Genre Transitions in Contemporary Fiction

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Edited by

Selin Şencan

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CONTENTS

Part III: Rewriting History and Fictionalizing the Past

Part IV: Posthuman Worlds and Speculative Ecologies

Part V: Post-Apocalyptic Geographies and the Ethics of Survival

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Introduction: Rethinking Genre in Contemporary Fiction

Selin Şencan

The evolution of genre in contemporary fiction reflects a remarkable process of transformation and renewal. Similar to fiction itself, whose vitality has long been tied to its capacity for adaptation, genre has never remained static. Emerging from classical taxonomic frameworks, the term genre, etymologically rooted in the Greek genos, signifying kind or type, originally functioned as a system of stable conventions for distinguishing narrative forms. However, since the mid-twentieth century, genre has undergone significant transformation, becoming increasingly responsive to evolving cultural, technological, and political conditions. Far from confining creativity, genre now operates as a space of experimentation, where boundaries are constantly crossed, merged, or reimagined, in Bulson's terms, "the inventive synthesis of old with new, fact with fiction, social with imaginative, political with personal," a form of "cut-n-mix" hybridity that defines the novel itself (Bulson 2018, 26). Mikhail Bakhtin emphasizes this feature by describing genre as "always the same and yet not the same, always old and new simultaneously... living in the present, but always remembering its past" (Bakhtin 1984, 106). This duality, of continuity and reinvention, has allowed contemporary writers to question the authority of tradition and pursue new narrative forms. The dissolution of rigid genre distinctions has been accelerated by the hybridization of literary modes: memoir fuses with speculative fiction; historical narrative intersects with autofiction; detective fiction blends with magical realism; graphic novels incorporate poetic monologues; and dystopian settings are reworked through the lens of domestic drama.

These cross-genre strategies demand new critical approaches, and literary theory has responded in kind. Frameworks such as genre theory, narratology, and intertextual studies now serve as essential tools for understanding how contemporary fiction reconfigures inherited forms. Roland Barthes's call to transform the reader from a "consumer to a

producer of the text" (Barthes 1989, 4) reveals this participatory shift, where genre no longer dictates interpretation but invites active meaning-making. Within this evolving critical landscape, Thomas Beebee identifies a fourfold model of genre analysis, "genre as rules, genre as species, genre as patterns of textual features, and genre as reader conventions," each corresponding to a broader debate about the locus of textual meaning: in the author, the context, the text, or the reader (Beebee 1994, 3). These stages mark genre's movement from classical categorization toward more relational models. The intersection of contemporary fiction and critical theory has also reshaped the literary landscape, especially since the 1960s. While earlier conceptions of fiction prioritized lived experience and intuitive expression over intellectual abstraction, epitomized by Julian Barnes's claim that "novels come out of life, not out of theories about either life or literature" (Barnes 1999, 41), contemporary fiction increasingly demonstrates a sustained engagement with theoretical discourses. Writers such as Umberto Eco, Julia Kristeva, and Angela Carter not only draw upon theoretical frameworks but structurally embed them within narrative structures, resulting in what Mark Currie identifies as "theoretical fictions," a development so significant that, in his words, "the wall between academic literary studies and fiction has been demolished from both sides" (Currie 1998, 81). Angela Carter's self-conscious use of Bakhtinian carnival, for example, simultaneously engages with and parodies feminist theoretical discourse, prompting Dominic Head to argue that "Carter is being used to illuminate the theory, rather than vice versa" (Head 2000, 153). In this way, contemporary fiction reclaims agency not only by incorporating theoretical motifs but also by resisting the authority of theory through parody, pastiche, and metafiction. In this sense, what emerges is neither a triumph of theory over fiction nor a restoration of fiction's autonomy, but rather a dynamic "mutual anxiety of influence," to borrow Patricia Waugh's phrase, where theory and fiction mirror, mimic, and critique one another in a self-perpetuating dialogue (Waugh, 2006: 7). Contemporary fiction, far from retreating into anti-theoretical sentiment, has transformed into a critical mode in its own right, capable of theorizing while storytelling and exposing while imagining.

