FOCUS ON THE FEMINIZATION OF FICTION

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Introduction

The title of this focus section points at a major innovation in contemporary British narratives. Whereas a "feminization of American cultural values" and the "ambivalence that constructs the contradictory nature of femininity in the [19th-century literary] text" (Bhabha 1994, 5-6) have been debated at least since the publication of Ann Douglas's 1977 study *The Feminization of American Culture*, investigations of a similar development hardly ever appeared on the agenda of English Studies before 1990 and are still rare. For British Cultural Studies the issue was raised when the death and funeral of Princess Diana caused unequaled expressions of public mourning and by "[t]he general 'feminization' of British society that was deduced by some observers from the events in the autumn of 1997."¹

It is the purpose of the present collection of essays to explore contemporary British novels with reference to the aspect of 'feminization,' and the aim of this introduction is to give a preliminary definition of a very complex and controversial phenomenon. If the reader instead of the author is made the starting point of my argument the reason lies partly in the object of research. The novel has for a long time been the preferred genre of a female audience, and this proclivity, critics believe, has increased into the 21st century to the point of an alienation of male readers. In an interview following a reading from his novel *Solar* to a German audience Ian McEwan's optimistic answer to the question "If women stopped reading, would the novel die?" was that he did not believe women would stop reading.² The implication that the success of a narrative with the public depends on the eagerness and taste of female readers comes as no surprise if we take into consideration modern reading habits which are occasionally still summarised as "Men write – women read."³ This debatable statement, however, contrasts with that of an American critic about the general "feminisation of the literary marketplace" (Showalter 1999), a permanently contested space. Whether we approve of the increase of women writers or not it has to be investigated how the texts themselves are affected by this development.

¹ Döring (2007, 253; my translation), quoting from Walkerdine (1999, 103). The essence of Döring's subsequent comment, that "this seems to simply uphold an already questionable categorisation [of emotionality as 'feminine']" will repeatedly be taken up in the course of this introduction.

² The event took place in the Theater am Schiffbauerdamm (Berliner Ensemble) in Berlin on 14 October 2010. The interviewer with this question probably alluded to McEwan's provocative statement from the early eighties, the period of the arms race in the last decade of the Cold War, "Shall there be womanly times, or shall we die?" – a question asked by a female voice in his libretto for the oratorio *A Move abroad: or Shall We Die?* (1983, 23). For a critical discussion of the oratorio's glorification of the role of the 'feminine' non-violent code of conduct see Childs (2012); cf. also Kläger's reference to Mars-Jones in this volume (89).

For the contributors of this volume the observation of a 'feminization of fiction' is not restricted to books written by or exclusively about and for women. Orange Prize judge Lola Young together with Elaine Showalter recently criticised "novels [...] written by women for women" (Showalter 1999) in the 1890’s as well as the 1990’s. Increasingly, female authors and even more the female target group are held responsible for a decline of fiction in English: in another interview about the works of Ian McEwan recorded in the US journal Education News the columnist asked American research scholar Diana Sheets to give a summarising evaluation of McEwan's latest novels and received the answer that they showed the author's desire to embrace the expectations of his "feminized readership" (in: Shaughnessy 2011), while years before McEwan had been accused of scavenging on female experience for his writing.

"Feminized fiction," Sheets polemicised, only makes "women and feminized men feel good" by satisfying the wish for a peaceful world through the creation of a conciliatory outcome and "nice" characters (in: Shaughnessy 2011). As a result of this value-related 'feminization,' which signifies a change in the content of novels that such readers may find comforting, the works can never be great fiction, she claims, regardless of many critics’ praise of the new direction in McEwan's work after 1987. Although he is currently not the only British writer in whose novels non-violence, empathy and conciliation are foregrounded, several studies on expanding concepts of masculinity-ies in literature regard his fictions as paradigmatic images of a 'New Man.'

The dispute about the value and effect of this kind of 'feminization' in narrative texts, namely the inclusion of characteristics so far categorised as feminine, is not unprecedented in the history of English literature and culture. Nowadays the observed gender-related shift may once again be regarded as the marker of "an age of transition in order to transport a new ethics and a new ideology," as criticism observes it for the Age of Sensibility in the 18th century (Göbel 1999, 102).

