonial studies.

In the United States during these years of transition from the 1970s to the 1980s, the terrain of the "upper ranges" is comparatively grim. The takeover of the New York publishing industry by large media conglomerates is squeezing out the smaller, more artisanal players (individuals as well as institutions). There is no sign of a niche for book-chat TV, let alone for televised literary awards. Indeed, the major awards are so lacking of any clear cultural role or identity, and so discouraged by the escalating pressures of commerce, that Barbara Prete, the director of the National Book Awards, journeys repeatedly to London to consult with Goff, undertaking in the following years a conscious makeover of the prize on the model of the Booker (English 2005: 375n1; Lehman 1986). By that point the preference for novels set in the past has become an integral part of the model. For the Booker, of all the major prizes, is the clear first mover in the turn from contemporary settings to historical ones. Already in the half decade from 1978 to 1983, novels set in the present account for just 30 percent of the Booker short lists, a dramatic drop from 73 percent in the previous five years. The National Book Awards short lists in 1978–83 are still running at 73 percent contemporary. But over the next five years they follow the Booker's path, present-day settings abruptly dropping to minority status in 1983–88, with further declines a decade later.

These are just the first sketchy strokes of what would need to be a vastly more painstaking actor-network description of the field of literary production around the turn of the 1980s. But it suffices to suggest the very different kind of explanation that arises from sociological analysis on this humbler scale. The critical preference for novels set in the past may not have been imposed by grand, hidden forces but was constructed by a fairly small number of well-placed actors and their concrete interactions at the ground level. A particular constellation or assemblage of productive agents—the transatlantic entrepreneur Buford and his new-generation journal; the literary marketing expert Desmond Clarke and his innovative consecrational device, the Best of Young British Novelists list; the prize administrator extraordinaire Goff and the unprecedented apparatus he fostered for book prize publicity; the failed science fiction writer Rushdie and his debut work of magic-historical realism—achieves around 1980 a kind of critical mass or adequate leverage to shift the disposition of the field. The shift is local to begin with, a British

phenomenon, having to do with the cultural politics of Britishness. But there are a host of transatlantic knock-on effects throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, ranging from the "Bookerization" of American literary prizes, to *Granta*'s Best of Young American Novelists, to the American Motion Picture Academy's rising enthusiasm for cinematic adaptations of Booker-winning novels.

This small-scale analysis can, in other words, suggest its own ambitiously sweeping hypothesis: just as the United States clearly dominates the commercial side of the contemporary literary field, Britain can perhaps claim, for the same post-1970s period, a certain priority of position and power when it comes to determinations of quality. The geotemporality of anglophone literature may resemble Pascale Casanova's for world literature in translation, where it is the old European capital, London, rather than New York that controls the clock of literary contemporaneity. As I say, much further work is needed to flesh out this hypothesis and make it credible. There is nothing small-scale about the quantity of scholarly labor involved in tracing all the minute linkages and micro-actions by means of which the literary field changed its temporal spots and became contemporary via noncontemporaneity. One is tempted at every little step to take the familiar shortcut of appealing to "larger social forces," to "the cultural logic of late capitalism," to "contemporary society" as a whole. But at this stage in the evolution of literary studies, that shortcut has begun to look like a dead end. Though more laborious and less certain of arriving at any terminus, the small-scale approach at least seems a live project.

James F. English is John Welsh Centennial Professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania, where he directs the Penn Humanities Forum and the Price Lab for Digital Humanities. He is author of *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (2005) and *The Global Future of English Studies* (2012).

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