Once perceived as a vehicle for coherent plots and neatly categorized themes, the contemporary fiction has embraced fragmentation, reflexivity, and hybridity. Contemporary writers inherit traditional forms only to dismantle and reconfigure them. Just as the early twentieth century saw modernist authors redefining the possibilities of fiction in response to war, revolution, and ideological upheaval, so too do contemporary authors reimagine genre in the context of digital culture, transnational identity, and posthuman inquiry. In this sense, genre no longer functions as a restrictive

taxonomy but as a discursive field, an arena in which writers interrogate, appropriate, and subvert established forms. Fiction in the twenty-first century frequently resists genre purity, using ambiguity as a deliberate strategy. These innovations are not merely stylistic; they reflect a deeper engagement with the instability of truth, the multiplicity of selfhood, and the fractured nature of contemporary experience. The result is a body of work that challenges literary boundaries while inviting readers to reconsider the assumptions on which those boundaries rest. As with the modernist revolution that preceded it, this genre evolution demonstrates the novel's enduring ability to reflect and adapt to historical pressures, affirming its continued relevance in a world where change is the only constant. In fiction, repetition, defined by Kenneth Burke as "the restatement of a theme by new details," has consistently played a crucial role in the evolution of genre (Burke 1964, 2). Each new work within a genre carries echoes of its predecessors, while simultaneously introducing innovations that distinguish it from those prior texts. These innovations often arise in response to the limitations of existing genres, as writers seek to expand the scope of what fiction can express.

Genre, therefore, functions as a site of negotiation between tradition and invention, memory and departure. For Adena Rosmarin, genre is a rhetorical instrument, "the critic's heuristic tool," used for interpretation, argument, and analysis (Rosmarin 1985, 25). Rather than defining genre in theoretical or historical terms, Rosmarin emphasizes its critical utility, asserting that it enables the reader to perceive a text in "all of its previously inexplicable and 'literary' fullness" by linking it to other texts that may be "similarly explained" (25). In this framework, genre functions less as a classificatory grid and more as a pragmatic method of reading, one that draws attention to the relationship between a text's form and the purposes it serves. This rhetorical model positions genre as both a constraint and a generative force, one that simultaneously limits and enables expression. By foregrounding genre's interpretive role, Rosmarin opens a space in which deviations, innovations, and contradictions within texts become readable, not as exceptions to a rule, but as essential to a genre's living practice. Such an approach is particularly resonant in the study of contemporary fiction, where generic instability is not a flaw to be resolved but a signal of the text's critical engagement with literary tradition.

The 1970s and 1980s marked a period of radical transformation in fiction, as writers from historically marginalized communities, particularly in postcolonial contexts like Africa and South America, experimental techniques that redefined the boundaries of narrative. Writers such as Jorge Luis Borges challenged conventional modes of storytelling, blurring the

lines between reality and invention, and demonstrating the elasticity of fictional form. This creative resurgence coincided with a broader shift in literary criticism, which began to interrogate the dominance of the Eurocentric canon and open space for the voices of women, postcolonial authors, and other previously excluded groups. The perceived "death of the novel" (Fiedler 1965, 170) was not really a sign that literature was in decline, but rather showed that existing critical approaches could not fully understand or keep up with how fiction was changing. As fiction moved beyond inherited forms, genre itself became a site of experimentation. Merja Makinen's concept of "a fluid model of popular discourses" captures how genre adapts to shifting cultural and historical conditions, allowing literature to respond to new readerships and modes of circulation (Makinen 2006, 6). This emphasis on flexibility aligns with Fredric Jameson's view of genre as a literary institution, a "social contract" that mediates between writer and public, shaping how texts are received and understood (Jameson 1981, 106). Genre, in this light, is less a container than a framework in flux. E.D. Hirsch characterizes it as a "preliminary generic conception" guiding interpretation (Hirsch 1967, 74), while John Frow argues that genre is "a category we impute to texts," subject to change based on reading context and purpose (Frow 2006, 102). These models are essential for engaging with contemporary fiction, which often defies categorization through its hybrid forms and global perspectives. No longer confined to national traditions or formal expectations, writers today continue to explore new narrative strategies, creating works that mirror the fragmented and interconnected realities of the twenty-first century. ever-evolving literary landscape.

Contemporary fiction, shaped by increasingly fragmented and accelerated life-worlds, demonstrates a heightened engagement with temporality. As traditional chronological sequencing gives way to non-linear, recursive, or disrupted forms, fiction emerges as a medium responsive to temporal complexity. The narrative structure itself becomes a staging ground for temporal experience: one that foregrounds contingency, delay, simultaneity, and rupture. In this context, the boundaries of genre are not simply formal conventions but temporal negotiations, points of convergence where multiple histories, present instabilities, and speculative futures intersect. The evolution of contemporary fiction in relation to genre reflects a significant departure from conventional linear narratives. A central feature of this transformation is the increasing focus on narratives that disrupt chronological sequencing and foreground the open-endedness of experience. Bakhtin's assertion that we must understand "the world as an event (and not as existence in ready-made form)" (Bakhtin 1984 37) highlights his view of reality as unfinished and dialogically constituted. In