Before I try to situate this focus section in the gender discourse of the last decades it is useful to take a look at the often proclaimed feminization of the early Modern novel in order to become aware of its parallels with and differences to the novels of the period between 1990 and 2010. Such a diachronic reflection can also uncover the reasons for the historical emergence of a feminization of fiction and shed light on the purpose of the following articles. The feminization discourse and the feminization of discourse in the socio-cultural development of the 18th century have recently provoked lively discussions among scholars. Emma Clery, in the introductory chapter of her study, defines feminization in distinction to effeminacy as

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4 Cf. Boileau's essay in this volume.
5 McEwan was publicly attacked for his "poaching on forbidden territory – women's experience" (Haffenden 1985, 178), a reproach that would hardly have been made fifteen or twenty years later (see Ingrid von Rosenberg's article in this volume).
6 Ruth Scurr, who states "[a]rtistically, morally and politically, he [i.e. McEwan] excels" (2005), is one of the reviewers of Saturday who pay unreserved tribute to the eventual platability of this novel. Saturday is told in the present tense from the perspective of a single male internal focaliser.
7 For example Davies (2003, 105-124). Especially The Child in Time has caused an ongoing discussion about the images of 'new' masculinity in McEwan's fiction, e.g. Schoene-Harwood (2000), McLeod (2000); cf. Ryan about The Child in Time: "[i]t is as if the old male ego, that lovely doppelgänger with its dark obsession, can at last be laid to rest by a self redeemed by fatherhood and true respect for the female body" (1994, 51). Cf. also Heiler (2010). On the image of masculinity in Martin Amis's work see Kläger's article in this volume.
strictly reserved for representations that approve or even advocate the acquisition of certain characteristics gendered ‘feminine’: sociability, civility, compassion, domesticity and love of family, the dynamic exercise of the passions and, above all, refinement, the mark of modernity. The ‘feminized’ man is a model of politeness, shaped by the contact with the female sex […]. (Clery 2004, 10)

Positions of narration that are differently gendered proved fascinating and sometimes mutually influential, as the reader of Pamela and Clarissa and also Sir Charles Grandison can observe, since already "Richardson conceives of the imagination in gendered terms" (Schellenberg 1994, 600). The fictional cross-dressing in such narratives as Richardson's worked especially well in connection with the sentimental love topic. On a larger scale, however, the debate among 18th-century wits supported a general revaluation and reconstruction of gender roles on account of the deep-reaching changes in contemporary society, which also brought about the dominance of the middle classes in public life, so that "the new bourgeois ethos [was] tacitly acknowledged as universally binding" (Göbel 1999, 100) during the first half of the 18th century. After the end of the Stuart monarchy roles that violated the borderlines of traditional gender models were considered appropriate for citizens of England and ascribed to both men and women (Göbel 1998, 160-162). The polarised opinions of contemporary writers, above all the 'reformers' Richardson and Steele vs. the 'traditionalists' Defoe and Pope, even saw in feminization the reason for either the progress or decline of the nation, respectively (Clery 2004, 10) – a statement that sounds as if made about today’s society. What came to be called 'polite society' was largely constructed on manners and norms previously considered 'feminine.'

Writers in the mid-18th century found values and behavioural rules which were compatible "with the new ideals of politeness and civility" (Göbel 1999, 99) in profiles gendered as feminine while aiming at a modernization of patriarchal society and "sweeten[ing] male hegemony" (Eagleton 1982, 95). Towards the end of the 20th century, however, neither the refinement of manners nor the aspiration of a class for social and moral supremacy could be given priority in the socio-political discourse on challenges and visions in which culture – including imaginative literature – plays a role; issues such as the survival of humanity in peace or demographic problems are evidently more urgent and demand ethical involvement. The protection of nature, of our climate and resources as well as non-violent problem solutions, equal opportunities and social justice have rendered necessary the inclusion not only of

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8 See Barker-Benfield's statements on the connection between Enlightenment and Sensibility (1992, 3-6; 105-119; 132-137); also Göbel (1998) and Göbel (1999).

