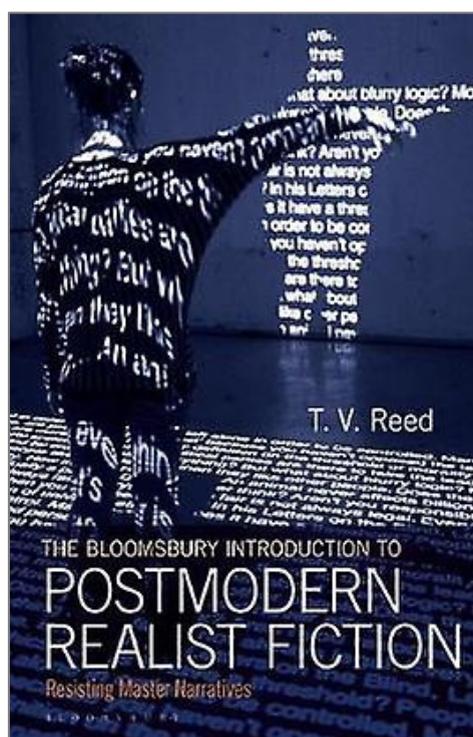


BOOKS

T.V. Reed, *The Bloomsbury Introduction to Postmodern Realist Fiction: Resisting Master Narratives*, New York: Bloomsbury, 2021, 274 p.

T.V. Reed, the Lewis E. and Stella G. Buchanan Distinguished Professor of English and American Studies at Washington State University, opens his wide-ranging survey of “postmodern realist fiction” with an intriguing statement: “There is no such thing as postmodern fiction.” This is because postmodernism is “not one agreed-upon thing” (15), but rather “a notoriously slippery category,” “a global phenomenon, with writers hailing from all continents,” except for Antarctica (1), and according to its first major theorist, Jean-François Lyotard, “a recurring historical phenomenon,” arising “whenever segments of a culture develop an intense self-consciousness about language as a force in creating the world” (5). Both the origins and endpoints of postmodernism have been intensely debated, while the lines



separating it from other forms of representation have been drawn and redrawn in ways that allow for but are not limited to what Reed calls *postmodernist realism*: a body of late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century works that “while still critical of ‘realism’ as a conservative ideology, tend to retain more recognizable elements of traditional fiction” (12), along with the imprint of their social and historical locations. As such, these narratives stand in sharp

contrast to, on the one hand, “distorted versions of postmodernism” that have been dismissed as “empty formalism” (10), as “obscure and cynical worldplay, lacking both substance and moral values” (2, 3), and, on the other, to “white supremacist, misogynist, anti-immigrant, anti-Semitic, and Islamophobic discourses” that have been on the rise in the last decade or so (2-3).

Reed builds up the complex picture of postmodernism with brush strokes at first, clearing up the “terminal confusion” surrounding three interrelated concepts—*postmodern theory*, *postmodernist aesthetics*, and *postmodernity*—and outlining several “conditions and styles” before he focuses on specific topics and texts. The evolving “story” of postmodernism that emerges from Reed’s account is one of change and continuity, more like a spiral than a straight line, swirling around the recognition, which underlies postmodern theory, that language shapes our interpretation of an “imperfectly knowable reality” (5). Hence the questioning of “all absolutes, all fundamentalisms—religious, philosophical, and political” (5), the “assault on naïve realism” (36), and the foregrounding of “different kinds of knowledge embedded in different kinds of experience, thought, and feeling” (6). Drawing on Donna Haraway’s concept of “situated knowledges” (45), Reed highlights the subversive and transformative power of those “other, multiple stories” that “offer essential tools for survival and resistance” (214) to “*gran récits*” (Lyotard), to “single stories” (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie) about cultural “others,” and last but not least, to the false, mass-mediated narratives of our post-truth era (12). “Novels alone,” he argues, “do not change the world, but they can play a role in shaping the sensibility of those who resist master narratives, those who engage in social movements and the other forces that bring about real change” (9).

Reed devotes the second chapter, perhaps the book’s most useful one from a theoretical perspective, to the interplay of “postmodern conditions and postmodernist styles” in order to show how aspects of the former, “both liberatory and

dangerous ones,” have “shaped the literary imagination from the 1960s to the present” (32). In pursuit of this goal, he covers a lot of ground, on “roads” taken by other postmodern theorists, starting with Lyotard, whose seminal study *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) set the tone and terms for theorizing the postmodern era as one defined by “incredulity toward *gran récits*” (20). Generally translated as “meta-narratives,” these “big stories,” as Reed colloquially dubs them, are totalizing belief systems—religious, philosophical, political—which foster illusions about reason, order, unity, scientific progress, human perfectibility, etc. Not only did Lyotard foresee the “proliferation of *petit récits*, more modest stories, more partial or local truths,” but he also “presciently argued” that advances in digital communications would play a major role in generating “competing, irreconcilably different narratives” (20, 21). Reed meticulously catalogues the economic, political, and social conditions of postmodernity, tracing both the transformations they have undergone since the post-Second World War era and their cultural implications: the decolonization struggles and revolutionary movements that “profoundly reshaped both the Global South and the Global North” (22); the morphing of *postcolonial* conditions into *neocolonial* relationships, especially driven by the United States and accelerated by the forces of neoliberal corporate globalization, which have contributed to environmental degradation (23), economic inequality, *cultural imperialism* by the overdeveloped nations (24), terrorism, nuclear warfare, “massive migrations,” and “increased multiculturalization” (27). In turn, these last two conditions brought “both highly positive forms

of diversity and deep ethno-racial tensions" (28), and together with decolonization and social movements "challenged the centrality of a *liberal humanist self* that claimed to be universal," coherent, and autonomous, rather than fluid and fragmented, relational and intersectional, historically and culturally constructed (28).

