

## (8) Minimalism and the New Lost Generation

Raymond Carver, Tobias Wolff, Ann Beattie, David Leavitt,  
Bret Easton Ellis, Tama Janowitz, Jay McInerney

### Minimalism

- Minimalism in Arts
- a movement associated with the post-WWII development in Western culture, prominent in the 1960s to 1970s
  - primarily refers to the visual arts whose reductivist methods pushed avant-garde modernism to a new extreme
  - prominent in literature in the **1980s**, a decade later former minimalists became established writers on their own
  - contrasts with the 1960s obscurity and allusiveness in its compression, lucidity and technical craftsmanship
  - differs from experimental postmodernism in its simplicity, though not on the account of richness in meaning
  - shifts away from experimentalism as a goal in itself toward realist depth and previously ignored points of view
- Minimalism in Literature
- a matter-of-fact prose style stripped down to its most fundamental features, discarding everything superfluous
  - recognizable for its 'equanimity of surface', ordinary subjects treated by neutral narrators in a very brief scope
  - characterized by economy with words, focus on surface description, eschewing adverbs and other modifiers
  - tends to **unexceptional** characters in unexceptional situations, keeps a psychological distance from the subject
  - gives voice to a new underclass of silences peoples in the cities, mostly workers, women or ethnic minorities
  - expects the readers to take an active role in creating the story, prefers allowing context to dictate the meaning
  - brought a flowering of the short story, perhaps symptomatic of the reading public's dwindling attention span

### The New Lost Generation

- Disillusioned 1970s
- the concept was introduced by David Leavitt in his autobiographical essay 'The New Lost Generation' (1985)
  - refers to the generation of people born in the 1960s, who experienced the **1970s** as teenagers or young adults
  - claims that they belong in part to the 1960s, in part to the 1980s but sit uncomfortably somewhere in between
  - explains they were born too late to take part in the rebellious 1960s and too soon to enjoy the consuming 1980s
  - characterizes his generation as defying definition, as marked by estrangement, loneliness and **disillusionment**
  - admits that his generation may be characterless, but by choice, based on the failure of the preceding generation

### Dirty Realism

- Naturalism Revived
- associated with figures like Raymond Carver, Tobias Wolff, Richard Ford, Harry Crews or Bobbie Ann Mason
  - features tough characters, elliptical dialogue and uncompromising approach to violent and unsavoury subjects
  - eschews slick metropolitanism in favour of rural American and often inarticulate, unsophisticated protagonists
  - seeks to articulate the lives of the **working poor** who have to sell their labour or even their bodies in order to survive and who might at any time lose everything, including the basic dignities that make human beings human

### The Literary 'Brat Pack'

- 1980s Iconoclasts
- the label was used to characterize the young writers in the **mid-1980s** who were to represent the new face of literature, young, fresh and iconoclastic, and who included Bret Easton Ellis, Tama Janowitz and Jay McInerney
  - owed a debt to the earlier minimalists, used similarly clear and often dispassionate ways of rendering modern anxiety and angst that represented a break from the linguistically heavy and polite fiction of the older generation
  - associated also with the 'blank generation', writers whose characters existed in a state of anomie, in a deadpan consumer culture of empty television shows, semi-disposable Swedish furniture, fast food and designer labels
  - represented the dislocation of the **city gilded youth** suffering from an environment that utterly swamped them
  - popularized laconic and cynical style and preoccupation with the decadent values of a materialistic generation

### Raymond Carver (1938–1988)

- Style & Subjects
- author of condensed, terse and toughly graceful stories, reminiscent in some of their methods of **Hemingway**
  - successfully employs omissions, the spaces between the words to give a sense of evanescent, elusive feelings
  - deals with people living on the fringe of subsistence and articulation, makes audible the apparently inarticulate
  - cleaves to the stark surfaces and simple rituals of everyday life, clings to the concrete, avoids any abstractions
  - addresses the urban vernaculars and blends them by focusing on slight plots and elliptical dramatic conflicts
  - describes emotions, disappointments and dissolving relationships with a deadpan simplicity and quiet stoicism
  - combines weariness with wonder, acknowledgement of the cruelty of life with an occasional moment of relief

Short Stories

*Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* (1976), *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love* (1981), *Cathedral* (1984), *Where I'm Calling From* (1988) • short story collections

## Poetry

*Winter Insomnia* (1970), *At Night the Salmon Move* (1976), *When Water Comes Together with Other Water* (1985), *Ultramarine* (1987) • poetry collections