9 Terry Eagleton, in his early reflections on this topic, equally contextualises the feminization of 18th-century fiction within social history when he ascribes the broad "feminization of discourse" to the bourgeois writers' bid for cultural hegemony (1982, 13; 95). The rising classes, according to Eagleton, recognised an essential necessity "to mollify ruling-class barbarism" (95), and thus sentiment and kindness could become constitutive for the re-invented, modernised male sphere (13). Eagleton resolutely claims that sentiment, though formerly gendered as feminine, became closely linked to "the milk of middle-class kindness" (95), irrespective of the irony in the allusion to Shakespeare's tragedy. Lady Macbeth shows distaste for "the milk of human kindness" and equally abjures "our good mother's milk" (Cixous 1986, 312) – we all know the consequences. Through the female protagonist of Shakespeare's play, whose imperative to "unsex" her stresses the possibility to deconstruct gender by magic, the connection femininity – humaneness – weakness, still debated today, is signified.
women, but of qualities like consideration, caring and integration. The contemporary appropriation of 'the feminine' and of feminization by public and literary discourse has changed according to the historical situation.

On the one hand recent social and philosophical developments, among them second- and third-wave feminism, are once more reflected in or promoted by fiction as a meta-discourse serving diverse purposes: mimetic, manipulative, or ideological. This entails a shift of diegetic elements as well as of structural and narratological procedures. Fiction, on the other hand, is able to design alternatives to social reality (see e.g. Gymnich 2000, 63) and therefore also contributes to the current negotiations of gender. While post-feminist theory has revealed that the gender debate in political discourse presupposes a circular argument which has obscured the fact that "the feminist subject turns out to be discursively constituted by the very political system that is supposed to facilitate its emancipation" (Butler 2006, 3), it has also stimulated the discussion about different ways of mimetic and creative gender-construction in narrative fiction. Pointing out that "[n]arratives do not only represent and stage masculinity and femininity, they also actively produce these concepts," Anne-Julia Zwierlein (2010, 14) discloses the analogy between contemporary fiction's discursive construction of gender and that on the socio-political level, where gendered identity is equally made by words. Similar to Zwierlein, Christoph Bode maintains that "literature [...] participates, via these representations, in the construction of gender" (2011, 220: original emphasis). He points to the relevance of previous monographs on gendered narratology that are mainly concerned with the Victorian novel. Another important contribution to this scholarly debate is Ina Schabert's article on the gendered narrative perspective in the 18th and 19th centuries, which is quoted below.

Thus the contributions in this volume carry on and aim at an expansion of the literary and critical discussion on the feminization of fiction. For this purpose novels were chosen that interrogate female-gendered themes and/or specific narratological characteristics and discourse-markers. The different articles implement methodical approaches like the gendered poetics of narratives or the (post)feminist criticism of gender definitions and gendered iconography.

One conclusion to be drawn from the articles in this focus section and their readings of the narratives can be emphatically anticipated with recourse to studies about the 18th century: "definitions of [...] the feminine multiply as do those of manliness and the masculine" (Göbel 1999, 102). For the analysis of contemporary fiction this means that biased views on the feminine and feminization as either bad or meliorist and more advanced are not likely to prevail here. Instead of such positions a questioning of gendered norms or the break-up of polarities are exhibited in these narratives, which participate in the general discourse on gender and its altered perception, and will lead to a pluralism of critical results.

