THE STEPMOTHER TONGUE

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The Stepmother Tongue

An Introduction to
New Anglophone Fiction

John Skinner

St. Martin's Press
New York

ISBN 978-0-333-67614-1 ISBN 978-1-349-26898-6 (eBook)
DOI 10.1007/978-1-349-26898-6

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Softcover reprint of the hardcover 1st edition 1998 978-0-333-67613-4

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For information, address:

St. Martin's Press, Scholarly and Reference Division,
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010

First published in the United States of America in 1998

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources.

ISBN 978-0-312-21176-9 clothbound

ISBN 978-0-312-21177-6 paperback

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Skinner, John, 1945–

The stepmother tongue : an introduction to new Anglophone fiction / John Skinner.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 978-0-312-21176-9 (cloth).— ISBN 978-0-312-21177-6 (paper)

1. English fiction—English-speaking countries—History and criticism. 2. American fiction—Minority authors—History and criticism. 3. English fiction—Foreign countries—History and criticism. 4. English fiction—Minority authors—History and criticism. 5. Commonwealth fiction (English)—History and criticism. 6. English fiction—20th century—History and criticism. 7. Decolonization in literature. 8. Second language acquisition. 9. Ethnic groups in literature. 10. Minorities in literature.

I. Title.

PR9084.S58 1997

823—dc21

97-34991

CIP

*Indifferent language of an alien shore,
the journey was troubled but I am here:
register me among your stepchildren*

Debjani Chatterjee

*one should never pass over in silence the question of the tongue in
which the question of the tongue is raised*

Jacques Derrida

For Carla

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Preface

The Stepmother Tongue: An Introduction to New Anglophone Fiction is intended for the student, critic and general reader. It does not provide a new theoretical model for post-colonial literature, but merely a broad and modestly innovative taxonomy of new fiction in English.

Each element of the title already implies a certain critical bias. There are countless twentieth-century writers (beginning with Conrad and Nabokov) whose relation to the English language is in some way exceptional, whether ambivalent, problematic, or in some cases even hostile: one may, in various senses, speak of a “stepmother tongue”. These are the authors who receive particular emphasis in the following pages.

More practically, a study of this kind demands rigorous selection. I began in search of a term which would include all literature written in the various “world englishes”, but exclude native English writers (although not Black British ones) and American writers (but not African Americans, or any of the other minority literatures of the United States). It is a complex but fairly precise job description, although there may, surprisingly, be no satisfactory candidate. The composite term “New Anglophone” draws on connotations currently familiar in Europe – the Anglo-Saxon world generally preferring “post-colonial”.

Unfortunately, the word “anglophone” itself is anomalous, as it should logically include *all* literature written in English, Margaret Drabble as well as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. Some preliminary justification for *de facto* omissions is offered here. On a practical level, even the sketchiest account of “mainstream” English and American fiction would have drastically curtailed the space available for other authors less familiar to many readers; whilst the existence of excellent single-volume surveys of both fields (those of Malcolm Bradbury spring immediately to mind) is a further deterrent.

At a slightly higher conceptual level, one may recall two vignettes in Salman Rushdie’s seminal essay “Commonwealth Literature Does Not Exist”: the “lady from the British Council” who reassured him that “English studies are taken to include Commonwealth literature” and the Cambridge don who asked whether he experienced “a kind of liberty, certain advantages, in

occupying ... a position on the periphery". The date of both incidents is 1983, since which the "empire" has been writing back with increasing insistence. It is nevertheless noticeable how many perspectives on fiction in English start at the so-called "centre" and never quite reach the "periphery". The present study could therefore be ironically regarded as a simple act of restitution, starting at the "periphery" but never quite reaching the "centre". Quotation marks are everything here, of course, since both of the concepts placed inside them have been progressively invalidated by the post-colonial theorist and the contemporary general reader.

The final justification for the present format derives, however, from the concept of the stepmother tongue: the four sections of the book reflect the diminishing degrees of literalness with which this trope could be applied. If it seems paradoxical in the context of "white writing" from Australia, New Zealand, South Africa or Canada, then it is surely inapplicable to mainstream English or American writing. These issues are explored more fully in the Introduction proper.

A brief comment is also necessary on the hitherto careless elision of "literature" and "fiction". The former is too vast a field for this book, which therefore limits itself to the twentieth century's dominant literary genre. Where fiction is concerned, moreover, most examples are chosen from the last fifty years, and almost all among full-length novels; the early twentieth century and the short story are two more victims of an enforced selection process.

The Stepmother Tongue does not claim to be exhaustive. Omissions range from individual novels and novelists to entire literary traditions (e.g. Malta), whilst other countries – such as the Philippines – are unfortunately not represented among the eighty texts treated in greater detail. The book is simply a personal attempt to fill, as usefully as possible, the space that was made available: space, incidentally, which seemed more than generous, for, if the novels discussed never seemed too long, the relevant critical or theoretical works rarely seemed too short.

A broad survey of this kind is clearly indebted to many standard secondary sources. These are normally acknowledged at the end of the appropriate section, although certain consistently useful works should be mentioned here. The relevant volumes of the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* (on Caribbean, Black African, Afro-American, Euro-American and Canadian writers) are invariably helpful, although there are as yet (regrettably) no volumes on Asian,

Australasian, or white South African writers. More comprehensive, although obviously smaller in scale, is the invaluable Routledge *Encyclopedia of Post-Colonial Literatures in English*. The leading scholarly journals in the field are the long-running *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (with its excellent annual bibliographies), together with the more recent *Kunapipi*, *Wasafiri*, *World Literature Written in English* and *Ariel*. To all of these sources I am naturally indebted. For simple issues of selection or exclusion, it was also of great benefit to have worked as consulting editor (with responsibility for Africa and Asia) on the new *Cambridge Guide to Fiction in English*. The policies of Ian Ousby and his other regional editors about who to include were particularly instructive. On matters of demographic and linguistic data, finally, Kenneth Katzner's *The Languages of the World* (1995 edition) was most useful.

It is also a pleasure to record more personal debts. I am grateful, above all, for the practical support of my department Chair, Risto Hiltunen, and to the Academy of Finland for an Advanced Research Fellowship for 1995–6, which enabled me to make additional study or research trips to the University of Cambridge (England), the University of the West Indies (Jamaica, Barbados, and Trinidad), and the Universities of Kerala and Mysore (India).

I would like to thank friends and colleagues who have offered good advice, shared their expertise, and/or helped obtain urgently needed materials. They include Victor Chang, Edward Baugh and Mervyn Morris (Jamaica); Kenneth Ramchand (Trinidad); K. C. Belliappa, Anil Kumar and K. Radha (India); D. C. R. A. Goonetilleke (Sri Lanka); S. K. Okleme (Ghana); Ian Ousby, Alastair Niven and Gilian Gorle (England); Bernth Lindfors (United States); Adrian Mitchell, Glen Philips and Cynthia vanden Driesen (Australia); Ralph Crane (New Zealand); Carla Raule (Italy); and Gerald Doherty (Finland). With these and many others who kindly answered all my queries, I can only hope that I asked some of the right questions.

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