

**Moretti, Franco, ed. *The Novel. Vol. I: History, Geography, and Culture*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006. 916pp. ISBN: 0691049475.**

Obituaries for the novel as the predominant format of Western literature are no invention of our postmodern scepticism about the possibility of representation and the permanence of reality. As early as the 1920s, Ortega y Gasset and Walter Benjamin among others were busily sounding the death knell for this once cherished literary form. Many voices have since joined the funeral choir, including recently BBC's political editor Andrew Marr, who in an article for *The Observer* in 2001 heralded a new age of non-fiction and observed that "the novel ... has a life-cycle of invention, full expression and formal decay" and "is no longer a way of understanding the world freshly" ("The Death of the Novel"). In view of this apparent demise of the novel, it seems an appropriate time to go and shop for a tombstone. Franco Moretti's *The Novel* could just be what the undertaker ordered, both with regards to content and to outward appearance—an all-encompassing, encyclopaedic inventory of the novel in all its shapes and disguises, one anthology to end them all. But is it really the extreme unction that Moretti applies to the genre, or does it rather constitute a crossroads in the development of the novel, a moment of rest where we try to catch our breath after 40 years of shifting and obliterating genre boundaries and regulations?

Moretti's two-volume English edition is an abbreviated version of his original oeuvre *Il Romanzo*, published in five volumes 2001-2003. While the second volume (2007)—subtitled *Forms and Themes*—tries to chart the genre from within, *Volume I* both encircles and diffuses its subject of investigation by locating it in terms of time, space and context, thus confirming the status of the novel as "the first truly planetary form" (preface). Accordingly, the interested reader is taken on an exceptional journey, which spans almost the entire globe as well as three millennia. The result is not only an overall view of the novel, but also a comprehensive chronicle of why, how, and under which circumstances human beings entertained themselves with stories, a history of our very own textuality as it were.

I will now try to retrace this extraordinary journey by recapitulating how Moretti divides up this cornucopia of essays, readings and extensive definitions into five sections, which are deliberately open and which are meant more as a tentative guideline than a strict classification of the articles.

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The first section, entitled “A Struggle for Space,” sets the stage by investigating the conditions under which fictional narrative could prosper. Jack Goody leads off with an attempt to link the tradition of “fictional narrative” precisely with the rise of the written word, which—in a European context—marks the transition from medieval to modern times. When he states that narrative is “not so much a universal feature of the human situation as one that is promoted by literacy and subsequently by printing” (3), he locates it at that precise point, where artificiality and mediality had taken the place of orality and reciprocity in the process of story-telling and thus of relating ourselves to the world we live in. This notion of the novel as a means (ultimately useless, but therefore inexhaustible) to compensate for the loss of a direct access to reality (in a Lacanian sense) resonates continuously in the background of this collection, most notably in Catherine Gallagher’s brilliant piece on “The Rise of Fictionality.” In addition to Goody’s dissociation of “narrative” from “orality,” Luiz Costa Lima, who discusses the relationship of narrative with the imagination, and Henry Y.H. Zhao, who probes into the frictional area between history and fiction, navigate two complementary boundaries against which the novel can and must be measured, while Walter Siti takes a look at various animosities that the novel encountered in its history, from *autos-da-fe* (as under the Inquisition) to self-denigration, which he sees as a generic feature of this particular form.

Now that the contextual basis for the rise of narrative fiction has been laid, section two, entitled “Polygenesis,” presents an actual family tree of the novel as we know it. This genealogy provides exemplary definitions and accounts of narrative genres from different cultures (from the Japanese *monogatari* to the European *roman*, from the Russian *povest* to the Arabian *qiṣṣa*), while also portraying a range of possible predecessors (like the Greek “novel,” or French Medieval romances) in detail.

Section three, “The European Acceleration,” combines the two preceding sections and investigates the unique circumstances under which narrative fiction, in the shape of the novel, could become the dominant literary genre in enlightened Europe. Spain is justly credited with being the fertile soil of this acceleration, even though—as Juan Ramon Resina’s essay deftly illustrates—this inciting impetus was as intense as it was short-lived. Further articles in this section examine other focal points of the novel’s success story, such as the renowned (and in light of the evidence of this book rather inappropriately named) “Rise of the Novel” in mid-eighteenth century England, or the climactic achievements in Russia, France, and England in the nineteenth century.

That novels were from the beginning not only a means of erudition and entertainment but also always an economic commodity becomes apparent in section four. Under the heading “The Circle Widens,” the first part of this segment meticulously charts the developing markets for fictional narrative, again with a diachronic and global perspective, ranging from Britain 1750-1830 (James Raven) to Nigeria 1950-2000 (Wendy Griswold). The comprehensiveness of the novel’s success is further proved with various analyses of how the European model influenced and contrasted with narrative traditions in other parts of the world.

In order to underline the book’s general ambition to present the novel as a trans-cultural and all-inclusive art form, the last section, entitled “Towards World Literature,” presents essays on and readings of a seemingly coincidental array of topics and texts (from “magic realism” to the “Novelists International” and from *The Heartless* [2006] to *Beloved* [1987]) the only common feature of which is their dissimilarity. This could, of course, be read as the ultimate indication for the failure of this once-cherished art form, which is no longer (and probably never was) capable of representing a world too accelerated and fragmented to be subsumed under a single generic denominator. It could, however, just as well point out the enduring need for making sense of this expanding and contracting world in the medium of fiction. Understood in this way, Moretti ends this volume on an encouraging note. The vivacity and integrative power of fiction looks strong enough even to survive the possible disintegration of “the novel” as its most important genre. There might be, Moretti implicitly suggests, a time when we have to think about new terms to define the global efforts of story-telling, but this would only mean the end of a word not the power of words.

The movement of this collection of essays mimics the development it wants to inscribe on to the “history of the novel” itself; from heterogeneous beginnings, which have their common roots solely in the fact that humans yearn for a good yarn, via the crucial stage of what the book calls “the European acceleration,” which—while it has not founded the genre of narrative fiction as such—certainly has endowed us with the critical framework with which we discuss it, towards a new area of heterogeneity with different voices and sub-genres from all over the globe. Seen in this light, this collection might indeed mark a crossroads in the development of narrative fiction and its critical evaluation. It demonstrates the versatility and vivacity of the written story, but also insinuates that maybe the category of “the novel” as we have known it

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might fall by the wayside in the process. So, while the “novel” may be dying, long live *The Novel*.

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### **Works Cited**

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