

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO



POSTMODERN
AMERICAN
FICTION

Edited by Paula Geyh

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO
POSTMODERN AMERICAN FICTION

Few previous periods in the history of American literature could rival the richness of the postmodern era – the diversity of its authors, the complexity of its ideas and visions, and the multiplicity of its subjects and forms. This volume offers an authoritative, comprehensive, and accessible guide to the American fiction of this remarkable period. It traces the development of postmodern American fiction over the past half century and explores its key aesthetic, cultural, and political contexts. It examines its principal styles and genres, from the early experiments with metafiction to the most recent developments, such as the graphic novel and digital fiction, and offers concise, compelling readings of many of its major works. An indispensable resource for students, scholars, and the general reader, the *Companion* both highlights the extraordinary achievements of postmodern American fiction and provides illuminating critical frameworks for understanding it.

PAULA GEYH is Associate Professor of English at Yeshiva University. She is the author of *Cities, Citizens, and Technologies: Urban Life and Postmodernity*, and a coeditor, with Fred G. Leebron and Andrew Levy, of *Postmodern American Fiction: A Norton Anthology*. Her articles on postmodern literature and culture have appeared in such journals as *Contemporary Literature*, *Twentieth-Century Literature*, *PARADOXA*, and *Criticism*.

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PAULA GEYH
Yeshiva University



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CONTENTS

<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	<i>page</i> vii
<i>Chronology</i>	ix
Introduction	I
PAULA GEYH	
1 Postmodern Precursors	9
JONATHAN P. EBURNE	
2 Prolonged Periodization: American Fiction After 1960	28
DAVID COWART	
3 Postmodern American Fiction and Global Literature	47
CAREN IRR	
4 Philosophical Skepticism and Narrative Incredulity: Postmodern Theory and Postmodern American Fiction	63
ARKADY PLOTNITSKY	
5 History and Fiction	81
TIMOTHY PARRISH	
6 Gender and Sexuality: Postmodern Constructions	97
SALLY ROBINSON	
7 Pluralism and Postmodernism: The Histories and Geographies of Ethnic American Literature	112
DEAN FRANCO	

CONTENTS

8	The Zombie in the Mirror: Postmodernism and Subjectivity in Science Fiction	131
	ELANA GOMEL	
9	Postmodern Styles: Language, Reflexivity, and Pastiche	148
	PATRICK O'DONNELL	
10	Between Word and Image: The Textual and the Visual in Postmodern American Fiction	163
	PAULA GEYH	
11	Electronic Fictions: Television, the Internet, and the Future of Digital Fiction	181
	ASTRID ENSSLIN	
	<i>Index</i>	198

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PAULA GEYH is Associate Professor of English at Yeshiva University. She is the author of *Cities, Citizens, and Technologies: Urban Life and Postmodernity* (2009) and a coeditor, with Fred G. Leebron and Andrew Levy, of *Postmodern American Fiction: A Norton Anthology* (1998).

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CHRONOLOGY

- 1960 John F. Kennedy elected president
 Black students hold sit-in at Woolworth lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina
 Birth control pill becomes available for use as a contraceptive
 Laser invented
 John Barth, *The Sot-Weed Factor*
- 1961 Construction of the Berlin Wall
 Freedom Rides organized by CORE
 Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin first man in space
 William S. Burroughs, *The Soft Machine*
 Joseph Heller, *Catch-22*
- 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis
 Telstar, the first telecommunications satellite
 John Glenn first American astronaut to orbit the Earth
 James Baldwin, *Another Country*
 Jorge Luis Borges, *Ficciones* (English translation)
 William S. Burroughs, *The Ticket That Exploded*
 Philip K. Dick, *The Man in the High Castle*
 Ken Kesey, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*
 Vladimir Nabokov, *Pale Fire*
- 1963 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech
 President John F. Kennedy assassinated
 Lyndon B. Johnson becomes president
 James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*
 Thomas Pynchon, *V.*
 Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*