Obviously the idea of a feminization of fiction does not fully meet the requirements of either the humanistic ideal, defended by first-wave feminism, of the equality of the sexes, or the triumphant but biologically determined stances of the radically gynocentric model celebrated by French feminist critics Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva, which was meant to replace the "normative standard

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10 Marshall McLuhan's challenging remarks in The Manitoban (1934) about the "emasculating utopias of socialism" reveal connotations of the 'masculine' (and, by deduction, of the 'feminine') that associate the social state with effeminacy (McLuhan cited in Marchand 1998, 33). Although published eighty years ago, McLuhan's ideas have not lost their impact completely.
of patriarchal femininity” (Schoene-Harwood 2000, xi). Although 'feminization' indicates a distinction of the masculine and the feminine, neither an opposition nor a hegemonic inversion of normative gender prerogatives – now female-based instead of patriarchal – will provide a satisfying specification. The phrase 'feminization of fiction' suggests a process and, if not a denial of distinct segregative gender norms, the possible extension or blurring of the borderlines separating masculine from feminine, borderlines postulated by all binary oppositions. The often proclaimed crossing of boundaries or the detection of their fictionality in the course of this process exposes an affinity to literary postmodernism, where (tres)passing is not a violation but a discovery, and to Judith Butler's poststructuralist theory of the performativity of gender. This entails a reconceptualisation of masculine or feminine identities, since Butler finally rejects the idea of a genuinely feminine identity which as a 'given,' can be expressed or revealed; instead, she maintains, it is constituted by numerous performative acts (Butler 2006, 191-192; see Gymnich 2000, 62). The socially established and habitually performed attributes ('rituals'), even though they are meant to legitimise the proclaimed distinctions, are not fixed, but fluent and liable to historical changes and cultural differences. To the statement that "the question of similarity or difference of the sexes has by no means been decided yet" (Weber 1994, 7; my translation) the floating and imitativeness of gender marks, which subvert distinctions, as claimed by Butler, provided an answer: it is neither only one nor exclusively the one, but rather both similarity and difference; the characteristics are by no means neatly assorted or generally felt to be 'natural.' A contextualisation within the performative turn of gender studies – as different from approaches based on clear oppositions of sex or of gender – reflects the awareness of mostly concealed facets of reality and facilitates an analysis of significant shifts in the subjects of narratives as well as in the gliding methods of narration. Literary scholarship has shown that the fictional experience and/or construction of space, time, character and plot is continuously conceived as gendered, with the figure of the narrator and the kind of mediation proving to be of special importance (Nünning/Nünning 2004, 49-179). To clarify the meaning, categorisation and subversion of thematic or diegetic characteristics gendered 'feminine' in narratives of this (post)feminist era is a purpose of the articles included here.

British fiction by women writers of the 80s and 90s had come under attack from the 1999 female Orange Prize judges as narrow-minded and petty, especially in comparison with American imaginative writing. This negative judgment was contradicted, for example, by critics like Elaine Showalter and Emma Parker who defended the allegedly parochial subjects of domesticity and feminine experience as also being "the proper stuff of fiction" (Showalter 1999; Parker 2004, 1). The debate about "the proper stuff of fiction" also reaches back into the 18th and 19th centuries, as Ina Schabert has shown in her article about gendering and fiction. Increasingly after about 1795, she states, more than one generation after Richardson, as part of the violent reaction against the French Revolution, women and women writers, were assigned a separate sphere defined by "matters of the home and the heart" (Schabert 1992, 318). Not only what they were sensitive to, but also how they constructed their perception and experience, was seen as gendered. "Women have a small field

of vision, and they perceive in subjective, personal modes. Men have access to all that can be known, and they are apt to see the world objectively and as a whole” (318).12