**Tobias Wolff (b. 1945)**

- Experiences • spent four years as a paratrooper in **Vietnam**, then received his education at Oxford and Stanford Universities  
 • served as a reporter for the *Washington Post*, subsequently became a university lecturer and writer at residence  
 • has published short stories, novellas and autobiographical writing, edited several anthologies of short stories
- Writing • skilfully depicts many voices and a wide range of emotions, though his preoccupation are male characters  
 • both his fiction and non-fiction writing is characterized by an exploration of the personal and existential terrain  
 • his protagonists often face moral dilemmas, unable to reconcile what they know with what they feel to be true
- Short Stories • *In the Garden of North American Martyrs* (1981; UK title, *Hunters in the Snow*, 1982), *Back in the World* (1985), *The Night in Question* (1996)  
 • short story collections, the latest includes many stories reflecting the author's experience in the Vietnam War
- Army Novella • *The Barracks Thief* (1985)  
 • a novella with a remarkable narrative structure, including several successive shifts of tone and point of view  
 • focuses on a group of three fresh paratrooper training graduates who are temporarily attached to an airborne infantry company, awaiting orders to report to Vietnam, and who are treated as outsiders by the experienced men  
 • the newcomers become suspects when money and personal property is discovered missing from the barracks
- Boyhood Memoir • *This Boy's Life* (1989)  
 • a harrowing memoir of his upbringing following his parents' divorce and his long separation from his brother<sup>1</sup>  
 • spent his boyhood alone with his mother until she remarried a man who was to become an abusive stepfather  
 • his brother meanwhile lived in the custody of their biological father, the brothers were reunited only years later
- Vietnam Memoir • *In Pharaoh's Army: Memories of the Lost War* (1994)  
 • a memoir about his service in Vietnam, including an account of the Tet Offensive during which he was present  
 • also includes his other experiences prior to becoming a writer, personal vignettes set in and out of Vietnam

**Ann Beattie (b. 1947)**

- Writing Subjects • appreciated for her keen, precise observations of suburban middle-class life and her dry, matter-of-fact irony  
 • preoccupied with chronicling the disillusionments of the middle-class generation that grew up in the 1960s  
 • her characters, having **come of age in the 1960s**, often have difficulties adjusting to the later cultural values  
 • the characters are often alienated, passive, unable to extricate themselves from unsatisfying careers and lives  
 • her early work attempts little examination of motivation, but later the depth of her characters tends to increase
- Novels • *Chilly Scenes of Winter* (1976)  
 • her first novel, presents a frustrated and bewildered figure of a lonely man in his twenties who yearns for love  
 • documents the fate of the 1960s idealism as the 'Woodstock generation' settles into comfortable middle age
- Loneliness • *Falling in Place* (1980)  
 • her second novel, depicts the loveless marriage of a forty-year-old advertising executive, set in the late 1970s  
 • chronicles the breakdown of a conventional American marriage as seen largely through the eyes of the children
- Loveless Marriage • *Love Always* (1985)  
 • an account of the world of contemporary media, dealing with a writer about love who is deserted by her lover  
 • combines a careful realistic attention to descriptive and thematic details with a satirical strain of black humour
- Deserted Writer • *Picturing Will* (1990)  
 • renders a special situation in the life of the five-year-old Will, whose mother goes to work as a photographer when deserted by the boy's father, now remarried to another woman, and is having a romance with a new man
- Deserted Mother • *Distortions* (1976), *Secrets and Surprises* (1978), *The Burning House* (1982), *Where You'll Find Me* (1986)  
 • collections of short stories, frequently appearing in magazines, including the *New Yorker* or *Atlantic Monthly*

**David Leavitt (b. 1961)**

- Gay Writing • a homosexual author, gay life in the post-AIDS world often surfaces as a theme or sub-plot in his short fiction  
 • a representative of an emergent narrative genre in the 1980s, **gay men's** coming-of-age or growing-up novels<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> His elder brother, Geoffrey Wolff, also wrote an autobiographical book about his difficult boyhood, *The Duke of Deception* (1979).

- concentrates on complicated family relationships, besides homosexuality often employs the motifs of cancer

Short Stories ***Family Dancing*** (1984), ***A Place I've Never Been Before*** (1990)

- collections of short stories, evocative studies of modern American family life, established him as a minimalist

Novels ***The Lost Language of Cranes*** (1986)

- his first novel, deals with the tormented relationship of a father and son, both discovering their homosexuality
- shows the son in accord with the conventions of the 1980s gay fiction, breaks new ground in the depiction of the father, a middle-aged married man coming to terms with his sexual nature and seeking advice from his son
- the title derives from a child mentioned in the novel who emulated the screeching of cranes rather than speech

Family Themes ***Equal Affections*** (1989)

- examines the theme of homosexuality and the family, presenting one of the leading characters as a lesbian girl

***While England Sleeps*** (1993)

- the original version of the novel included an episode so resembling one in the life of the British poet Stephen Spender that Spender sued the author for plagiarizing his memoir and had the book removed from book shops

### **Bret Easton Ellis (b. 1965)**

- regarded a representative of **transgressive** art, a form aimed to outrage or violate basic mores and sensibilities
- uses an extensive cast of characters, makes some of them recur throughout his writing in major or minor roles
- most of his writing was adapted into film versions, notably his first three novels and the short story collection

Yuppie Novels ***Less Than Zero***<sup>3</sup> (1985)

- his first novel, an initiation tale of a young man trapped in his own alienation, set in a bleak modern landscape
- portrays the disaffected youth in affluent society in the 1980s, preoccupied with drugs, casual sex and money