CHRONOLOGY

- 1964 Lyndon B. Johnson elected president
 Civil Rights Act
 President Johnson declares War on Poverty
 Donald Barthelme, *Come Back, Dr. Caligari*
 William S. Burroughs, *Nova Express*
 Hubert Selby Jr., *Last Exit to Brooklyn*
 Susan Sontag, "Against Interpretation"
- 1965 Malcolm X assassinated
 Civil Rights March from Selma to Montgomery led by
 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.
 Truman Capote, *In Cold Blood*
- 1966 China's Cultural Revolution begins
 Black Panthers founded by Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton
 National Organization of Women (NOW) founded
 Julio Cortázar, *Hopscotch* (English translation)
 William H. Gass, *Omensetters Luck*
 Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49*
 Jean Rhys, *Wide Sargasso Sea*
 Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*
 Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of
 the Human Sciences"
- 1967 Six-Day War
 Summer of Love
 Donald Barthelme, *Snow White*
 Richard Brautigan, *Trout Fishing in America*
 Gabriel García Márquez, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*
 Susan Sontag, *Death Kit*
 John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion"
 Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author"
- 1968 Richard Nixon elected president
 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Senator Robert Kennedy assassinated
 Prague Spring
 May 1968 protests in France
 John Barth, *Lost in the Funhouse*
 Donald Barthelme, *Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts*
 Richard Brautigan, *In Watermelon Sugar*
 Robert Coover, *The Universal Baseball Association*

CHRONOLOGY

- William H. Gass, *In the Heart of the Heart of the Country*
 William H. Gass, *Willie Masters' Lonesome Wife*
 Michael Herr, *Dispatches*
 Norman Mailer, *The Armies of the Night*
 Tayeb Salih, *Season of Migration to the North*
- 1969 United States lands men on the moon
 Creation of the ARPANET, forerunner of the Internet
 Robert Coover, *Pricksongs and Descants: Fictions*
 Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left Hand of Darkness*
 Ishmael Reed, *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down*
 Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*
- 1970 United States invades Cambodia
 Kent State Massacre of antiwar protesters
 Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) founded
 Donald Barthelme, *City Life*
 Joan Didion, *Play It As It Lays*
 Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*
- 1971 Pentagon Papers scandal
 Invention of the microchip
 E. L. Doctorow, *The Book of Daniel*
 John Gardner, *Grendel*
 Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*
- 1972 Richard Nixon re-elected president
 Nixon goes to China
 Equal Rights Amendment approved by Congress
 John Barth, *Chimera*
 John Gardner, *The Sunlight Dialogues*
 Ishmael Reed, *Mumbo Jumbo*
 Gene Wolfe, *The Fifth Head of Cerberus*
- 1973 Skylab launched
Roe v. Wade Supreme Court decision
 Kathy Acker, *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula by the Black Tarantula*
 Toni Morrison, *Sula*
 Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow*
 Kurt Vonnegut, *Breakfast of Champions*
- 1974 Richard Nixon resigns; Gerald Ford becomes president

CHRONOLOGY

- 1975 Vietnam War ends
 Bill Gates and Paul Allen found Microsoft
 Samuel R. Delany, *Dhalgren*
 E. L. Doctorow, *Ragtime*
 William Gaddis, *JR*
 Gayl Jones, *Corregidora*
 Joanna Russ, *The Female Man*
- 1976 Jimmy Carter elected president
 Mao Zedong dies; China's Cultural Revolution ends
 Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak found Apple
 Maxine Hong Kingston, *Woman Warrior*
 Marge Piercy, *Woman on the Edge of Time*
 Manuel Puig, *Kiss of the Spider Woman*
 Ishmael Reed, *Flight to Canada*
 Tom Robbins, *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*
- 1977 Voyager spacecraft launched
 Robert Coover, *The Public Burning*
 Toni Morrison, *Song of Solomon*
 Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*
- 1978 First test-tube baby born
 Israel and Egypt sign Camp David Peace Accords
 Gerald Vizenor, *Darkness in Saint Louis Bearheart*
- 1979 Margaret Thatcher becomes prime minister of the United Kingdom
 Three Mile Island nuclear plant accident
 John Barth, *LETTERS*
 Norman Mailer, *The Executioner's Song*
 V. S. Naipaul, *A Bend in the River*
 Philip Roth, *The Ghost Writer*
 Gilbert Sorrentino, *Mulligan Stew*
 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*
- 1980 Ronald Reagan elected president
 Toni Cade Bambara, *The Salt Eaters*
 Maxine Hong Kingston, *China Men*
 Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping*
 Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence"