his framework, genres are evolving, time-bound processes that respond to shifting social, cultural, and historical conditions. This understanding is especially pertinent to contemporary fiction, where fragmented temporalities and hybrid structures reflect a world in constant transformation. As Bakhtin notes, the novel is "the only developing genre" because it remains open to "contact with the present" and resists finalization (Bakhtin 1981, 3). Echoing this perspective, Dunmire contends that genre is "inherently temporal in nature" and "located within and responsive to specific temporal conditions" (Dunmire 2012, 2). She defines genre as "typified rhetorical actions" that reflect the expectations and values of particular communities in specific historical contexts (Dunmire 2012, 4). The genre in contemporary fiction, in this way, becomes a site of continual becoming, shaped by and shaping the fluid temporalities of the present. Fictional texts no longer present time as a background framework but as an active dimension of meaning, shaping characters' experiences and the reader's interpretive process alike. The temporal construction of these narratives mimics the unpredictability and openness of human experience, reflecting a world understood not as a completed whole but as an ongoing, unfolding event.

The strong spatial dimension of contemporary fiction may make it a medium particularly suited for engaging questions of narrative structure. Robert T. Tally Jr. emphasizes the growing critical recognition of spatiality in contemporary fiction, arguing that the novel operates as a form of "literary cartography" that projects, organizes, and maps the social spaces it represents (Tally 2018, 153). Tally notes that the "spatial aspects of that apparently temporal form," the novel, have become increasingly visible and subject to critical attention, particularly following the spatial turn in the humanities and social sciences (153). This spatial awareness reflects what critics call the spatial turn in the humanities, shaped by postmodernism's new spatiality, postcolonial focus on place and territory, and structuralist challenges to temporal dominance. Tally further argues that "the novel is a sort of map," that enables readers to locate themselves "among the characters, events, settings, and ideas" of the fictional world (153). This mapping does not merely depict space but actively shapes it, as narrative settings, whether realistic or fantastical, are "produced by the narrative itself" rather than derived from any external geography (153). Citing Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope, Tally explains that space and time form "the organizing centres for the fundamental narrative events of the novel" (Tally 2019, 179). Thus, spatiality is inseparable from temporality and becomes integral to contemporary fiction's representation of identity, power, and social structure. This spatial experimentation reflects the

intricacies of a globalized, networked world, where boundaries between local and global, personal and collective, remain in constant flux. Through such narrative innovations, contemporary fiction not only reconfigures our perception of temporality but also reshapes how we understand and experience space, offering new ways of mapping the world both within and beyond the text.

A significant development in contemporary fiction is its reconfiguration of genre perception through an increasingly interdisciplinary perspective. In an age shaped by digital interconnectedness and the convergence of diverse media, contemporary fiction often resists traditional literary classifications by drawing on fields as varied as philosophy, sociology, environmental studies, and technology. This interdisciplinary orientation gives rise to hybrid narratives that merge elements of fantasy, science fiction, memoir, historical fiction, and beyond, enabling fiction to mirror the fragmented and multifaceted nature of modern life. Such texts are marked not only by their thematic diversity but also by their formally experimental modes of storytelling, a hybrid blend of genres that reflects the imaginative, phenomenological dimensions of contemporary experience. Moreover, contemporary fiction continually adapts to reflect the conditions of a rapidly globalizing world. Rather than presenting cosmopolitanism as a discrete category, fiction absorbs its dynamics, migration, cultural hybridity, and border-crossing, as part of its formal and thematic transformation. This is evident in narratives that reflect the erosion of rigid national, temporal, and spatial boundaries, drawing on what Arjun Appadurai describes as the "global cultural flows" that shape imagination in late modernity (Appadurai 1996, 33). The result is not merely thematic engagement with globalization, but a reimagining of narrative structure itself, where fragmented geographies and polyphonic identities are encoded into the form of the novel. Novels by writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Zadie Smith do not just depict transnational lives; they enact genre evolution by integrating disparate storytelling modes, timelines, and voices within a single textual space. In this way, the global turn in contemporary fiction parallels other interdisciplinary shifts and reflects broader cultural transformations that call for new narrative forms.

