

This is a preprint of Eve, Martin Paul, ‘The Essay in the Career of the Contemporary English Novelist’, ed. by Denise Gigante and Jason Childs (Cambridge University Press, 2024), made available under the terms of Cambridge University Press’s Green open access policy:

<https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/open-access-policies/open-access-books/green-open-access-policy-for-books>

What authors may post to websites and when

The table below explains how much of a manuscript can be made publicly available, in what ways, and under what licences, depending on the version of the manuscript being shared.

Version of manuscript	Re-use licence	Personal web page	Department, institutional, or non-commercial subject repository	Commercial repository or social media site
Preprint	Any licence (including Creative Commons)	Entire manuscript, at any time	Entire manuscript, at any time	Entire manuscript, at any time
SMUR	Same as publishing agreement	Entire manuscript, at any time	Entire manuscript, at any time	Entire manuscript, at any time
AM	Same as publishing agreement	One chapter, six months after publication	One chapter, six months after publication	One chapter, six months after publication
VoR	Same as publishing agreement	One chapter, six months after publication	One chapter, six months after publication	One chapter, six months after publication

The Essay in the Career of the Contemporary

British Novelist

Martin Paul Eve

Birkbeck College, University of London

Essay writing is a paratextual method by which authors place themselves within literary lineages. As Thomas Karshan and Kathryn Murphy note, the history of the essay form has reflexivity and citation at its core.¹ It is a mode in which authors jostle alongside and cite one another. In this sense, essay writing for the contemporary novelist becomes a way to signal a kind of ‘literariness’.² For John Mullan, in the fictive space literariness is ‘a clumsy word, but a useful label for the ways in which novels display their attachment to other works of literature’, an intertextual technique by which ‘[b]ooks remember other books’.³ Chris Baldick ascribes such ‘literariness’ to intrinsic ‘linguistic and formal properties’ of written works.⁴ However, such literariness is also a result of publication placement and can be seen in the function of the essay. It is a process in which essay authors ‘remember other authors’ by reviewing one another and publishing

-
- 1 Thomas Karshan and Kathryn Murphy, ‘Introduction: On the Difficulty of Introducing a Work of This Kind’, in *On Essays: Montaigne to the Present*, ed. by Thomas Karshan and Kathryn Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 1–30 (pp. 17–18).
 - 2 A term first mooted by Roman Jakobson, *Novejšaja Russkaja Poèzija* (Prague: Tipografija Politika, 1921), p. 11.
 - 3 John Mullan, *How Novels Work* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 284.
 - 4 Chris Baldick, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

alongside others. Essay placement in serial publications such as the *London Review of Books* ('*LRB*') or the *New York Review* builds a social network of authorship and affiliation. Such venues provide a space where authors exchange cultural capital and build their careers.

This chapter will show how the essay plays out as a strategy in the career of the contemporary British novelist. Despite 'the various ways in which the essay bristles against academic writing', I argue here that the form has become deeply entwined with models of academic hierarchy and the teaching and research positions that contemporary novelists often take within universities.⁵ As I will demonstrate, such hierarchies also play out in the journalistic space of literary networking in which authors review each other and signal their affiliations to a wider public. In this context, the essay can also become a site of polemic controversy that can generate more heat than light. I will finally also show how the essay plays a core role in bolstering the novel against other encroaching media, even when such defences may be preaching to the converted. While one might imagine, in the age of the internet, that the essay form would have declining cultural significance, I will argue in this chapter, across the axes of 'academia', 'controversy', and 'sophistication', that the essay and its networks continue to exert a strong influence on the career of the contemporary British novelist.

The reader should be warned, upfront, that in this chapter I treat the essay sociologically and somewhat cynically; I am examining what the form does for the careers of contemporary British novelists while other chapters will turn to the nuance of what these essays say. It is also difficult to do adequate justice to the richness of the

5 Karshan and Murphy, p. 16.

field of contemporary British novelists who write essays, which runs from Marina Warner, through David Mitchell, up to Bernadine Evaristo. Be it Julian Barnes or Ian McEwan, the basic fact is that most contemporary novelists also write non-fiction essays. The interplay between the essay form and the novel is complex. Clearly, writers such as Hilary Mantel, to whom I will turn more extensively shortly, write essays about the topics that appear in their own fiction. Mantel also, for example, wrote a diary for the *LRB* in which she talks about her health struggles and how they affected her writing and research. In these senses, the essay form works across different modes, ranging from a kind of persona-generating auto-fiction, via historical research, through to topical political debate. Unable to cover everything, this chapter attempts to map the more limited effects of these writings on the novelistic careers of these authors.