CHRONOLOGY

- 1981 First Space Shuttle flight
 IBM introduces personal computer
 President of Egypt Anwar Sadat assassinated
 Sandra Day O'Connor becomes first woman Supreme Court justice
 Donald Barthelme, *Sixty Stories*
 Philip K. Dick, *VALIS*
 Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*
 Alexander Theroux, *D'Arconville's Cat*
 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*
- 1982 Kathy Acker, *Great Expectations*
 Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictee*
 Audre Lorde, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*
 Ntozake Shange, *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*
 Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*
- 1983 Thomas Bernhard, *The Loser*
 Samuel R. Delany, *Return to Neveryón*
 Katherine Dunn, *Geek Love*
 Wendy Law-Yone, *The Coffin Tree*
 Paule Marshall, *Praisesong for the Widow*
 Steve Meretzky, *Planetfall*
 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*
- 1984 HIV identified as the cause of AIDS
 Ronald Reagan re-elected president
 Octavia Butler, *Dawn* (Part 1 of the *Xenogenesis* trilogy)
 Joan Didion, *Democracy*
 Louise Erdrich, *Love Medicine*
 William Gibson, *Neuromancer*
- 1985 Mikhail Gorbachev becomes premier of the Soviet Union
 DNA fingerprinting
 Paul Auster, *City of Glass*
 Don DeLillo, *White Noise*
 Gloria Naylor, *Linden Hills*
 Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto"
- 1986 US Space Shuttle *Challenger* explodes
 Nuclear reactor accident at Chernobyl
 Iran-Contra scandal
 Kathy Acker, *Don Quixote, which was a dream*
 Art Spiegelman, *Maus*

CHRONOLOGY

- 1987 Ronald Reagan and Mikhail Gorbachev sign Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty
 US stock market crash
 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*
 Jay Cantor, *Krazy Kat*
 Robert Coover, *A Night at the Movies, or, You Must Remember This*
 Michael Joyce, *afternoon, a story* (hypertext)
 Maxine Hong Kingston, *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*
 Toni Morrison, *Beloved*
 Cynthia Ozick, *The Messiah of Stockholm*
 William T. Vollmann, *You Bright and Risen Angels*
 David Foster Wallace, *The Broom of the System*
 Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction*
- 1988 George H. W. Bush elected president
 Perestroika begins
 Harvard patents genetically altered mouse
 Kathy Acker, *In the Realm of the Senseless*
 Octavia Butler, *Adulthood Rites* (Part 2 of the *Xenogenesis* trilogy)
 Don DeLillo, *Libra*
 Gloria Naylor, *Mama Day*
 Cynthia Ozick, *The Shawl*
 Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*
- 1989 Berlin Wall falls; collapse of Soviet bloc in Europe
 Tiananmen Square Massacre
 US government bails out savings-and-loan banks
 Octavia Butler, *Imago* (Part 3 of the *Xenogenesis* trilogy)
 Rikki Ducornet, *Fountains of Neptune*
 Oscar Hijuelos, *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love*
 Bharati Mukherjee, *Jasmine*
 William T. Vollmann, *The Rainbow Stories*
- 1990 Reunification of West and East Germany
 Creation of the World Wide Web
 Hubble Space Telescope launched
 Iraq invades Kuwait; Gulf War begins
 Lynda Barry, *Come Over, Come Over*
 Jessica Hagedorn, *Dogeaters*

