THE NOVEL IN ENGLISH
AN INTRODUCTION

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THE NOVEL IN ENGLISH

AN INTRODUCTION

Ian Milligan

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Foreword

There are so many novels, and they are so varied in subject, style and achievement. They bear witness to the curiosity of mankind about itself, they show us how writers see men and women in their societies, and they often demonstrate men and women coming to terms with society in the process of growing up, of learning, of making crucial judgements, of taking decisions, either carrying out actions themselves or reacting to the thoughts, the emotions, the behaviour of others. And behind all this analysis and action, this dialogue and description, this creation which reaches into realism or the infinities of imagination, or mingles these extremes, there is, almost inevitably, the human desire to tell a story, a story about people. Once upon a time . . . He spoke to her, and she replied to him . . . The door opened and the golden light irradiated the room where . . .

The European novel, the English novel, the American novel have different nuances, but their general achievement has been the creation of a world, a fictional world where fact and fancy have intermingled, a populous world in which we find the living characters the novelists have created: men and women who have a vibrant, reverberating life, who have compelled the attention, evoked the sympathy, deserved the repulsion, stimulated the thoughts of readers — over centuries in many cases. Robinson Crusoe discovers the footprint on the sand; Emma is rude to Miss Bates; Catherine Earnshaw says 'I am Heathcliff'; Oliver Twist asks for more; Long John Silver breaks out into 'Fifteen men on the dead man's chest'; Lord Jim repeatedly exclaims 'Nothing can touch me'; Paul Morel feels 'dreary and hopeless' between Miriam and Mrs Morel; and Stephen Daedalus tells his friend Cranly 'I will not serve that in which I no longer believe'.

Novelists continually add to the richness of our human experience; they bring before us new topics, new characters, new attitudes. Mr Milligan in this Introduction to the novel in English rightly includes

Foreword

discussion of novelists who do not come from Britain or America, but are writing in English about their own people – their problems and their pleasures – and adding to our common stock of enjoyment and experience in so doing. Achebe's Okonkwo, Robertson Davies's Monica Gall, Janet Frame's Vera Glace, V. S. Naipaul's Mr Biswas, R. K. Narayan's Krishna the Malgudi schoolteacher, or Patrick White's Mrs Flack join the characters created by earlier novelists. They become inhabitants of our village, the village of the English-speaking, English-reading world. Their creators have often been engaged in discovering the nature of national identities: not only have they brought into the novel a lively, fresh, idiosyncratic use of the English language as it has developed in their countries, but they have interpreted attitudes, moral standards and values, all of which may differ from those of their readers, and consequently they often have a powerful, shaping role in influencing ideas both inside and outside their own countries.

Influential novels undoubtedly have always been; but unless reading them is pleasurable, unless they are, ultimately, enjoyable, their survival value is decidedly dubious. Mr Milligan stresses their emotional effect. No novel, he says, has the right to be dull. And no reader should be passive either! In this book Mr Milligan indicates stimulating ways in which readers can increase the pleasure they experience in reading fiction, by responding to the rewarding challenges each novel presents. To do this is to develop an understanding and an appreciation of different kinds of novels written at different times and in different places. It requires us to read critically, and this both deepens our sensibility and increases our capacity for informed and balanced judgement, for engaging fully those intellectual and emotional responses that contribute our enjoyment.

Stirling, 1982

A. Norman Jeffares

Preface

There are few novices in the art of novel-reading; even in an age of television reading begins early, and most interested readers of novels have a wealth of experience to draw on if they decide to take a closer look at how novels are written. This book has been written to encourage students to deepen their experience of reading by paying close attention to the language of the novel. It goes beyond 'practical criticism' by suggesting ways of understanding the structure and design of the novel as a whole. It has been written in the belief that close attention to the text not only increases understanding but enhances the pleasure which readers will find in it.

Reading in depth is a valuable skill, but it may lead to an undesirable narrowing of the range of the reader's interest. The novel in English has been enriched by the contributions of novelists in India, in Africa, in America, in Australasia, in the Caribbean and in India. Students of literature in Britain are often too little aware of these writers, while students elsewhere may sometimes fail to remember the links between novels in English written in their own countries and the historical tradition of which they form a part.

No one book can fulfil all of these objectives, but I am deeply grateful to Professor A. N. Jeffares for encouraging me to write this one, which claims to be no more than an introduction to the novel in English. I wish to thank Miss M. W. Prentice and Miss E. McLellan for their patient and cheerful help in producing the typescript. On this occasion, as on others, my wife's good sense and clear judgment have saved me from some errors: for those that remain the responsibility is mine.

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Ian Milligan

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