Essay Writing as a Career Network

We can understand a little how writers' careers benefit by examining one particular type of essay: the discursive book review as it has appeared in the last twenty years of the *LRB*.⁶ As a longstanding, UK-based literary journal, the *LRB* serves to some extent as a synecdoche for British literary essay networks that transfer cultural cachet. However, it also has its idiosyncrasies. Initially inserted into the *New York Review of Books*, the *LRB* grew from the period of strike lock-outs that knocked the *Times Literary Supplement* temporarily out of circulation in the late 1970s.⁷ The magazine is 'broadly leftist' in

6 In order to do this, I wrote a scraper that extracts these reviews for analysis. See Martin Paul Eve, *MartinPaulEve/LRB*, 2021 <<https://github.com/MartinPaulEve/LRB>> [accessed 2 March 2021].

7 Sam Kinchin-Smith, 'Intent', in *London Review of Books; An Incomplete History*, ed. by Sam Kinchin-Smith (London: Faber & Faber, 2019), p. 4; Mary-Kay Wilmers, 'Difficulties', in *London Review of Books; An Incomplete History*, ed. by Sam Kinchin-Smith (London: Faber & Faber, 2019), p. 26.

political terms and celebrates the idea of free debate.⁸ The paper worked at its inception on the principles of subjective reviewing practices (i.e. a purely objective book review was impossible) and against deconstructive literary theory, although this stance has changed substantially over its history.⁹ Finally, it is known both for the formative influence of Frank Kermode on its style and for the intensive editing of its longest-standing editor and funder, Mary-Kay Wilmers.¹⁰ The *LRB* provides an excellent case study of how essay writers connect themselves to other writers in order to transfer social standing.

Broadly speaking, *LRB* reviewers and reviewees are of three different types. The first category is authors who are reviewed but never review. Zadie Smith, for instance, falls in this category (she has never written for the *LRB*). The second is a category of occasional reviewers loosely grouped in the network. These authors sit outside lengthy chains of mutual reviewers. Tom McCarthy, for example, falls into this category (the people McCarthy reviews – Jean-Philippe Toussaint and Steven Hall – have themselves never reviewed for the *LRB*). Finally, some reviewer-novelists are part of elaborate chains of reviews that form the dense interconnected core of the network. Hilary Mantel falls at the lower end of this group (Mantel, for instance, reviewed Eamon Duffy in volume 31 no. 18, who reviewed Keith Thomas in volume 31 no. 14, who reviewed

8 Sam Kinchin-Smith, 'I Shall Not', in *London Review of Books; An Incomplete History*, ed. by Sam Kinchin-Smith (London: Faber & Faber, 2019), pp. 32–33; Sam Kinchin-Smith, 'Dancing with Dogma', in *London Review of Books; An Incomplete History*, ed. by Sam Kinchin-Smith (London: Faber & Faber, 2019), pp. 106–7.

9 Karl Miller, 'Letter to Frank Kermode', in *London Review of Books; An Incomplete History*, ed. by Sam Kinchin-Smith (London: Faber & Faber, 2019), pp. 56–57; Paul Myerscough, 'New-Fangled Foreign Nonsense', in *London Review of Books; An Incomplete History*, ed. by Sam Kinchin-Smith (London: Faber & Faber, 2019), pp. 74–75.

10 Daniel Soar, "'Sly Sir Frank'", in *London Review of Books; An Incomplete History*, ed. by Sam Kinchin-Smith (London: Faber & Faber, 2019), p. 157. Wilmers's influence on the publication has been substantial. She was wholly responsible for its editorial policies and directions over a multi-decade tenancy.

Alexandra Walsham in volume 33 no. 10, who reviewed John Cooper in volume 34 no. 13). At the far end of the spectrum in this category is the Scottish novelist Andrew O'Hagan, an editor of the *LRB*, who is often involved in chains of up to twenty reviewers. Of course, authors can have connections with one another outside of the walls of a single publication. It is also true, though, that network centrality does not correlate well with differences in literary prestige. That is: authors can have prestige without being central in the *LRB* network. Nonetheless, some authors are well connected and some are not. Figure 1 gives a birds-eye view of the network, revealing this 'inner circle' formulation for this serial.