CHRONOLOGY

- Charles Johnson, *Middle Passage*
Valerie Martin, *Mary Reilly*
Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*
Thomas Pynchon, *Vineland*
Kim Stanley Robinson, *A Short, Sharp Shock*
Karen Tei Yamashita, *Through the Arc of the Rainforest*
Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*
- 1991
Dissolution of the Soviet Union
Gulf War ends
Julia Alvarez, *How the García Girls Lost Their Accents*
Sandra Cisneros, *Woman Hollering Creek*
Douglas Coupland, *Generation X*
Bret Easton Ellis, *American Psycho*
Stuart Moulthrop, *Victory Garden*
Leslie Marmon Silko, *Almanac of the Dead*
Jane Smiley, *A Thousand Acres*
Art Spiegelman, *Maus II*
Gerald Vizenor, *Feral Lasers*
Gerald Vizenor, *Landfill Meditations: Crossblood Stories*
Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*
Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*
- 1992
Maastricht Treaty creates the European Union
Bill Clinton elected president
Bosnian Wars begin
Cristina García, *Dreaming in Cuban*
Neal Stephenson, *Snow Crash*
Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*
- 1993
Oslo Accords signed by Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)
Ana Castillo, *So Far from God*
Philip Roth, *Operation Shylock*
Tei Yamashita, *Brazil-Marú*
- 1994
South Africa ends apartheid; Nelson Mandela elected president
North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) goes into effect
Netscape introduced

CHRONOLOGY

- Edwidge Danticat, *Breath, Eyes, Memory*
 Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners*
 George Landow, *Hyper/Text/Theory*
- 1995 World Trade Organization (WTO) established
 Oklahoma City bombing
 Dayton Accords end Bosnian War
 Marie Cardinal, *The Words to Say It*
 Rikki Ducornet, *Phosphor in Dreamland*
 William H. Gass, *The Tunnel*
 Shelley Jackson, *Patchwork Girl*
 Chang-Rae Lee, *Native Speaker*
 Richard Powers, *Galatea 2.2*
- 1996 Bill Clinton re-elected president
 Dolly the sheep cloned
 Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace*
 Percival Everett, *Watershed*
 David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*
- 1997 Don DeLillo, *Underworld*
 Nora Okja Keller, *Comfort Woman*
 Toni Morrison, *Paradise*
 Thomas Pynchon, *Mason & Dixon*
 Philip Roth, *American Pastoral*
 Gerald Vizenor, *Hotline Healers*
- 1998 International Space Station launched
 Google founded
 Adam Cadre, *Photopia*
 Michael Cunningham, *The Hours*
- 1999 Rikki Ducornet, *The Fan-Maker's Inquisition*
 Viktor Pelevin, *Generation P*
 Colson Whitehead, *The Intuitionist*
- 2000 George W. Bush elected president
 Vladimir Putin elected president of Russia
 Michael Chabon, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*
 Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves*
 Mario Vargas Llosa, *The Feast of the Goat*
 Nick Montfort, *Ad Verbum*
 Judd Morrissey, *The Jew's Daughter*

CHRONOLOGY

- Philip Roth, *The Human Stain*
 Emily Short, *Galatea*
 Franco Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature”
- 2001 Al-Qaeda attacks United States on September 11
 Afghan War begins
 Wikipedia launched
 Apple introduces iPod
 Percival Everett, *Erasure*
 Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections*
- 2002 Euro enters circulation
 Lydia Davis, *Samuel Johnson Is Indignant*
 Kelley Eskridge, *Solitaire*
 Jeffrey Eugenides, *Middlesex*
 Aleksandar Hemon, *Nowhere Man*
- 2003 Human Genome Project completed
 United States and allies invade Iraq
 Don DeLillo, *Cosmopolis*
- 2004 NATO and EU expand to include most of the former Eastern
 Bloc
 Web 2.0
 Facebook introduced
 Mars Rover explores planet surface
 George W. Bush re-elected president
 Sarah Shun-Lien Bynum, *Madeleine Is Sleeping*
 Rikki Ducornet, *Gazelle*
 Kate Pullinger, Stefan Schemat, and babel, *The Breathing Wall*
 Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America*
 Art Spiegelman, *In the Shadow of No Towers*
- 2005 Angela Merkel becomes first woman chancellor of Germany
 YouTube launched
 Kyoto Protocol to reduce greenhouse gas emissions com-
 mences
 Hurricane Katrina floods New Orleans
- 2006 Twitter launched
 Alison Bechdel, *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic*
 Max Brooks, *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie
 War*
 Dave Eggers, *What is the what*

