

Review of *Contemporary Literature in English: Selected Historical, Social and Cultural Contexts* by Jana Javorčíková

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The compilation of literary-critical studies *Contemporary Literature in English – Selected Historical, Social and Cultural Contexts* is an eclectic, concise yet thorough set of scholarly essays related to historical, theoretical and literary-critical aspects of contemporary literature written in English. As the title suggests this is a major undertaking which is intended to serve a useful and very much needed guide for both students and teachers engaged in the teacher-training and interpreting-training programs presently offered at university graduate-student levels. Especially in Slovakia, there are no existing texts that adequately meet the particular needs of these students, who often come to the study of contemporary English literature without a proper grounding in literary history, critical methodology or cultural contexts. The selection of literary analyses is ambitious and comprehensive in its purpose, thoughtful and sensitive in its presentation of relevant authors and their works, and imaginative in its overall structure and organization. In my view, the author has certainly achieved her mission to leave her students “hungry for even more information and eager to teach both for pleasure and to obtain a more objective scope of information.”

The book is divided into three sections; each is devoted to one respective field of literature. Part I discusses problems of literary theory and history. Close attention is also paid to critical schools and parallels between theories of literature and philosophy. Part II deals with selected authors and literary movements. Some of these authors (e.g. Samuel Beckett, William Golding, and John Fowles) represent the traditional literary canon; others represent marginalized voices – be they ethnic and post-colonial authors (e.g. Romesh Gunsekera), women writers (Iris Murdoch, Angela Carter, Muriel Spark, Margaret Drabble and Sue Townsend) or immigrants to Britain (George Mikes, Salman Rushdie, and Kazuo Ishiguro). The careful selection of representative literature here gives readers a fair and concise view of authors, themes and styles present in 20th and 21st century fiction written in English. In part III of the book, attention is paid to the problems of literary research, and to writing about literature.

It is to the author’s credit and experience that she understands the inadequacies of many student handbooks of English literature, which are outdated, overly weighted in factual data and terminology, and organized by routine chronology. This author, on the other hand, chooses to organize the material differently and wisely. Here, substantive critical issues, movements and representative writers, and even current “problems,” take precedence. For example, in Part I, the author, quite rightly, takes up such problematical yet basic issues as the proper understanding of the terms “English” and “British” as they relate to “modern” and “contemporary”. This is a very interesting topic and her discussion is informative. It is admirable the way the author confronts the problem of making understandable to students the periodization of English literature, which is not simply a matter of decades on the calendar but historical moments characterized by such movements as the Modernists, the “Angry Young Men”, the feminist, and the post-imperialist, which tend to overlap and influence each other. In a like manner the author covers an impressive range of difficult topics and consistently illuminates them in a way that seems to be informative and stimulating for the student.

It is a virtue of the course book that the discussions of literary trends and movements are illustrated by in-depth analyses of a particularly relevant writer's works. For example, there are cogent examinations of John Fowles' psychological novel *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, David Lodge's "multi-layered", post-modern experimentation in *Small World*, and the "neo-romantic" poetry of Ted Hughes. The course book not only depends on the author's own analyses, but it usefully incorporates an excellent contribution by a colleague on the absurd uncertainties of Samuel Becket's *Waiting for Godot* which should provide a useful starting point for students' further exploration of a seminal work. Throughout the book, the author supports her points, where necessary, with references to appropriate secondary sources at the end of each section. There is a comprehensive bibliography, which will be valuable to students and teachers. Also useful to students are her guides to organizing literary studies, a task for which students are often unprepared, and the useful appendices.

The book fulfils a definite need in literary research related to recent literature written in English. It will be a significant contribution to the students' experience with English literature, as well as broaden the scope for scholars interested in secondary literature related to contemporary fiction, drama and poetry written in English.

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