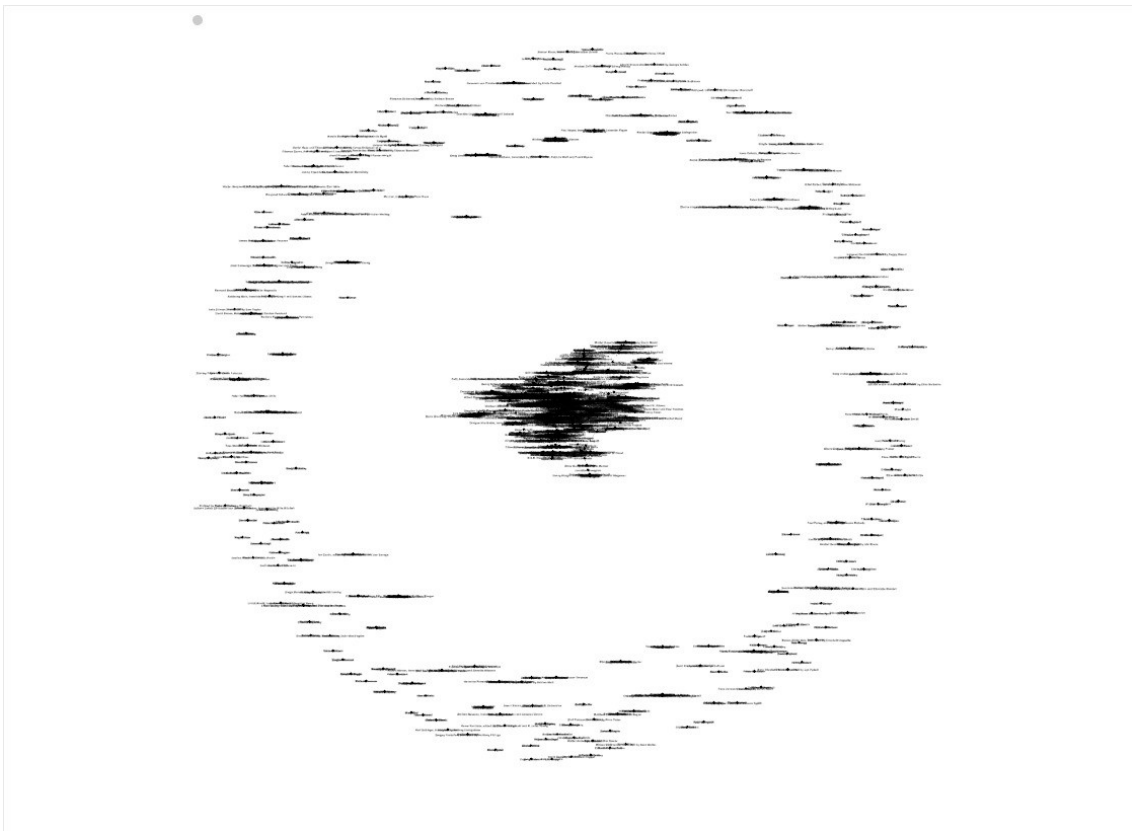


Figure 1: The network of the *London Review of Books*. While the distance renders the authors' names illegible, it allows us to see the dense central cluster of names that shows figures woven into tight review networks. Those at the edge form the archipelagos of one-off, disconnected reviews.

This tight-knit inner sanctum of the *LRB* implies a nepotistic culture of authors mutually reviewing each other's books. Indeed, it is possible to find various connecting pathways between reviewers (X reviewed Y, who reviewed Z, who reviewed X). In some cases, the reciprocity is direct. Consider, for instance, that J. Arch Getty reviewed Sheila Fitzpatrick in volume 22 no. 5, who reviewed Getty in volume 36 no. 6. While these most closely woven patterns of tit-for-tat do *not* involve novelists (but tend to be

historians), they have, from time to time, involved poets, such as when David Wheatley reviewed Denis Donoghue in volume 23 no. 21, who reviewed Wheatley in volume 27 no. 6. Further, novelists are often only slightly removed from these directly looping chains. Julian Barnes, for example, reviewed Julian Bell in volume 37 no. 15, who reviewed T.J. Clark in volume 41 no. 3, who reviewed Malcolm Bull in volume 27 no. 18, with the latter mutually reviewing Clark in volume 36 no. 4. As Hilary Mantel has claimed that the *LRB* tries not to send reviewers ‘bad books’ with which they will not get on, it is likely that these chains of reviews will be mostly positive; a circle of backslapping.¹¹

Literary review publications are sites of interaction between authors of literary fiction. Such network effects and cliques can be quantified. However, we must recognise that such a birds-eye view is necessary but insufficient to comprehend the role of the essay in the career of the contemporary British novelist. In order to understand this function better, I now turn to three contemporary novelists and essayists – and their chosen subjects – as case studies in understanding the role of the essay in literary career structures.

Zadie Smith and the Creative-Critical Academic Career

Zadie Smith has written extensive quantities of non-fiction, with her first collection, *Changing My Mind: Occasional Essays*, appearing in 2009. She has written mainly for US publications (favouring the *New York Review* and the *New Yorker*, eschewing the *London Review of Books*). So prolific is Smith that her essays span multiple volumes,

¹¹ Hilary Mantel, ‘Introduction’, in *Mantel Pieces: Royal Bodies and Other Writing from the London Review of Books* (London: Fourth Estate, 2020), pp. 1–6 (p. 3).

from *Changing My Mind*, through 2018's *Feel Free*, up to her pandemic lockdown inspired *Intimations* from 2020. Her essays range in subject from the processes of creative writing to contemporary politics, such as murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement. Notably, Smith is also a tenured professor of creative writing at New York University. Unlike Mantel or McCarthy, the other authors to whom I will shortly turn, Smith is a British-born writer working at an American academic institution and thus writes from a specific critical and geographic vantage point. Hence, she may benefit differently from publication in US cultural magazines than those in the UK.