CHRONOLOGY

- Jonathan Safran Foer, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*
 Shelley Jackson, *Half Life*
 Kate Pullinger, Chris Joseph, and Andy Campbell, *Inanimate Alice* begins
 Thomas Pynchon, *Against the Day*
 Gary Shteyngart, *Absurdistan*
- 2007 Global economic crisis
 Apple introduces the iPhone
 Michael Chabon, *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*
 Junot Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*
 Helena María Viramontes, *Their Dogs Came with Them*
- 2008 Barack Obama elected president
 Nicholson Baker, *Human Smoke: The Beginnings of World War II, the End of Civilization*
 Matt Richtel, *Twiller*
- 2009 Dave Eggers, *Zeitoun*
 Tao Lin, *Shoplifting from American Apparel*
 Thomas Pynchon, *Inherent Vice*
 Tale of Tales, *The Path*
- 2010 European sovereign debt crisis
 Arab Spring
 Jennifer Egan, *A Visit from the Goon Squad*
 Jonathan Franzen, *Freedom*
 Ben Marcus, *The Flame Alphabet*
- 2011 Iraq War ends
 David Foster Wallace, *The Pale King*
- 2012 Higgs boson discovered
 Barack Obama re-elected president
 Chris Ware, *Building Stories*
- 2013 Edward Snowden releases documents proving mass surveillance by National Security Agency (NSA)
 Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Americanah*
 Jonathan Franzen, *The Kraus Project: Essays by Karl Kraus*
 Thomas Pynchon, *Bleeding Edge*
- 2014 Chang-Rae Lee, *On Such a Full Sea*
 Jeff Vandermeer, *Southern Reach* trilogy

PAULA GEYH

Introduction

In the late 1960s, the young American artist Bruce Nauman created “A Cast of the Space Under My Chair,” a concrete materialization of a “void,” negative space made positive. On the concrete block, one can see the imprint of what was rarely, if ever, seen – the underside of the chair, the inside of its legs, and, above all, that seemingly empty space below, now filled, the absent made present. And, although the sculpture might not look entirely comfortable, one could sit on it, too.

The story of postmodern American fiction could also be seen as the making present of that which was absent throughout the previous history of American literature. The first of the two most significant new presences was that of the author within the narrative itself, which was a formal, metafictional development (admittedly one with precursors). These authors, initially mostly white men, stepped onto the pages of their metafictional narratives, joining their characters and reflecting on what was happening. This development went hand in hand with other early postmodernist formal experiments. The second new presence, crucial for postmodern literature and culture alike, was that of the multiple “others,” authors who moved from the margins of literature to its, now in turn multiple, centers. These “other” authors – women in historically unprecedented numbers, and then Native Americans, African Americans, Latina/o Americans, Asian Americans, and more – emerged as major creative forces and joined the ongoing conversation that is American literature, a process that has continued ever since. These new voices *changed* this conversation by telling the stories of those who had always been on the margins of or absent from American literature, and thus gave presence to these absences in turn.

This proliferation of narratives from below and from outside can be seen as one of the manifestations of the “incredulity toward [grand] narratives” that, as the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard argued, defined the “postmodern” in general, the cultural formation that arose because of the

transformation of knowledge in postindustrial, computerized societies.¹ The extraordinary range and power of postmodernism's challenges to traditional structures of knowledge, and to the social and cultural hierarchies that define these structures, dominant in the post-World War II world and still in place now, explain many of the controversies still surrounding postmodernism, beginning with those over the term itself. The debates among literary scholars and critics about what the term meant, or whether it meaningfully designated anything at all or was merely another word for "late modernism," began early on and persist to this day. In the meantime, "postmodernism" became widely used, especially in the mainstream media, as a general term of disapproval for contentious aspects of both academic and popular culture. In one form or another, then, the term "postmodernism" and the phenomena associated (for good or bad reasons) with it have been around for nearly half a century now. Indeed, recent academic debates concerning postmodernism are often about whether it has ended, and if so, when, and, inevitably, "what it was."