Broadly speaking, genre evolution in contemporary fiction can be understood in two intersecting directions: thematic expansion and formal experimentation. It is thematic when fiction integrates concerns from external disciplines, philosophy, sociology, and environmental studies, thereby opening itself to questions that exceed traditional literary frameworks. It is formal when fiction structurally absorbs these concerns, reshaping narrative architecture through hybrid forms that merge memoir,

science fiction, fantasy, and historical fiction. Thematic hybridity allows fiction to reflect contemporary anxieties surrounding identity, memory, and technology. Formal hybridity, by contrast, manifests through fragmented timelines, polyphonic narration, and mixed genres. This transformation is strongly shaped by the postmodern sensibility, which embraces parody, pastiche, and intertextuality, alongside a growing cultural recognition of popular forms as legitimate artistic modes. The traditional hierarchy that once separated high literature from mass entertainment is no longer stable; postmodernism actively promotes "the effacement of the older distinction between high culture and so-called mass or commercial culture" (Jameson, 1991, 2), allowing fiction to absorb and repurpose popular genres without undermining its literary ambition. What emerges is a narrative space in which hybridization becomes not merely possible but desirable, a space where fiction "takes pleasure in mixing what used to be kept separate: genres, discourses, even the popular and the elite" (Hutcheon 1988, 13), thereby reconfiguring genre as a flexible system responsive to contemporary cultural conditions. As David Duff observes, "the increasing cultural dominance of the popular genres themselves" has allowed genre to function as a "valorizing term" rather than a prescriptive one (Duff 2000, 3). This redefinition has enabled contemporary fiction to blend literary and popular forms in ways that were once considered incompatible.

The shared commitment of women writers to narrative innovation makes their work an influential force in the evolution of genre in contemporary fiction. Through their engagement with voice, embodiment, and marginal perspectives, they disrupt inherited literary forms and generate hybrid genres that foreground experience, challenge dominant epistemologies, and expand the boundaries of what fiction can represent. As women became more visible in contemporary fiction, they started to rework traditional genres. Forms like the novel, short story, and autobiography were reshaped to reflect gender, identity, and social structures from new perspectives. Feminist narratology has addressed this transformation. As Susan Sniader Lanser notes that feminist narrative theory "tends to favor flexible categories over fixed sets," emphasizing the role of gender and context in shaping meaning (Lanser 1986, 345). In a similar line of thought, Rita Felski writes that "genres are not only shaped by gendered expectations; they also shape how gender is understood and enacted," drawing attention to the mutual influence of genre and gender (Felski 2008, 56). These perspectives show that genre, for many women writers, becomes a site of formal and political transformation. Through these innovations, women have not only expanded the range of stories told but also reshaped the boundaries of genre

itself, making contemporary fiction more inclusive and reflective of diverse human experiences.

This book examines how contemporary fiction transforms genre, and how changing genres, in turn, reflect cultural and narrative shifts. Genre is understood broadly here, encompassing not only formal categories like the novel or short story, but also evolving narrative modes such as fantasy, biofiction, trauma fiction, metafiction, and posthumanist writing. While individual chapters closely examine specific genres or texts, the volume as a whole explores how genre functions as both a structure and a site of change. It is organized into five parts: self and identity, cultural memory and violence, historical reimaginings, alternative world-making, and speculative futures. Together, these chapters show how contemporary fiction reworks inherited forms to engage with urgent cultural, political, and environmental concerns. The range includes hybrid coming-of-age narratives, fictionalized biographies, metafictional reflections on war and authorship, ecological narratives, and post-apocalyptic imaginaries. These examples reflect the growing tendency of fiction to blur generic boundaries, creating hybrid forms that both respond to and reshape contemporary experience. Through this approach, the book presents genre as a flexible system constantly adapted to reflect the complexities of modern life.

Part I, Mapping Identity: From Self-Discovery to Dislocation, opens the volume by exploring how contemporary fiction negotiates interior life, memory, and the construction of selfhood across distinct yet overlapping frameworks. The section begins with Robert T. Tally Jr.'s analysis of the *Harry Potter* series as a modern coming-of-age narrative situated within fantasy. Tally argues that the novels challenge the escapist label often assigned to the genre. Instead, they use magical elements to foreground moral development, social awareness, and structural inequalities. The blend of fantasy and realism allows Rowling's work to engage readers in questions of identity, responsibility, and choice. In the second chapter, Azade Göktürk turns to *Martha Quest*, the opening novel of Doris Lessing's *Children of Violence* series, to examine the role of psychoanalytic conflict in shaping female subjectivity. Focusing on mother-daughter dynamics, Göktürk shows how Martha's development is marked by unresolved familial tensions that reflect broader struggles within patriarchal society. The chapter examines the psychological dimension of identity formation, positioning the self as deeply embedded in emotional and intergenerational entanglements. Chapter three continues the inquiry into identity by shifting the lens to transnational space. Selin Şencan reads Bharati Mukherjee's *Jasmine* through the framework of diaspora and migration studies. The chapter argues that the novel resists linear identity

narratives and instead depicts selfhood as fragmented, iterative, and shaped by displacement. By tracing the protagonist's multiple name-changes and relocations, Şencan highlights the instability of place-based identity and the transformative force of movement. Together, these chapters offer three distinct approaches, fantastical, psychoanalytic, and diasporic, to the evolving narratives of self in contemporary fiction. Each contributes to a broader understanding of how memory, gender, and geography intersect in the formation of identity.