Given this orientation, it is, therefore, essential to note that many of Smith's essays, published in American venues, have a distinctly British flavour. Consider, for instance, 'North-West London Blues', an essay that opens with a detailed description of Willesden Green, its (imperilled) libraries, and immediate environs. We are told of 'the concrete space between the pretty turreted remnants of Willesden Library (1894) and the brutal red-brick beached cruise ship known as Willesden Green Library Centre (1989), a substantial local landmark'.¹² The level of detail here provided about British geography and history is surely overkill in some ways; the bracketed dates for a library centre read almost like parody. Yet the very first section of this essay collection uses the category of 'In The World' to stake such spatial and geographic identity claims as important. Despite her position in the US academy with a US readership, Smith remains very much a *British* contemporary novelist and her essays specifically yield details of the British context.

¹² Zadie Smith, 'North-West London Blues', in *Feel Free: Essays* (New York: Penguin, 2019), pp. 3–13 (p. 3).

For Smith, though, the US academy provides a different career structure within which her essay forms sit: the MFA writing programs that constitute an industry and historical period that Mark McGurl has dubbed the ‘Program Era’.¹³ Cyril Connolly identified the problem for literary essayists as far back as 1938 when he wrote that ‘reviewing is a whole-time job with a half-time salary’.¹⁴ An academic career, by contrast, can help an author plug this deficit. Such an academic career may seem a surprising route to a salary given that enrolments in traditional English (‘critical’) programmes have been on the decline for approximately a decade in the UK at the time of writing. However, within the same departments, creative writing has seen a growth in numbers. Having high-profile literary writers on a department’s academic faculty has become a way to attract students, whether it be Caryl Phillips at Yale, Martin Amis at the University of Manchester, or, as here, Zadie Smith at NYU.

A network analysis of the *LRB* can, again, inform our understanding of the importance of academia to networks of essays. Table 1 shows a sample chain.

Reviewer	Reviewee	Volume / Issue	Role
Andrew O’Hagan	Neal Ascherson	24 / 21	Novelist
Neal Ascherson	Jonathan Rée	42 / 15	Journalist
Jonathan Rée	Steven Connor	34 / 6	Freelance
Steven Connor	Marina Warner	34	Academic
Marina Warner	Thomas Laqueur	39 / 16	Academic / Novelist
Thomas Laqueur	Christopher Clark	35 / 23	Academic

13 Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

14 Cyril Connolly, *Enemies of Promise*, revised edition (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 94.

Christopher Clark	Margaret MacMillan	35 / 16	Academic
Margaret MacMillan	Adam Tooze	37 / 3	Academic
Adam Tooze	Paul Blustein	42 / 15	Academic
Paul Blustein			Journalist

Table 1: A representative chain of reviewer connections in the *LRB*.

The preponderance of academics in this random sample of a long chain could be proof, again, that the academy usually ends up talking to itself. However, it is also an indication of the academy's role in the ongoing discussions within the *LRB*. The academy here seems to serve as a 'glue' of sorts, adhering different fields to one another within the career network in which novelists are enmeshed. If a contemporary Republic of Letters still exists in the digital age, academia continues to play the prominent role that it assumed in the later twentieth century.¹⁵

Smith feels anxiety about her academic role. She writes that she is 'not a real professor' and worries about teaching on an MFA programme while having 'no MFA' and 'no PhD' herself.¹⁶ It is notable, though, that the roles are not full time for many authors who hold such academic posts; they serve as an appendage to or support for their creative writing. For Smith and others in her position, essays seem to act as the critical backbone that legitimates creative practice within the academy; hence her anxiety. However, she nonetheless admits the impossibility of juggling her attempts simultaneously to 'write a novel, teach class, bring up a kid and produce a regular

15 For more on this, see Jerome J. McGann, *A New Republic of Letters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

16 Zadie Smith, 'Foreword', in *Feel Free: Essays* (New York: Penguin, 2019), pp. xi–xii (p. xi).

column'.¹⁷ Academia offers only a partial solution to having insufficient time to write essays.

Hilary Mantel's Controversies and Politics

Essays are also the foremost vehicles used by contemporary novelists to generate controversy and thereby stoke conversation about their works. Among the most prominent contemporary British novelists whose career uses the essay as a vehicle for controversy is Hilary Mantel. Mantel is best known for her *Wolf Hall* trilogy of Tudor historical fiction (2009, 2012, 2020). Mantel's career in essays began in the late 1980s when she wrote for the *Literary Review* and the *London Magazine*, both poorly paying gigs that she took for reasons of reputational gain.¹⁸ However, her essayistic career accelerated dramatically in 1987 when she was invited to write for the *London Review of Books*, shortly after the publication of her second novel, *Vacant Possession* (1986). Like many of her contemporaries, Mantel's essays take the form of discursive book reviews. This allows Mantel to range widely in her subject matter while, ostensibly, reviewing a book.

