R.B. Kershner

*Twentieth-Century Novel: An Introduction.*


Reviewed by Grace Ann Hovet

Published 10.3.2001

R.B. Kershner has undertaken a daunting task—to introduce the development of the twentieth century novel in no less than 148 pages. In addition to its focus on the shift from modernism to postmodernism over the past 100 years, this slim volume also includes an apt discussion of the origins and history of the novel, brief definitions of key terms, precise overviews of theory, instructive endnotes, and a comprehensive index. All in all, Professor Kershner’s lucid and concise approach is both instructive and appealing.

Four major aspects of his text illustrate this approach. They help explain why it would be of significant use to his targeted audience, mainly undergraduate (and some graduate) students, most of whom are more familiar with media than novel and among whom few have read more novels than high school assignments such as *Grapes of Wrath, Huckleberry Finn,* and *To Kill a Mockingbird.* First, Kershner’s initial chronological approach anchors the genre by tracing its characteristics, distinguishing, for example, classical mimetic influences from historical reality (true story), and romance (fancy) from novel (reality). As in his section on romance, however, he repeatedly points out that terms defining such characteristics are slippery. They overlap and interject one into another, as in Hawthorne, who terms his prose tales "romances".

As Kershner progresses into the twentieth century and emphasizes the chronological shift from modernism to postmodernism, he makes a surprise move and, in doing so, illustrates the state of an art that has become increasingly diverse and politicized. In Chapter 2, "The Rise of Modernism," he labels a section "Isms, Schisms, and Schools" and discusses - without strict chronological limitations - movements that range from symbolism to surrealism. This second aspect of his approach spills over into Chapters 4 and 5, where he surveys the impact that movements such as African American Studies and Gender Criticism have had on the twentieth-century novel. He also discusses the emergence of critical theories as a factor dominating approaches to the creation and interpretation of the contemporary novel. Thus he makes space to explore intersecting movements and develop a more comprehensive view than a strictly chronological approach would permit. By doing so, he reflects what a very complex and multi-layered discipline the study of the novel has become.
Another positive aspect of Professor Kershner's study is his decision to include a section (though brief) on film. In it he discusses the similarities between film and the novel and, quoting a 1975 article by Geoffrey Wagner, points out that more than half of all films are based on novels and stories. Given the current Austen-mania, the fact that twenty-two Pulitzer Prize winning novels along with scores of best sellers (The Color Purple, The Bridges of Madison County, Cider House Rules) have been filmed, and even the presence of Stephen King's novels on the Internet, Wagner's statistic probably holds true today. Students are eager to see "their" media related to what they are studying. Professor Kershner builds the bridge to do this, as he also does in his brief section on online resources.

The last commendatory is more oblique: his text, in itself, models scholarship that can be emulated. It is so well organized that sections of it can be assigned separately. As importantly, each section quietly, unobtrusively incorporates scholarly materials from a significant variety of sources. His extensive endnotes ease readers into these resources and, while arousing curiosity, do not distract from the text. Though his examples of novels tend to focus on the early part of the century, he clearly establishes, by content, review, and tone, a very user-friendly text.

KEYWORDS: novel, twentieth century, modernism, postmodernism

REVIEWED BY: Grace Ann Hovet

ADDRESS: Department of English Language & Literature, University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, IA 50614-0502, USA

Originally published in Prolepsis: The Tübingen Review of English Studies