Part II, Witnessing Violence and Cultural Memory, turns to the role of literature in representing historical trauma and systemic violence. This section considers how both fiction and nonfiction engage with memory, testimony, and the ethical demands of witnessing. Sabah Carrim opens the section with a study of genocide writing that focuses on the ongoing persecution of the Uyghur Muslims in China. Her chapter draws attention to the ways nonfictional accounts, memoirs, testimonies, and reports, offer immediate documentation of suffering, while fiction emerges as a medium for emotional processing and symbolic interpretation. Carrim's analysis of *The Backstreets* by Perhat Tursun illustrates how abstract narrative forms can convey the psychological and existential dimensions of state violence. Rather than presenting graphic detail, the novel renders trauma through estrangement, silence, and philosophical introspection. This approach, Carrim argues, allows fiction to participate meaningfully in the work of cultural memory, offering affective insight into experiences often left unspeakable. The second chapter in this section, written by Fahime Serhatti, focuses on trauma fiction through a close reading of Pat Barker's *Another World*. Serhatti examines how Barker portrays trauma across generations by combining personal memory with the collective aftershocks of war. Fragmented timelines, spectral presences, and narrative disjunctions serve to mirror the psychological disorientation caused by trauma. The novel resists narrative closure, showing how the past remains unresolved in the present. Through these techniques, Serhatti demonstrates that trauma fiction functions not only as a genre but also as a narrative strategy capable of addressing the lingering effects of violence and loss. Together, these chapters highlight the ethical and aesthetic challenges of representing trauma and show how literary forms can bear witness to cultural suffering beyond the limits of direct testimony.

Part III, Rewriting History and Fictionalizing the Past, investigates how contemporary fiction reengages with historical narratives to question, revise, and reinterpret the past. Nesrin Koç opens the section with a study of biofiction through Caryl Phillips's *A View of the Empire at Sunset*. Her chapter focuses on the reimagined life of Jean Rhys, exploring how biofiction

departs from conventional biography by privileging emotional insight over factual precision. Koç shows how Phillips reconstructs Rhys's experience of return and estrangement in Dominica, emphasizing themes of alienation, memory, and colonial displacement. In merging historical fact with fictional subjectivity, the novel illustrates how biofiction can offer nuanced portrayals of historical figures whose inner lives often remain obscured by official records. Koç underscores the genre's capacity to illuminate the personal and psychological dimensions of historical experience. The second chapter in this section, by Nazila Heidarzadeghan, turns to the genre of neo-Victorian fiction. Her analysis focuses on Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith* and A. S. Byatt's *Possession*, two novels that blend Victorian narrative structures with postmodern techniques. Heidarzadeghan argues that these works give voice to historically marginalized subjects while drawing connections between 19th-century concerns and contemporary debates on gender, sexuality, and authorship. In *Fingersmith*, Waters reworks the Victorian sensation novel to explore themes of class and queer identity, using narrative fragmentation to question the stability of truth. In *Possession*, Byatt constructs a dual narrative that bridges Victorian and modern timelines, revealing how the past shapes intellectual and emotional life in the present. As a whole, these chapters show how historical fiction can act as a critical tool, one that both recovers silenced histories and interrogates the storytelling traditions through which those histories are remembered.

Part IV, Posthuman Worlds and Speculative Ecologies, explores how contemporary fiction challenges anthropocentric norms by reimagining the boundaries between human, nonhuman, and environmental life. In chapter eight, Niğmet Metinöğlu analyzes Jeanette Winterson's *The Passion* as a posthuman text that subverts Enlightenment ideals of bodily coherence and fixed identity. Through the fragmented bodies of Henri and the hybrid form of Villanelle, the novel constructs subjectivity as unstable and porous. Çetiner shows how elemental forces, spatial dislocation, and gender fluidity converge to dismantle humanist binaries. This reading positions *The Passion* within a literary tradition that interrogates dominant models of embodiment and ethical belonging. Erel Mez follows this discussion in chapter nine with an analysis of A. S. Byatt's *Sea Story*. Mez examines how the narrative frames the sea as a sentient, dynamic force and critiques environmental degradation, especially plastic pollution. Through metaphor and lyrical prose, the story challenges human exceptionalism and highlights the interdependence of ecological systems. Posthumanism, in this context, becomes a narrative strategy for unsettling inherited ideas about nature and agency. Chapter ten turns to Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Word for World is Forest*, where Kadriye Tilbe Eser focuses on ecological conflict

and colonial violence. The novella contrasts the indigenous Athsheans' symbiotic relationship with their environment against the exploitative practices of the Terran colonizers. Drawing on material ecocriticism and rhizomatic theory, Eser demonstrates how Le Guin critiques capitalist expansion and imagines alternative modes of living. Considered together, these chapters reveal how posthumanist and ecological fiction create new imaginative spaces for rethinking subjectivity, ethics, and planetary futures.