Mantel's first review for the *LRB* is instructive in understanding her focus. In this first piece – 'No Place for Journalists' – Mantel reviews two books covering the censorious political regimes of Saudi Arabia and China. This early essay sets the tone for a tie-in with Mantel's generic stylings. For, first, Mantel historicises her review of these contemporary commentaries, noting how '[i]n the past, other Arabs regarded the

17 Zadie Smith, 'The *Harper's Columns*', in *Feel Free: Essays* (New York: Penguin, 2019), pp. 251–332 (p. 332).

18 Mantel, 'Introduction', p. 1.

desert people as backward and deprived'. At the same time, she notes that 'the bedouin harboured a conviction of moral and racial superiority'. Such historicisation allows Mantel to paint herself as a knowledgeable and serious researching historian (which she is), even though her novels are fictive and her academic background is in law, not history. Mantel also uses this first *LRB* piece to highlight an interest in the worldwide position of women. For instance, Mantel remarks on how the 'Saudis manifest a terrible fear of women's sexuality', although she also notes that '[l]ife for Saudi women has improved in many ways'.¹⁹ This early work sets the scene for Mantel's career-long commitment to the essay form. In that, it neatly encapsulates her areas of knowledge. She had lived in Saudi Arabia for some time and so knew of its cultures (explored, for example, in 'Bookcase Shopping in Jeddah'). Furthermore, she has particular expertise in Tudor and French revolutionary history (e.g. 'On Marie-Antoinette'). Finally, she often brings a personal aspect into her essay writing (e.g. 'Meeting my Stepfather').²⁰

The formal characteristics of Mantel's non-fiction essays reflect the historiography of her fictional writing. For instance, in addition to publishing a 'Diary' in the *LRB*, Mantel is also the author of an autobiographical memoir, *Giving Up the Ghost* (2003). This text covers her family background and the import of a religious upbringing for her writing. As Joseph Brooker has noted, Mantel writes her autobiography in a literary style with non-linear narration, a feature also seen in the autobiographies of Jeanette Winterson and John McGahern, among others. Brooker examines, for instance, how Mantel's memoir begins at the end, on '12 August 2000'.

19 Hilary Mantel, 'No Place for Journalists', *London Review of Books*, 1 October 1987 <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v09/n17/hilary-mantel/no-place-for-journalists>> [accessed 17 February 2021].

20 Mantel, 'Introduction', p. 4.

This proleptic distortion continues into the first chapter, which meditates ‘on the art of auto-biography from the present’.²¹ Hence, Mantel’s autobiographical essay work is in some ways a historiographic meditation. The techniques of writing historical fiction are deployed as much in her essayistic writing about her *own* history as in her writing about great historical figures. Mantel uses the essay form to position herself as a reflexive historiographic thinker, a point of crucial import for her fiction and for her reputation.

The historiographic elements of Mantel’s essays and fiction demonstrate an affiliation with formal historical research. Mantel, therefore, sits within the crossover space of academic historians in the *LRB* network. However, she has also stoked controversy with her non-fiction writings. Mantel’s 2013 essay, ‘Royal Bodies’, in the *LRB*, for instance, claimed that the Duchess of Cambridge was becoming ‘a shop-window mannequin, with no personality of her own, entirely defined by what she wore’.²² Mantel’s contextual hook for this piece was Marie Antoinette’s fashion: ‘a woman eaten alive by her frocks’ who was ‘transfixed by appearances, stigmatised by her fashion choices’. Nonetheless, Britain’s ardently royalist tabloid press stirred up fury over this piece, with the *Daily Mail* leading the charge and bringing the Prime Minister into the critical fray.²³

Mantel hardly shies from political controversy. As noted in the introduction to her wittily titled anthology, *Mantel Pieces* (2020), she believes that ‘a literary journal

21 Joseph Brooker, ‘Around 2000: Memoir as Literature’, in *A History of English Autobiography*, ed. by Adam Smyth (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 374–87 (p. 378).

22 Hilary Mantel, ‘Royal Bodies’, *London Review of Books*, 21 February 2013 <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v35/n04/hilary-mantel/royal-bodies>> [accessed 18 February 2021].

23 Francesca Infante and Rebecca English, ‘Kate Puts Her Baby Bump on Parade as Prime Minister Mauls Best-Selling Author Hilary Mantel over “plastic Princess Made for Breeding” Jibe’, *Mail Online*, 2013 <<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2280780/Kate-Middleton-plastic-princess-designed-breed-Author-Hilary-Mantel-attacks-Duchess-Cambridge.html>> [accessed 18 February 2021].

must [also] be a political journal’, as literary writers cannot simply ‘detach from larger realities’.²⁴ Mantel weaves this politicised sentiment through her writings, both in essay and fictional forms. Indeed, while Mantel calls her controversial ‘Royal Bodies’ essay a piece in a ‘category of one’ – a total outsider to her usual fare – this is somewhat disingenuous. She is known and has fostered a career as a ‘rebellious’ writer, one who also managed to enrage Conservative readers with her fictional story about an assassination of Margaret Thatcher.²⁵ As part of the promotional campaign, the *Guardian* interviewed Mantel about this work and she expressed a still ‘boiling detestation’ for Thatcher. By this point, it seems that Mantel was enjoying stoking the ire of ‘the great outraged’.²⁶