This book is not likely to settle these debates about postmodernism. I hope, however, it will lend support to the view, assumed here, that "postmodernism" remains our best overarching designation for the most characteristic and significant aspects of the American and (although this exceeds this volume's purview) European literature and culture of the past five decades. With this half-century mark, we have also now arrived at a point where it is possible, with a reasonable degree of confidence, to demarcate and survey the field of postmodern American fiction. Although its canon is still fluid and new works are likely to be added to it, there is a substantial critical consensus on the essential authors and works of postmodern American fiction, and on its key ideas, thematic preoccupations, and stylistic hallmarks. This *Companion* aims to offer an engaging guide to this fiction, to highlight its achievements, supply illuminating frameworks for understanding it, and provide concise, compelling readings of many of its most important works.

Before I outline the content of this volume, I shall define some key terms, beginning with "postmodernity" and "postmodernism," and lay some conceptual groundwork for this outline. Postmodernity is a historical category designating the period that is generally agreed to have begun in the late 1960s; its endpoint is a matter of no small dispute, but, for reasons to be explained below, this editor's view is that we are still somewhere in its midst (a view shared by many, even if not all, of the volume's contributors). Postmodernism, by contrast, is a cultural and conceptual category that refers to the literature, art, and culture of postmodernity, and its defining ideas and modes of thought. Postmodernist is the adjective that applies to these works,

although “postmodern” is often used, as in this volume’s title and in several of its chapters, interchangeably with it.

Admittedly, these definitions may be too broad and somewhat simplified. “Postmodernity,” in particular, may ultimately be more useful as a periodizing term referring to cultural (including literary) and intellectual history than as a general, historical term encompassing the last half-century’s events that began, in the advanced industrial and now postindustrial countries, with the political upheavals of the late 1960s. (It is noteworthy that professional historians generally do not use the term, except occasionally when negatively referring to some trends associated with it.) At the same time, as many scholars – perhaps most prominently Lyotard and Fredric Jameson – have argued, there are profound relationships between literature and the political, social, economic, technological, or other, as they are sometimes termed, “dominants” of its historical era. These relationships may be more oblique and reciprocal than Jameson’s Marxist schema of the (economic) base–(cultural) superstructure suggests, but the historical context within which postmodern American fiction has developed is important. Thus, the equal rights and social liberation movements of the past half-century undoubtedly helped to bring about the opening of the canon of American literature, making it fully inclusive and representative for the first time. Reciprocally, the works of women, African Americans, and all the other “others” mentioned above gave voice to their experiences and helped to define these movements and their guiding ideas. These ideas became, in turn, integral parts of postmodern thought.

At the same time, an examination of some of the key works of postmodern American fiction could easily lead one to conclude that, rather than being simply the mirror of its time, it is often remarkably ahead of it, as if conforming to Oscar Wilde’s famous statement, made long ago, that “Life imitates art far more than Art imitates life.”² Thus, in a remarkable scene in Thomas Pynchon’s 1966 novel *The Crying of Lot 49*, its heroine Oedipa Maas stands on a hillside in Southern California, looking down at the vast sprawl of San Narciso, with its “ordered swirl of houses and streets,” which makes her think “of the time she’d opened a transistor radio to replace a battery and seen her first printed circuit.”³ Pynchon’s startling and subtle metaphor introduces the emerging landscape of postmodernity, already suggested by his immediately preceding description of San Narciso as “less an identifiable city than a grouping of concepts.”⁴ The printed circuit will evolve into the microchip, making possible the personal computer and the Internet, two of the defining technologies of postmodernity. Later, but still years before the Internet went public (1991) and Netscape (1994) enabled us to navigate the emerging World Wide Web, William Gibson coined the term “cyberspace”

and imagined it in his 1984 cyberpunk novel *Neuromancer* as “a graphic representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system.”⁵