Part V, Post-Apocalyptic Geographies and the Ethics of Survival, investigates how contemporary fiction imagines societal collapse and explores ethical possibilities for survival in ruined environments. In chapter eleven, Ercan Gürova analyzes Paul Auster's *In the Country of the Last Things* as a bleak vision of post-apocalyptic existence. The narrative follows Anna Blume through a disintegrated city where moral codes, social institutions, and physical infrastructure have vanished. Gürova highlights how Auster constructs a space of total abandonment, marked by decay, violence, and the erosion of human dignity. While survival is reduced to its most basic terms, the novel does offer fragile signs of renewal, particularly in the form of pregnancy and communal shelter. These fleeting moments raise critical questions about whether post-apocalyptic fiction can envision meaningful recovery or simply portray unrelenting decline. In chapter twelve, Mahinur Gözde Kasurka turns to Julie Bertagna's *Exodus*, a climate fiction novel that critiques the anthropocentrism of modernity through a narrative of rising seas and ecological devastation. Kasurka emphasizes how the novel positions both human and nonhuman forces as central to survival, challenging hierarchical distinctions between nature and culture. The story examines community, oral tradition, and ecological sensitivity as tools for enduring collapse. Drawing on material ecocriticism, Kasurka shows how *Exodus* offers an alternative vision of the future rooted in interconnection and care. Taken together, these chapters demonstrate how post-apocalyptic fiction navigates themes of loss and resilience, offering narrative spaces in which the ethics of survival must be reimagined through ecological and relational terms.

In the closing section of this volume, I return to the central concern of how genre functions in contemporary fiction. Drawing on what I term "many genres in flux," I reflect on how literary forms today no longer remain confined within certain definitions. Contemporary fiction proves that genres can be combined or undone to better reflect the uncertainties of the present. In this sense, genre does not offer us a stable destination, but it does offer a map, one that changes each time we turn the page. And in that act of reading, we find not only new forms, but also a renewed sense of what it means to engage with the world through narrative. In the second part,

Further Dialogues on Genre Evolution, I present a conversation with Robert T. Tally Jr., whose reflections on genre hybridity, media interaction, and literary form extend the discussion into broader cultural contexts. Our exchange explores the idea that genre evolves in response to the world it seeks to represent. I hope these reflections encourage readers to further explore the evolving forms that shape contemporary fiction and to engage with the critical conversations that genres continue to generate.

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PART I:

MAPPING IDENTITY:
FROM SELF-DISCOVERY TO DISLOCATION

CHAPTER 1

THE MAGICAL BILDUNGSROMAN: HARRY POTTER, FANTASY LITERATURE, AND THE ALL-TOO-REAL WORLD

ROBERT T. TALLY JR.

Fantasy Fiction is a recognizable, easily understood genre of popular fiction, finding its place neatly in bookstore aisles among other distinctive marketing genres such as Romance, Mystery, Science Fiction, or Horror. At the same time, however, the defining characteristics of fantasy fiction are often unclear, subject to debate, or prone to genre-blurring discontinuities, particularly when it comes to other so-called non-realist works. For example, is Dracula by Bram Stoker, which features a vampire amid otherwise realistic scenes in England, considered fantasy, horror, science fiction, or something else? Fantasy frequently overlaps with other genres, to the extent that some enthusiasts and scholars attempt to draw sharper boundaries between them. For instance, Darko Suvin draws attention to the differences between cognitive estrangement in science fiction and the more mythic or religious forms of estrangement in most fantasy fiction. Following Suvin, Fredric Jameson, in *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, refers to this as "the great schism," offering a set of differentiae specificae that can be used to distinguish fantasy from science fiction (Jameson 2005). China Miéville, in "Cognition as Ideology," a vigorous defense of fantasy that also questions this kind of generic-boundary policing, critiques the "cognition" model by observing that "faster-than-light drives" are no more realistic than dragons, as any physicist would confirm (Miéville 2009, 234). If anything, fantasy is a capacious category that arguably encompasses many other supposedly non-realist genres.