College Students ***Rules of Attraction*** (1987)

- explores the psychological traumas and sexual promiscuity of a group of middle-class liberal college students
- focuses primarily on three students, two boys and one girl, who find themselves in an entangled love triangle
- narrated in the first person, told from the point of view of various characters, both the major ones and minor

Serial Killer ***American Psycho*** (1991)

- an unnerving journey into the mind of a serial killer, Patrick Bateman, otherwise a yuppie<sup>4</sup> Wall Street banker
- rejected by the author's publisher for its excessive violence and supposed misogyny, but published by another
- blurs the distinction between genre and literature, wants to be sensationalistic and serious at the same moment
- both criticizes commodity culture and is itself contained in it in representing a cartoonishly materialistic figure
- contains a surfeit of violence and horror, an obsession with commodity fetishism but also a knowing use of the narrator, for it is never clear to the reader whether the killer who tells his story is recording facts or fantasizing

Short Stories ***The Informers*** (1994)

- a collection of short stories linked by characters inhabiting the same universe, covering much the same territory as the preceding novels in vignettes of various wayward figures, ranging from rock stars to vampires

### **Tama Janowitz (b. 1957)**

- born in San Francisco, educated in New York, where she settled and which she uses as the setting of her fiction
- satirically comments on the freaks and fakes who inhabit the sprawling metropolis of **social non-achievement**
- employs a unique farcical voice in her biting prose, seeks to find balance between insight and social criticism
- eschews political statements, but addresses the issues of feminism, racism, capitalism and cultural imperialism

Growing-up Novel ***American Dad*** (1981)

- her first novel, an ironic growing-up story of a slightly misanthropic young boy who lives in the shadow of his father, a psychiatrist and reputed ladies' man, and unsuccessfully tries to escape his father's admonishing glare

Short Stories ***Slaves of New York*** (1986)

- a collection of short stories telling in the manner of the collective history a variety of stories of young artists, writers and film-makers whose failing lives are determined by the expense and confusion of living in Manhattan
- portrays a society of egos shackled by their own modish attitudes and their highly artificial social environment

<sup>2</sup> Gay growing-up novels depict a central character's development through or against the structure of a story we colloquially call 'coming out', showing self-affirmation and self-definition through the realization that the narrator's experience is shared by others.

<sup>3</sup> The title comes from a song by the Elvis Costello (b. 1954), associated with the fashionable mid-1970s New Wave musical genre.

<sup>4</sup> Yuppies, standing for Young Urban Professionals, were an emerging class of the 1980s; typically wealthy young people who showed off their wealth by purchasing exclusively designer products and paying exaggerated attention to their looks and bodies.

Exploitation Novel

***A Cannibal in Manhattan*** (1987)

- a black comedy, an ambitious portrayal of the absurdities of metropolitan life in presenting a cannibal chief visiting the wilder shores of America, Manhattan, who was brought by sponsors to America only to be exploited
- the protagonist is cheated at every turn, unwittingly implicated in a horrendous crime and abandoned by his erstwhile sponsors so that the distinctly unmythical savage slides towards vagrancy and a fondness for drinking
- creates a threatening world of betrayal and treachery, underpinned with the alternative of drunken camaraderie

Discrimination Novel

***The Male Cross-Dresser Support Group*** (1992)

- a novel offering her familiar mix of farcical incident, wry observation and lurid description of low-life scenes
- culminates in a car chase across America with the female protagonist accompanied by a boy dressed as a girl
- suggests through the fictional story that being a male affords greater privileges in society than being a female

**Jay McInerney (b. 1955)**

Novels

- produces novels with autobiographical elements, though struggles against the image of **himself as a character**

***Bright Lights, Big City***<sup>5</sup> (1984)

Cocaine Parties

- a novel written in the second person narrative, unique in its time for its detailed portrayal of cocaine subculture
- the nameless protagonist is strongly autobiographical, like the author also the character is a writer who works as a fact-checker for a high-brow magazine, while by night the character turns into a cocaine user and party goer
- the protagonist is left by his wife, who was tempted away by a modelling career, he seeks to lose himself in the party scene but ends up looking for her at fashion events and worshipping every item that she owned in their flat
- the novel became the inspiration for a film of the same name (1988) and later an off-Broadway musical (1999)

Karate Learner

***Ransom*** (1985)

- a novel following the eponymous protagonist who settles in Kyoto and seriously immerses himself in karate because he hopes that it will transform his life and enable him to regain control, but is caught up by his past life

Party Girl

***Story of My Life*** (1988)

- a novel narrated in the first person from the point of view of the young female protagonist, described as a 'sexually voracious' party goer and cocaine addict, who moves to Manhattan and aspires to become an actress
- implies that her behaviour is a response to her father's abuse, including his murder of her prize jumping horse

College Couple

***Brightness Falls*** (1992)

- a novel focused on a couple who meet at a college, gives a richly detailed panorama of the New York City life

<sup>5</sup> The title is taken from a 1961 blues song by Jimmy Reed, representative of the electric blues, which he brought to the mainstream.