Computerized information and communication technologies have profound effects on how we experience and understand the postmodern world. Indeed, as Lyotard argues, the postmodern shift or even revolution in the nature of knowledge has largely been brought about by these technologies (which were still in their early stages when he wrote *The Postmodern Condition* in 1979). This revolution in thought is, I believe, still underway, which is why I think that we are still in the midst of the postmodern era. Bio-engineering and cyborg technologies are also part of this postmodern transformation, and they are changing our senses of subjectivity and even of what it means to be human. Perhaps, as N. Katherine Hayles, Cary Wolfe, and others have argued, we are already “posthuman,” insofar as our subjectivity is not defined merely phenomenologically but instead, as it were, technophenomenologically. Postmodern literature depicts these new ways of thinking and experiencing the world, enacts them through its formal and conceptual structures, and helps us to make sense of them. As the world changes, new experiences demand new modes of thought and forms of expression. What Frank Lentricchia wrote of Don DeLillo’s novels is largely true of all postmodern novels: they “could not have been written before the mid-1960s,” and they are remarkable for “the unprecedented degree to which they prevent their readers from gliding off into the comfortable sentiment that the real problems of the human race have always been about what they are today.”⁶

As indicated earlier, some theorists of postmodernism deem it to be reaching its end or even to have already ended. Brian McHale, who has done much to help to establish postmodernism as a literary and cultural category (he is among the most-quoted theorists in this book, along with Lyotard, Jameson, and Linda Hutcheon), begins *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodernism* (2015) with a chapter entitled “What Was Postmodernism?” He argues that “perhaps the only consensus that has ever been reached about postmodernism has to do with its end: postmodernism, it is generally agreed, is now ‘over.’”⁷ McHale aims to locate the end of postmodernism in historical events and suggests 9/11 as “a convenient shorthand for postmodernism’s endgame.”⁸ If, however, postmodernism is defined (as I assume it to be) less by historical events than by revolutions in thought and modes of existence, by epistemologies and ontologies that emerged in the late 1960s and do not yet seem to have played themselves out, then we still live in the postmodern world, or, rather, in many postmodern worlds. Postmodern literature continues to reflect on, shape, and illuminate these worlds.

I now turn to an outline of the book's chapters, which explore in greater depth and detail the subjects just considered, beginning with different definitions of and perspectives on postmodernity and postmodernism. The book's organization is defined by several key interrelated problems and themes.

The first three chapters situate postmodern American fiction in its relation to, and as, literary history, on the one hand, and in relation to global literature, on the other. In [Chapter 1](#), Jonathan P. Eburne considers the history of the definitions of postmodernism and their relations to different trajectories of modernism. He argues that postmodern writers create their own literary pantheons of precursors across periods and use literary-historical categories like postmodernism "as part of their very medium of experimentation." In [Chapter 2](#), David Cowart traces the development of postmodern American fiction over three generations, from the late 1960s through the present. He surveys its characteristic forms and key ideas as they have been worked out by the successive, yet interrelated, generations of postmodernists, including the "aesthetic dissent" of several very recent authors. In [Chapter 3](#), Caren Irr explores the networks of connections between postmodern American fiction and global literature, and how "a quest for affiliations and affinities scattered across a global landscape unifies late postmodern writing as its practitioners work to make sense on a human scale of transformations wrought by global capital."

The next two chapters on theory and history address key issues in postmodern thought and how they shape – and are shaped by – postmodern fiction. In [Chapter 4](#), Arkady Plotnitsky examines paradigms of postmodern thinking, found in theory and literature alike, that define and are defined by "the postmodern condition" and explains their relations with preceding modes of modern or (a separate category) modernist thinking. Using Thomas Pynchon's and Don DeLillo's novels as examples, he demonstrates how literature engages with scientific conceptions of chance, contingency, and probability. Postmodern thinking and skepticism extend far beyond science, however, to virtually every other discipline of knowledge, including history, and they have, as Lyotard put it, "altered the game rules" for all of them in some way.⁹ The postmodern skepticism, or incredulity, toward the received (and grand) narratives of the past and traditional notions of history is explored by Timothy Parrish in [Chapter 5](#). Noting the preoccupation of postmodern American fiction with "how history is made, received, and understood," he looks at how the critical awareness of the constructed nature of both literature and history has informed the ways this fiction reimagines the past and rewrites history from previously marginalized or absent perspectives.