The evasion of realism itself seems to be a defining feature of fantasy. Yet, as Kathryn Hume observes in her magisterial study *Fantasy and Mimesis: Responses to Reality in Western Literature*, the fantastic and

the imitative or realistic modes "seem more usefully viewed as the twin impulses behind the creation of literature" (Hume 1984, 195). Nearly all fantasy fiction includes the seemingly unreal—magic, for example—within an otherwise all-too-real world, which lends urgency to its plots and characters. Similarly, even the most meticulously realistic fiction, in the traditions of Honoré de Balzac, George Eliot, or Fyodor Dostoevsky, contains moments of unreality or at least improbability (such as remarkable coincidences or unlikely connections) that color otherwise realistic settings and events.

Miéville suggests that the real divide lies more between recognition and estrangement, noting that various forms of the fiction of alterity may be distinguished from fiction that adheres to the familiar. As he puts it:

> There's an obvious relation with realist versus non-realist work (thinking on these lines might help map links between the pulpiest SF and more celebrated Surrealist and avant-garde work), though the distinction maps only imperfectly across the generic divide. All fiction contains elements of both drives (to different degrees, and variably skilfully). That very fact might be one way of getting at the drab disappointment of, on the one hand, the clichés of some fantasy and the twee and clunking allegories of middlebrow "literary" magic realism (faux estrangement, none-more-mollycoddling recognition), and on the other at those utterly fascinating texts which contain not a single impossible element, and yet which read as if they were, somehow, fantastic (Jane Eyre, Moby-Dick, etc.). Great stuff can doubtless be written from both perspectives. (Qtd. in Crown 2011)

That is, the sheer weirdness of a text like Moby-Dick—its generic unclassifiability and extravagance—makes it resemble fantasy fiction in some respects more than many conventional works of so-called fantasy.

The Harry Potter heptalogy appears to be a straightforward example (or rather, seven examples) of fantasy fiction, albeit fiction that also falls into the common marketing category of "children's literature," even though many of its readers were clearly adults. A tale of wizards and magic, populated by traditionally fantastic creatures such as unicorns, dragons, hippogriffs, basilisks, trolls, centaurs, goblins, and elves, is undeniably fantasy. Yet these beings and events occur in a recognizably "real" England, and much of the humor, drama, and pathos of the series emerges from the often-overlapping yet ontologically distinct spheres of the magical and the real. This is evident in the mundane anxieties of school life, test stress, for instance, even when the subjects studied are transfiguration or potions instead of physics or chemistry. Above all, the Harry Potter series

presents an elaborate coming-of-age narrative, chronicling the maturation of a single, unlikely hero alongside his friends and, ultimately, the society in which he lives. In many respects, then, Harry Potter reflects another, much older genre: the Bildungsroman. Only here, it is set in a postmodern context and integrates otherworldly elements as part of our world.

Beginning in the late eighteenth century and continuing into the early twentieth, the Bildungsroman became a dominant narrative form in European literature. It typically offers an engaging account of a young person's growth, from innocence to experience, shaped by lost illusions and great expectations, while learning to make their way in the world. The term Bildungsroman, often translated as "novel of education" or "formation," derives from Bildung, which suggests more than formal learning. It encompasses the formation of self-image (Bild meaning "representation" or "image"), physical and emotional maturation, intellectual development, and an understanding of how the world operates.

Although the form is most closely associated with the nineteenth-century novel, the Harry Potter series represents a striking twenty-first-century reinvention of the genre. In this chapter, I argue that the Harry Potter books collectively form a magical Bildungsroman, uniquely adapted to the conditions and concerns of the postmodern era.

The *Bildungsroman*

Historically, the *Bildungsroman* is a narrative form that seems to reveal the anxieties and opportunities of a society undergoing a transformation, as the tale of a young adult's maturation coincides with sweeping social changes as well. In Western literary history, as Franco Moretti has noted in *The Way of the World: The* Bildungsroman *in European Culture* (2000), the *Bildungsroman* is both the product and the mirror of a revolutionary period in which traditional societies were giving way to the vicissitudes of modern industrial development. This process eventually leads to literary modernism, in which the developing personality of the individual becomes all the more fragmented and displaced. The social upheavals of the early nineteenth century caused both opportunities and crises, and the young adult becomes a key figure for a society that was fashioning itself into something new.