Nevertheless, the career implications of fostering scandal – particularly in this essayistic vein – cannot be overlooked. As James F. English has detailed, in the world of literary prizes, scandal serves only to further the reputation of any particular prize. The ‘threat of scandal’, he writes, ‘is constitutive of the cultural prize’.²⁷ While most such scandals are, say, the ‘scandals’ of prize juries overlooking supposedly worthy figures, the scandalising behaviour of authors can be highly productive for cultural prizes.²⁸ I am neither here judging Mantel’s expertise nor casting doubt on the value of her fiction. I

24 Mantel, ‘Introduction’, p. 5.

25 Victoria Bennett, ‘Subjectivity in Process: Writing and the I in *Giving Up the Ghost* and *Ink in the Blood*’, in *Hilary Mantel: Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Eileen Pollard and Ginette Carpenter (Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), pp. 73–86 (p. 73)
<<https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474296533>>; Hilary Mantel, *The Assassination of Margaret Thatcher* (London: Fourth Estate, 2015).

26 Hilary Mantel, ‘Hilary Mantel on Margaret Thatcher: “I Can Still Feel That Boiling Detestation”’, *The Guardian*, 19 September 2014, section Books
<<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/sep/19/hilary-mantel-interview-short-story-assassination-margaret-thatcher>> [accessed 21 February 2021].

27 James F. English, ‘Winning the Culture Game: Prizes, Awards, and the Rules of Art’, *New Literary History*, 33.1 (2002), 109–35 (pp. 36–37).

28 James F. English, *The Economy of Prestige Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp. 227–28.

am merely pointing to how her controversy-generating essays feed into networks of prize culture that thrive on scandal. Whether intentional or not, since her ascent to these heights of cultural prizewinning, Mantel's reputation and presence has only been boosted by such prominent provocative and scandalous essay material.

Tom McCarthy's Erudite Sophistication

Hilary Mantel uses her nonfiction to bolster her reputation for broad historical knowledge while cultivating some level of literary scandal. Meanwhile, another school of contemporary British writers uses the essay to develop affiliations with highbrow, difficult fiction, and with literary theory. The work of Tom McCarthy exemplifies this trend. McCarthy is a London-based writer of literary fiction best known for the three novels *Remainder* (2005), *C* (2010), and *Satin Island* (2015), the latter two of which were both shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize.²⁹ McCarthy is also the author of several

²⁹ This section on Tom McCarthy was originally published in Martin Paul Eve, *Literature Against Criticism: University English and Contemporary Fiction in Conflict* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2016), pp. 60–63.

less well-known pieces, notably *Men in Space* (2007) and a work of literary criticism, *Tintin and the Secret of Literature* (2006).

McCarthy is one of those whom Mantel might describe as taking ‘comfort from vogues in literary criticism’ (she paints herself as ‘a non-combatant’ in the theory-wars).³⁰ Indeed, McCarthy uses the essay form to position himself as a popular literary critic who writes on difficult fiction and theory. For example, he wrote on James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) and J.G. Ballard’s *Crash* (1973) in the *London Review of Books* in 2014. He wrote on Jean-Philippe Toussaint’s *Running Away* (2009) when his novel *C* was published. He wrote on Steven Hall’s *The Raw Shark Texts* (2007) to coincide with *Men in Space*.³¹ He cites Derrida, Heidegger, de Man, Žižek, Deleuze and Guattari, Barthes, Benjamin, and Kristeva, with great enthusiasm, sometimes within the same breath.³² Such an affiliation with theory and philosophy appears part of a calculated strategy. McCarthy usually publishes around the times when his fiction is released. For example, the sudden outpouring of *LRB* pieces in mid-to-late 2014, after a four-year hiatus, might appear, to the cynically-minded, to coincide eerily with the publication of *Satin Island*.

30 Hilary Mantel, ‘Women in Pain: American Marriage’, in *Mantel Pieces: Royal Bodies and Other Writing from the London Review of Books* (London: Fourth Estate, 2020), pp. 9–18 (p. 12); Mantel, ‘Introduction’, p. 3.

31 Tom McCarthy, ‘“Ulysses” and Its Wake’, *London Review of Books*, 19 June 2014, pp. 39–41; Tom McCarthy, ‘Writing Machines’, *London Review of Books*, 18 December 2014, pp. 21–22; Tom McCarthy, ‘Stabbing the Olive’, *London Review of Books*, 11 February 2010, pp. 26–28; Tom McCarthy, ‘Straight to the Multiplex’, *London Review of Books*, 1 November 2007, pp. 33–34.