Around 1990 we saw the beginning of a radical questioning, for some even the supposedly impending dissolution of normative gender concepts, thereby turning them into “a site of contest, a cause of anxiety” (Butler 2006, 4). This had been prefigured by the second and the beginning of the third wave of feminism; after 1990 the argument about what is fiction’s “proper stuff” assumed a strident tone. Consequently, ‘feminine’ topics are no longer restricted to female voices or focalisers, but may be presented through the constructed perspective and the verbal expression of a man, just as subjects of far-reaching significance that are evidence of a wider scope of mind, such as war and adventurous conquest, science or national identity, are also dealt with by female reflector figures sometimes operating with the distancing, abstract mode. This gives rise to new questions: e.g. how is the formerly masculine ‘stuff of fiction’ feminized by a female author, a female homodiegetic narrator, or a female internal focaliser? Can the ‘feminine stuff’ be ‘surpassed’ by their male equivalents? Are a conciliatory ending, emollience and fluidity of style necessarily the characteristics of a female focaliser, considering that narrative cross-dressing may extend to the subject matter as well as the sequence of elements in a story and the mode of writing? And finally: is the internal focalisation constructed in such a way that a former unreflected representation, in which “[masculinity] tries to stay invisible by passing itself off as normal and universal” (Easthope 1986, cited from McLeod 2000, 219), is ‘liberated’ from its patriarchal imprint, including the traditional fictions of femininity?13 As Bode highlights in his chapter on the gender of narration (2011, 219-227), the narrative text, especially with regard to gender, is a field of the readers’ projections, filling blanks with our cultural knowledge (or ignorance), with stereotypes and clichés, our yearning for certainty and unambiguous reliance, our subconscious cultural and historical conditioning, and our inhibitions with regard to unorthodox thinking. It is also the definite – if occasionally subversive – intent of this focus section to expose to what extent writers, readers and critics have fallen victim to essentialist views or “automatic-pilot decodings” (Bode 2011, 226) of narrative texts in speaking of the recent ‘feminization of British fiction’ and to show that in responding to some of the questions mentioned above “we’re [not] alone with our projections” (225) nor with our unease and curiosity. The re-negotiation of gender, as shown in fictional texts and their analysis, begins to refute the double or triple meaning of the statement that “writing is male-dominated” (Yavuz 2012).

The following contributions, in the wake of the evolution of third-generation or post-feminism, use theoretical approaches as different as feminist criticism, media science, narratology, or gender studies for the analysis of contemporary novels. The

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12 As a result of the diversification and plurality of ‘femininities’ and gender norms ‘women of sense’ in late 18th-century and early 19th-century fiction exist side by side with females acting in ‘separate spheres’ (cf. Göbel 1999). Bode (2011, 223) doubts the validity of gendered perspectives demonstrated in these quotations and regards them as unreflected historical stereotypes.

13 Before Easthope’s statement or Eagleton’s 2008 review of Anonymity by John Mullan and several studies from the first decade of this century, Monique Wittig had pointed out in 1983 that masculinity claims universality, as the “Man=man” equation in the English (and German) language suggests: “[...] there are not two genders. There is only one: the feminine, the ‘masculine’ not being a gender. For the masculine is not the masculine, but the general” (Wittig cited in Butler 2006, 27).
contributors’ individual propositions are briefly outlined here, following the roughly chronological order in which the articles are arranged.

The opening part of Ingrid von Rosenberg’s essay on female birth experience as imagined by male authors shows that, since the 18th century, giving birth generally was not a subject-matter of fiction even for those writers who chose a female narrative perspective. The very few examples by male writers before 1900, like George Moore’s *Esther Waters*, only draw attention to the general absence of the topic. Even when, after 1920, women writers began to dedicate themselves to the birth-topic male authors still evaded detailed descriptions. Following her historical overview von Rosenberg analyses two examples from the past decades: Bernard MacLaverty’s *Grace Notes* and Toby Litt’s *Ghost Story*. While assuming an imagined female perspective they choose "very different approaches to treat a woman’s experience of childbirth" (26). Their novels illustrate the "topical feminisation of fiction" – MacLaverty by thematising the "conflicting forces of [the protagonist’s] biological and artistic creativity" (22) and Litt by the narrative’s empathy with a woman’s grief and ambivalence after her child’s death. While the late Victorian George Moore clearly adhered to traditional gender roles, von Rosenberg considers the weakening of normative gender divisions to be responsible for this different treatment of the subject by more recent male authors.

