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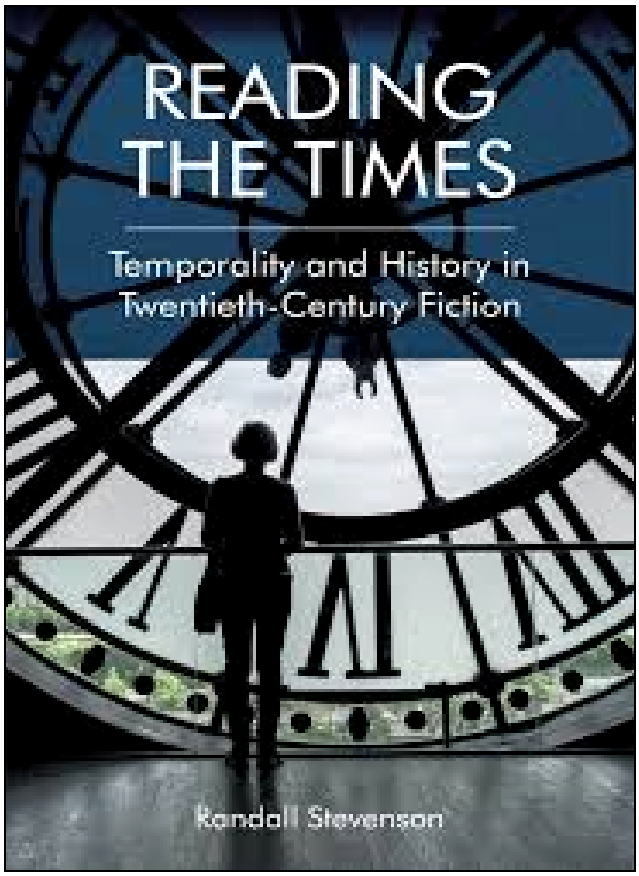
(RECOMMENDED CITATION)

BOOKS

Randall Stevenson, *Reading The Times: Temporality and History in Twentieth-Century Fiction*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018, 262 p.



In his conclusions to *Reading the Times*, Randall Stevenson observes that, in the 21st century, tensions between "time on the clock" and "time in the mind" have become almost unintelligible. Clock time, in other words, has become "coextensive with the very fabric of existence itself" (222). Yet, of course, this was not always the case. The introduction and standardisation of measured time thoroughly marked quotidian life in the 20th century, together with the literature it produced. *Reading the Times* engages precisely this context of shifting perspectives on the

clock, as well as the manner in which the latter decisively altered the course of fiction. The study brings together areas of interest previously explored by its author. Professor of Twentieth-Century Literature at the University of Edinburgh, Randall Stevenson published *Modernist Fiction: An Introduction* in 1992, followed by *The Oxford English Literary History vol. 12, 1960-2000* in 2004, and *Literature and the Great War* in 2013. Throughout the latter, Stevenson pursues a concern not only with the innovations of modernist fiction in the 20th century, but particularly with the social, economic, and cultural contexts that shaped them.

The same stance is maintained in *Reading the Times*, which initially emphasises the administrative difficulties of agreeing upon and implementing a universal, more convenient, yet sometimes "unnatural" measure of time in a society in which the behaviour of people was commonly guided by personal rhythms and the everyday patterns of the sun. According to Stevenson, literature responded to the exigencies and apprehensions introduced by the clock throughout the century. The novel, furthermore, became "the best equipped to resist or reorient the relentless, measured passage of time" (19). For this reason, Joseph Conrad and his maritime career make the subject of the Stevenson's second chapter, which outlines the "chronotype" put forward by the former and later followed by most modernist writers. Indeed, Conrad's fiction, like his career, was characterised, according to Stevenson, by "tensions between responsibility and romance, calculation and glamour" (37), easily translatable into tensions between chronology, an essential discipline for mariners, and time in the mind. Yet Conrad's writing was not merely a rejection of clock time. It was, instead, an exploration of the tensions brought about by the implementation of this time, which Stevenson himself makes explicit here. The third chapter investigates yet another shift in perspective, from Conrad to D. H. Lawrence's fiction, wherein the effects of the clock time appear to be much more violent and devastating. To provide an explanation for this new attitude to time, Stevenson tackles the dehumanising aftermath of industrialisation, as well as the significance of war time in the Great War. Against such a background, the fourth chapter more generously considers the work of fiction in providing means to resists clock time, with emphasis on time in the mind and memory. The authors considered here include Bergson, Proust, Joyce, Ford Maddox Ford and Virginia Woolf, but also Albert Einstein, whose Theory of Relativity was, at the time, rather loosely interpreted as an "alternative or ameliorative means of envisaging the historical stresses of the age" (109).

In chapter five, Stevenson deals predominantly with inter-war fiction, which, he adds, shifts its perspective once again, this time, from "hours to years," not only due to the "post-Relativist relaxation" in resentment of the clock, but also due to the felt necessity to pay increasing attention to history and the two World Wars (133-4). According to Stevenson, the Wars, and especially the catastrophes of the Second World War, made it impossible for those who lived through them to look toward the future without terror or to assume a view of history as progress any longer. The sixth chapter, therefore, extensively considers the work of postmodern writers and their strategies to encompass "potentially unspeakable historical events within the form of the novel" (178-9). Finally, the seventh

chapter underlines that although the 21st century brought along the apparent naturalisation of measured time, novels continue to express an antipathy to the clock, suggesting that conflicts between "time on the clock" and "time in the mind" actually "extend in one form or another across a very long history" (235).

This is, in fact, one of the book's most impressive feats. In *Reading the Times*, Randall Stevenson does not surgically separate the 20th century and its literature in order to analyse its specific characteristics, but rather seeks to contextualise the latter by linking them to their roots in the previous century, as well as their consequences in the present. As such, he makes obvious the relevance of a certain "perennial aspect in temporal tensions" (235) not only for modernist writers, but also for postmodernity and contemporary times. Furthermore, Stevenson proceeds to a well-documented reconstruction of 20th century life, prior to and immediately following the intrusion into the quotidian of relentless clock time and its anxieties. The study, in other words, can serve as a bridge from the present to the larger historical context of the 20th century, which may be more or less obscure for the contemporary reader. Stevenson delivers new insights into modern fiction, but most importantly, he provides a means for readers to access the perspectives of both 20th century writers and their audience. In this regard, the book serves as an invaluable tool for the interpretation of any text produced in a context marked by shifting perspectives on temporality and traumatic historical events.

Reading the Times accomplishes its ambitious task meticulously. It is intended for scholars and students of twentieth-century literature, but it remains accessible to any reader with an interest in the development of modern narrative. Largely due to Stevenson's engaging style, as well as his ability to deliver in-depth analyses in an easily readable fashion, the book can be read both as an introduction into modernist and postmodernist writing and a complex interpretation of the latter.

DIANA MELNIC
Email: diana.melnic3@yahoo.com