32 McCarthy, ‘“Ulysses” and Its Wake’; Tom McCarthy, ‘Get Real, or What Jellyfish Have to Tell Us About Literature’, in *Typewriters, Bombs, Jellyfish: Essays* (New York: New York Review Books, 2017), pp. 57–76 (p. 72); Tom McCarthy, ‘Tristram Shandy: On Balls and Planes’, in *Typewriters, Bombs, Jellyfish: Essays* (New York: New York Review Books, 2017), pp. 77–97 (p. 91); Tom McCarthy, ‘The Prosthetic Imagination of David Lynch’, in *Typewriters, Bombs, Jellyfish: Essays* (New York: New York Review Books, 2017), pp. 137–50 (p. 147); Tom McCarthy, ‘From Feedback to Reflux: Kafka’s Cybernetics of Revolt’, in *Typewriters, Bombs, Jellyfish: Essays* (New York: New York Review Books, 2017), pp. 151–72 (p. 158); McCarthy, ‘Stabbing the Olive’; Tom McCarthy, ‘On Dodgem Jockeys’, in *Typewriters, Bombs, Jellyfish: Essays* (New York: New York Review Books, 2017), pp. 203–7 (p. 206); Tom McCarthy, ‘Kathy Acker’s Infidel Heteroglossia’, in *Typewriters, Bombs, Jellyfish: Essays* (New York: New York Review Books, 2017), pp. 255–74 (p. 260).

McCarthy has not published a novel since 2015. Likewise, he has written nothing new for the *London Review of Books* since that time.

It is not just a general erudition that is put to the uses of self promotion here. McCarthy's populist criticism, usually on highbrow literary fiction, links his non-academic authorial presence with the high literature of the modernist and postmodernist schools favoured on university syllabi. This aspect can be seen in his 2015 Guardian article, again on Joyce.³³ McCarthy's literary criticism seems designed to associate his fiction writing with the giants of the modernist period and the theorists of the poststructuralist schools. He also appears to be attempting to vie with university-based academic literary critics for cultural sophistication and the authority to remark on these forms. Importantly, McCarthy's affiliation with modernist and postmodernist canons is neither straightforwardly one of lineage nor homage. Yet the connection nonetheless generates his authorial presence with a pre-fabricated canon lineage behind him. Such a strategy is not unique to McCarthy. It almost certainly applies to other public-intellectuals who deploy these marketing techniques, such as Will Self.³⁴

Indeed, Self is a notorious case. Like many years, 2018 saw the publication of a dire warning from this novelist.³⁵ Echoing the same remarks that he made twice previously in 2014, Self cautioned that the novel was a dying art-form, with books and

33 Tom McCarthy, 'The Death of Writing – If James Joyce Were Alive Today He'd Be Working for Google', *The Guardian*, 2015 <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/mar/07/tom-mccarthy-death-writing-james-joyce-working-google>> [accessed 10 April 2015].

34 For more on McCarthy and modernism, see Justus Nieland, 'Dirty Media: Tom McCarthy and the Afterlife of Modernism', *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 58.3 (2012), 569–99 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2012.0058>>; Martin Paul Eve, 'Structures, Signposts and Plays: Modernist Anxieties and Postmodern Influences in Tom McCarthy's *C*', in *Tom McCarthy: Critical Essays*, ed. by Dennis Duncan (London: Glyphi, 2016), pp. 183–203.

35 Alex Clark, 'Will Self: "The Novel Is Absolutely Doomed"', *The Guardian*, 17 March 2018, section Books <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/mar/17/will-self-the-books-interview-alex-clark-phone-memoir>> [accessed 26 May 2020].

bookshelves heading the way of the dinosaur.³⁶ For Self, it appears important to situate himself within a lineage of Cassandras. Hence he proclaims that the literary-fictional novel 'is absolutely doomed to become a marginal cultural form, along with easel painting and the classical symphony'.³⁷ Many commentators noted that it was odd for a contemporary novelist to predict the death of a medium to which he was so indebted and, indeed, committed. Why would an author of novels write such a performative and potentially self-fulfilling prophecy?

In some ways, though, following my argument about McCarthy, Self's stratagem is clear: this cluster of doom-mongering bunched around the publication of his three novels *Umbrella* (2012), *Shark* (2014), and *Phone* (2017). Self combines an air of controversy, as per Mantel, with a claim to theoretical sophistication, as per McCarthy, following in the footsteps of Barthes and others with claims of the death of the author.³⁸ Yet not everyone was swayed. Self's son, Luther, took to Twitter in order to air some family grievances. This was in some ways fair. After all, Self had used his children as the proverbial canaries in the 'culture-mine' in a 2014 essay. The tenor of the retort, though, was brutal. Responding to the 2018 *Guardian* piece, Luther Self tweeted: 'haha that is literally my dad, the other day he got angry at me for saying comics were as good as novels [...] he's an idiot'. Going further than this, though, Luther Self also tweeted

36 Will Self, 'The Novel Is Dead (This Time It's for Real)', *The Guardian*, 2 May 2014, section Culture <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/may/02/will-self-novel-dead-literary-fiction>> [accessed 26 May 2020]; Will Self, 'The Death of The Shelf', 2014 <<https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/the-death-of-the-shelf>> [accessed 26 May 2020].