A liberation of formerly gendered subjects in contemporary fiction is also observed in Michael Szczekalla’s article on Pat Barker’s war novels, in which a male theme is treated by a female novelist. Barker reveals how war can be experienced by women while on a narratological level she gives voice to a plurality of characters, thereby offering multiperspectivity instead of a clear decision in favour of defenders or opponents of war. Barker’s *Regeneration Trilogy*, Szczekalla argues, for the first time achieves an integration of the historical-political and the artistic-individual perspective which was foregrounded by Wilfred Owen’s and Siegfried Sassoon's poetry on the Great War. In her more recent novels, Barker is equally committed to transcending, blending and balancing stances of patriotism and suffering, of war for freedom or democracy and pacifism. This integrative ability, according to Szczekalla, is her special merit and proof of Barker’s ‘feminized’ fiction.

In quite a different way Nicolas Boileau approaches the general theme of this focus section. Rachel Cusk’s novels *Saving Agnes* and *The Country Life*, published in the 1990s, deal with female characters who experience gender and their bodies as different from the self; if we refer to Simone de Beauvoir’s famous dictum they desperately try for most of their lives to become women, accompanied by the uneasiness of having to conform to stereotypes, but ‘sentenced’ to their physical nature and entrapped by gender like everybody else. Although, as Boileau shows, narrative techniques generally gendered as feminine are applied, the conflict remains unsolved. The protagonists’ struggle for identity does by no means come to a halt when confronted with feminism: they continue to marginalise themselves. What the women cannot deny or evade is "the real body that social moulding vainly tries to camouflage" (42), and due to this essentialist presence they are shocked by its otherness. Gender, femininity and feminism are not ‘natural,’ but are constructs one has to work hard for without knowing whether it is worth the effort; all the heroines know for certain is that they do not ‘fit.’

From a thematic ‘feminization’ accentuated in the previous articles, Merle Tönies’s contribution shifts to a generic and structural one. Black British Women
Writers and the re-shaping of the Bildungsroman as a classical male plot model are the topic of her essay, in which she compares Andrea Levy's novel *Never Far From Nowhere* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*. Through a contrastive analysis of the character constellations in each novel different female life-stories can be compared; the female Black British Bildungsroman thus often becomes a "dual Bildungsroman" – a distinct subgenre which differs both from the male Black British Bildungsroman and the earlier female Bildungsroman (silently white). Above all, the development of the black female protagonists and their identity with regard to society is foregrounded, with the metaphorical use of space as a central tool of conveying it. To link diverse fates of women in one plot can be considered a hallmark of the appropriation of the male plot model by black women writers. Tönnies maintains that compared to the male Black British Bildungsroman the female variety tends to be more optimistic, if also more indeterminate.

Barbara Schaff's reading of Sarah Waters's trilogy *Tipping the Velvet*, *Affinity* and *Fingersmith* unfolds before the reader the imagined femininity of the Victorian novel and the response from feminist criticism. Waters, according to Schaff, has challenged and probed many of the stereotypes prevalent among contemporary readers about Victorianism, especially with regard to the tropes of femininity, among them same-sex relationships. The shift from the *topos* of platonic sisterly affection towards female homoerotic desire, leading to the discovery of this hidden aspect of the 'other' Victorian, "is a major aspect of Waters's revisionist approach to Victorian femininity" (68); lesbian love here expresses female identity more completely than even the position of the female artist can. Waters's fictions are revisionist also because "the ultimate ideal all three novels seem to come to is one that is very much modelled on the heterosexual romance as represented in the Victorian sensational novel" (72), while they display a more critical attitude towards class conflicts. Waters's 'proper stuff' proves to be "the investigation of complex, contradictory, deviant and unresolved positions between gendered binaries" (73).

Roland Weidle in his contribution on Graham Swift and the way in which this writer transfers narrative control to women explores the image of femininity thus created. He is especially concerned with the way in which the narrative discourse achieves 'feminization,' namely the gendering of female characters in *Out of this World*, *Last Orders* and *Tomorrow*. The result surprises when seen against the backdrop of criticism on Swift as a postmodern writer, "not only Swift's concept of femininity but also his idea of a female voice is anachronistic" (85). His female characters betray very conservative ideas of gender roles while Swift's narrative strategies associated with women, above all the "engaging" interventions, approach female writing of the high Victorian Age. The "quiet feminism" claimed for these novels by some critics may, according to Weidle, reveal itself at closer inspection as a concealment of the return of old gender roles in postmodern guise.