The *Bildungsroman* thus registers a certain moment of European history, and the form tends to disintegrate once the processes of modernization have saturated social life. The political and industrial revolutions of the late-eighteenth century made possible a new way of thinking and writing about personal development, and this confluence of factors makes *Bildungsroman* possible. The French Revolution, combined

with the industrial revolution, had transformed European societies enormously, as older aristocratic social relations no longer had the same power, and commercial relations increased in influence and power. Suddenly, merely having a good "name" was not enough to ensure your high status in society, and the pursuit of wealth could take you into any number of professions or places. Young adults, who are filled with anxieties but also possess limitless opportunities, become symbolic of the society itself. As Moretti puts it, "Virtually without notice, in the dreams and nightmares of the so-called "double-revolution," Europe plunges into modernity, but without possessing a *culture* of modernity. If youth, therefore, achieves its symbolic centrality, and the "great narrative" of the *Bildungsroman* comes into being, this is because Europe has to attach a meaning, not so much to youth, as to *modernity*" (Moretti, 5, emphasis in original). For example, key differences between Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship* (1796) and James Joyce's *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), the novels that roughly bookend the chronological span of Moretti's study, indicate the trajectory of the form.

In Goethe's novel, which is often now considered the archetypal *Bildungsroman*, the young protagonist starts off naïve in the ways of both love and the world, but through an elaborate series of adventures among theatrical troupes, businessmen, nobles and commoners, he ends up a mature, well rounded adult, engaged to be married, while also nicely balancing the artistic and the commercial aspects of his life. Wilhelm Meister's "apprenticeship" is really his journey into the world, where he meets people of all social classes, and where he eventual comes to terms with his own identity. Similarly, Joyce's hero, Stephen Dedalus, leaves home to find his place in the world, but in both the style of the novel and the substance of Dedalus's adventures, the modernist Portrait of the Artist differs from Goethe's earlier Bildungsroman. Notably, Joyce's style presents a kind of running "stream of consciousness" even when it is narrated in the third person; that is, although the narrator is not Dedalus himself, we indirectly see Dedalus's own thoughts and experiences. His Bildung, moreover, appears to be far more interior than Wilhelm Meister's. Dedalus's maturity comes from his own intellectual and psychological development, whereas Meister's was more social and cultural, as his learning and self- awareness come primarily from the variety of other people he encounters. In the little over a century between these two novels, we can see how the *Bildungsroman* moves from a symbolic form of the society as a whole to a symbolic form of the isolated individual within, but potentially isolated from, society.

The *Harry Potter* series obviously did not fit within this historical scheme of things, but in its chronicle of a young person's development from childhood to adult maturity, as well as from ignorance and naïveté to knowledge and mastery, the seven volumes as a whole can be viewed a fitting example of a postmodern *Bildungsroman*.[1] The label is really a little anachronistic, but *Harry Potter* offers a kind of *Bildungsroman* well suited to another epoch of anxieties and uncertainties, which is to say, our own epoch. Straddling the millennia, the *Harry Potter* series is like a postmodern *Bildungsroman*, insofar as it takes place in the late-twentieth-century world with which its readers are already quite familiar, but the series confronts our own uncertain present by charting a young person's development through a complex world of magic and reality. In this respect, Harry Potter moves beyond the narrow interiority of the modernist subject, bringing to the postmodern moment a form closer to the original eighteenth-century genre but supplementing it with a fantastic mode, most visible in the pervasiveness of magic in the series. Harry Potter's "magical" Bildungsroman presents literary history with a marvelous variation of the form, one perhaps well suited to a time in which the all-too-real world is beset with such darksome uncertainty.

The advent of *Harry Potter* coincides, perhaps not coincidentally, with a world transformed by globalization and by mass media's penetration of the remotest regions of the globe, where the assurances of a previous era no longer hold true. Magic adds greater wonder to the stories, but also provides a strategy for making sense of the world. The magical world of wizards, house elves, goblins, trolls, dragons, and Dementors constitutes a meta-world, a realm just beyond the senses of most Muggles, but which is intimately related to our own, often terrifyingly *real* world, as is movingly portrayed in "The Other Minister" chapter of *Half-Blood Prince*. Also, in showing that what some call "fate" is precisely the result of innumerable individual choices, J. K. Rowling reverses the mainstay fantasy conception of destiny. Whether it was Harry's direction to the sorting hat, "Not Slytherin!", in *Sorcerer's Stone* (121) or Voldemort's self-fulfilling prophecy in choosing to kill Harry, as Dumbledore explains in *Order of the Phoenix* (842), what seemed to be immutable fate or even "divine" Providence is revealed to be the culminating results of series of choices, guided by no otherworldly hand but made in good faith by the choosers themselves. The *Harry Potter* series presents powerful evidence that "the way of the world" is frequently what readers make of it, a valuable lesson for students and teachers alike.

Although each novel forms a complete story in itself, then, the seven books of the *Harry Potter* series constitute an entire *Bildungsroman*