In the second half of Chapter 2, Reed highlights those stylistic techniques—many of them recycled modernist devices (unreliable narrators, irony, shifts in tone and time frames, disjointed plots, open endings, genre bending and/or blending, intertextuality, magical realism, etc.)—whereby postmodern realists have sought to capture a more nuanced understanding of identity and history by "disrupting" what Roland Barthes dubbed the "reality effect" of traditional realism (34). A key tenet of postmodern aesthetics invoked by Reed holds that form and content are "inseparable," and thus "deeply political because *literary conventions* not only reflect but also *shape social conventions*" (33). Therefore, he notes, for postmodern realists, "artistic resistance" to what we take for granted as "natural" or "normal" is bound up with "political praxis" (35). Precisely because it draws attention to "the processes by which the 'real' is invented through narrative," science fiction/speculative fiction/fantasy has led critics like Brian McHale to see it as emblematic of postmodern fiction that revolves around "questions of ontology," positing a "*multiverse*" made up of "multiple, incompatible worlds," as opposed to "different angles on the same world" employed by modernists (50). Unlike the latter, postmodernists embrace openness, uncertainty, and fragmentation, but, Reed concedes, just like the modernist aesthetic, postmodern style can

become "commodified, tamed, made to serve the very forces it seeks to critique" (14). Thus, he maintains, "it is up to us as readers to work with these texts, to create contexts of reception that release their power to help bring about much needed changes in the world" (52).

Reed urges readers to "[k]eep this task in mind" as he turns to his selection of postmodern realist novels, all written in English, by critically acclaimed, canonical postmodern writers, but also lesser known ones, and tackled under distinct yet flexible thematic rubrics. For instance, works that explore the fluidity of identity and "sociopolitical bases of identity formation" under postmodern conditions include those covered in Chapter 3 (Kathy Acker's *Don Quixote*, Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist*, to name but a few) and the hybrid "autofiction" discussed in Chapter 8 (Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men*, Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, Olivia Laing's *Crudo*, among others). Since the different facets and transformations of the postmodern self are interwoven with those of the body, the next chapter maps out the intersections of "gender, sexuality, race, and the body" in works by Jeannette Winterson, Angela Carter, Katherine Dunn, Shelley Jackson, Daisy Johnson, and Akwaeke Emezi. Chapter 5 traces the shift from the nuclear family model to extended, cross-generational family structures within communities of color (99), richly represented in novels by Anna Castillo, Junot Diaz, Eden Robinson, among others. The presence of the past and the "emplotment" (Hayden White) of both history and fiction are evident in works of "historiographic metafiction" (Linda Hutcheon), perhaps "the most characteristic form of the postmodern novel," which

Reed samples in Chapter 6, with emphasis on Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of the Butterflies*, Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*, and Leslie Silko's *Almanac of the Dead*. Chapter 7 centers on the critical practice of rewriting the canonical stories of the past in revisionary novels by Jean Rhys, Bharati Mukerjee, Salman Rushdie, A.S. Byatt, Jessica Hagedorn, and Sherman Alexie. The last two chapters take up key issues concerning human and ecological survival in the present and future, respectively: the dislocations of people caused by war, famine, poverty, globalization, political repression, terrorism, religious extremism, and new technologies figure prominently in Tommy Orange's *There There*, Mohsin Hamid's *Exit West*, Rabih Allamanddine's *Koolaid: The Art of War*, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*; just as important, the perils and possibilities of AI, the threats posed by surveillance states, biotech, and climate crises, find expression in s/f and CliFi novels, including Nnedi

Okorafor's *Lagoon* (2014) that projects a dystopian vision and participates in the cultural movement of Afrofuturism (227).

The brief but illuminating introduction to each of the aforementioned chapters lays out a historical/cultural framework within which to consider variations on that theme and set them alongside or against each other. Most importantly, Reed insists, his overviews cannot substitute for reading the novels themselves, so "this book exists only to point [readers] toward the real books" (17). To echo his assessment of A.S. Byatt's novel *Possession* (1990), Reed's own book is "rich with love—love of literature, of the past, of [memorable characters]," even as it mounts a compelling "critique of the excesses of some strands of postmodern theory" (162). Rigorously researched and packed with keen insights, this introduction to postmodern realist fiction is bound to resonate with scholars, teachers, students, and literature lovers.

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