37 Clark.

38 Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', in *Image, Music, Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1987), pp. 142–48; Self, 'The Death of The Shelf'. For more on this history, see Sean Burke, *The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008).

that ‘he’s a novelist who hasn’t sold any of his last two books so he assumes the whole medium is dying’.

In this claimed tension between individual book sales and the future of an entire media form lies the challenge for Self’s self-situation. For there is a political economy at work in Self’s essay. This essay is designed to create an air of exclusivity and refinement that is predicated on a form of cultural conservatism with regard to literary fiction and the material artefact of ‘the book’. The essay knowingly beckons to a readership who are *already persuaded* of the need for the future of the book and interpellates them as co-defenders against the barbarism of new media forms that are, supposedly, slowly displacing ‘real’ reading.³⁹ In other words, Self fabricates a fictive set of other, dangerous, and new (but not to say ‘novel’) media forms that threaten the supposed place of literary fiction; the essays become a career move in which Self proclaims himself the defender of high culture. This essay does so by being published in a venue devoted to the artform described as dying, alongside other authors. Yet who reads the books section in the *Guardian* newspaper, or the *London Review of Books*, except those already persuaded of the merit of books? Self is also, importantly, Professor of Modern Thought at Brunel University, alongside Evaristo and Benjamin Zephaniah, who hold similar roles at this institution. This is a job that provides him with some financial income in exchange for teaching a course on psychogeography and contributing his creative writing to the department’s Research Excellence Framework. In other words, Self’s strategies combine all of the aspects that I have covered in this chapter.

39 See Julia L. Panko, *Out of Print: Mediating Information in the Novel and the Book*, Page and Screen (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2020), pp. 16–18 for more on this gesture.

Nevertheless, to return to McCarthy, his identity projection becomes, through the essay, the figure who is not an academic but who can demonstrably play that game, a continuation of the modernist legacy of the ‘author-critics’ such as T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, D.H. Lawrence, and Ezra Pound.⁴⁰ For an author who wishes to be viewed as a proto-neomodernist, what could be a better technique to forge such a link than to write essays on high modernist fiction? Perhaps most importantly, though, when considering career structures, McCarthy is significant for considering who writes about whom. Famously, to come full circle back to my first case study, Zadie Smith – herself the winner of the Whitbread First Novel Award, the Guardian First Book Award, the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, the Commonwealth Writers’ First Book Award, the Orange Prize for Fiction, and an author twice shortlisted for the Man Booker – wrote an essay about McCarthy in 2001 entitled ‘Two Paths for the Novel’.⁴¹ In this work, which arguably did more for McCarthy’s career than any of his own essays, Smith canonised McCarthy, calling *Remainder* ‘an alternate road down which the novel might, with difficulty, travel forward’ (positing a realist/anti-realist binary that McCarthy has himself disowned).⁴² Hence, once again, we return to the ways in which authors’ reviews of one another spread prestige and canonicity through the viral networks of serial essays and reviews.

In this chapter I have assessed, in functional terms, how the essay works to further the career of contemporary British novelists. In so doing, I have had to cast a

40 Ronan McDonald, *The Death of the Critic* (London: Continuum, 2007), p. 81.

41 Zadie Smith, ‘Two Paths for the Novel’, *The New York Review of Books*, 20 November 2008 <<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2008/11/20/two-paths-for-the-novel/>> [accessed 22 February 2021].

42 David Haglund, ‘The Long Shadow of “Two Paths for the Novel”’, *The New Yorker*, 2015 <<https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/long-shadow-two-paths-novel>> [accessed 23 February 2021].

somewhat cynical, utilitarian eye on the form, neglecting the myriad other reasons why novelists might turn to the essay (intellectual advancement, political belief, etc.). Through this perspective, though, I have shown how networking, controversy, and academia lock together in the essay form, steadily contributing to the career structures of the contemporary novelists who write them. Zadie Smith, Hilary Mantel, and Tom McCarthy make up the case studies here, but the overarching categories of ‘academia’, ‘controversy’, and theoretical ‘sophistication’ to which I have assigned these writers could be used to consider a far broader range of authors, from China Miéville to Sarah Hall. While there is continued debate over the ongoing death of the novel – despite the fact that the form has ‘been proclaimed dead or dying for nearly as long as it has been alive’ – the contemporary essay works to keep the category alive and remains crucial in the career of the contemporary British novelist.⁴³

43 Kathleen Fitzpatrick, ‘The Exhaustion of Literature: Novels, Computers, and the Threat of Obsolescence’, *Contemporary Literature*, 43.3 (2002), 518–59 (p. 519) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/1209111>>.