In an article covering the period from 1997 to 2010 Florian Kläger explores four novels by Martin Amis, who, both Amis and Kläger maintain, has been wrongfully accused of misogyny, whereas the writer considers himself to be feminist and 'gynocratic.' The links and interferences between gender and genre have always interested Amis, Kläger says. Their auto-critical examination by the novelist can lead to a parodic crossing and reaffirming of gender boundaries in *Night Train* or a narrative of violence and redemption as in *Yellow Dog*. The phase of a cultural transition from the pre-feminist stage to that of the transcendence of gender essentialism is aptly repre-
presented by Amis's latest novel *The Pregnant Widow. Inside History* (2010). "Whereas *Night Train* and *House of Meetings* mainly broach the issue of the 'feminization of fiction' on the level of form, the narrator of *The Pregnant Widow*, like Xan Meo in *Yellow Dog*, also addresses it explicitly" (96). The genre is held responsible by Amis for an inadequate representation of life which refuses to be condensed in a coherent form. The radically postmodern narrative with its fragmentation and multiperspectivity better reflects the cultural anarchy of the late sixties that overturned even those structures which had shaped society and the novel for centuries.

Marion Gymnich discusses the representation of specifically female experience in *The Looking Glass* by Michèle Roberts, which until now has received little critical attention. The narrative reflects the feminist writer's interest in subjects as well as forms, stories as well as structures, that are female-gendered and have hardly ever been approached in writing characterized by a heteronormative view of art and the novel. Roberts's celebration of female sensuality – palpable in her style and her characters – emphasises her suggestion that there is a gendered experience of the world in general and that the gendered perception, including that of female desire and sexuality, has permanently been suppressed. Intertextuality and the rewriting especially of myths and fairytales are, as Gymnich shows, a recurring element in feminist fiction and are also used by Roberts, here in the figure of the mermaid, which the novelist treats in a highly complex fashion. Gymnich registers the writer's "almost essentialist streak" (109) and her proximity to French Feminism as expressed in her imagery, protagonists, style of writing and topics addressed.

The article by Helga Schwalm thematises an experience which was quite unusual for women until recently: Arctic travel and exploration, a traditionally masculine field that is at present also highlighted for the popular imagination by a number of (auto)biographical or fictional narratives by women. Schwalm chooses Stef Penney's novel *The Tenderness of Wolves* (2006) and the biofiction *The Ice Museum: In Search of the Land of Thule* (2005) by Joanna Kavenna for the purpose of accentuating two contrasting ways of women writers' "appropriation of a traditionally highly gendered male genre as explorers' and peripatetic (itinerant) travel writing" (112). Focusing on topography and the literary imagination Schwalm investigates the strategies by which these authors create the (neo-)Victorian margins of women's lives and their temporary transgression (Penney) or illuminate the historical and literary semanticisation of Arctic space (Kavenna). This makes them stand out clearly against the imperialistic (postcolonial) and hegemonic narratives of male explorers in a formerly male-dominated area.

To conclude, Pascal Nicklas opens up a new interpretation of the feminization of fiction in his essay on the voice of Zadie Smith. The bestselling author, whose position as a celebrity in the contemporary literary and cultural scene of Britain accounts for her unusual publicity, has been transformed into a media persona, and it is this process which Nicklas critically reveals in the first part of his article. The fashioning and self-fashioning of a shooting star foreground gender aspects which are then exploited for commercial interests in the literary market. Interviews, reviews, pictures on the internet, video recordings, blogs and other ways of distribution are used as comments on and interpretations of her art. Smith's femininity gradually emerges as the glossiest element of this medialisation, distinct from the "ungendered bookish persona living literature intensely" (128) she was presented as at the beginning of her career. In the second part of his essay, Nicklas demonstrates that Zadie Smith's work
displays an awareness of female topics and the feminine perspective, but especially a perceived closeness between the world of words and the cosmos of women. Smith positions herself in a post-feminist era, thereby becoming a landmark in recent developments in the feminization of fiction.

Works Cited


