

From:

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Lad Trouble

Masculinity and Identity in the British Male
Confessional Novel of the 1990s

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In the 1990s, the male confessional novel, most prominently represented by Nick Hornby (»High Fidelity«), but also by other writers, articulated the structure of feeling of the male generation in their late twenties/early-to-mid-thirties.

The book presents the advent of the male confessional novel in a fresh and yet critical light, challenging the feminist claim that the genre should be understood as a relapse into sexism. By applying an eclectic theoretical framework, ranging from Williams to Giddens to Butler and Derrida, the study illustrates why the male confessional novel is too complex a phenomenon to be solely interpreted in terms of retrosexism. It shows how the multitude of postmodern gender scripts adds to the problematic nature of clearly defined gender relationships.

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PREFACE

It is not true that men are unwilling to change.
It is true that many men are afraid to change.
(bell hooks)

Who has not suffered at one stage in their lives from a serious identity crisis? It affects us all, just like the great dramatic characters of the world stage. When King Lear begins to lose his sanity towards the middle of the play of the same name, he queries: "Who is that man who can tell me who I am?" As a royal character, he firmly believes that people recognise him in his past splendour, and that his subjects function as a mirror in which his power and identity are reflected. King Lear of course is wrong in trusting his regal prerogatives, and in the course of the play, he turns mad and, as a consequence, transforms from a king into a human being; into a 'normal' man.

The subject matter of this book neither concerns mad kings nor troubled princes – neither confused bourgeois adolescents nor angry working-class rogues, but quite simply ordinary young, British men as we encounter them in the fiction of the 1990s.

Taking into consideration the postmodern identity crises with regard to nation, ethnicity, class and gender, I intend to cast light on the phenomenon of the male confessional novel that supposedly articulated the crisis of masculinity in the 1990s. The male confessional novel is a term that was coined by the media and used by the book market to categorise a specific genre of male fiction that is more commonly referred to as *ladlit*. For reasons that will become obvious, I prefer the term male confessional novel, but when I think it appropriate, will sometimes refer to *ladlit* as well.

Before I properly introduce the topic, I want to express some general concerns that have guided my work.

Doing research in the field of literary and cultural studies is a fascinating and controversial business. It is fascinating because the object of study is multifaceted, embracing almost every single aspect of our culture and everyday life, and the different perspectives and angles from which the object of study may be approached are no less multifaceted. But this vast array of perspectives is also responsible for the

controversial nature I mentioned. Does one privilege the text over the context? Is there a difference at all between text and context? What exactly is the merit of a close reading? Shall we aim at revealing the meaning of a poem, novel or drama, or should we concentrate on the material conditions in which a literary work was produced? Does it matter whether the author comes from a working-class background or from the educated middle classes? Why do we take a different approach to a Renaissance drama than to a contemporary novel? Does it matter whether a book was written by a man or a woman? And talking about gender, in how far does it matter whether the main protagonists in a novel are male or female?

There are countless questions, and I have not even mentioned the problem of theory yet. But before delving into the muddle of theoretical approaches, let us first get back to the fascinating aspects of literary and cultural studies and ask ourselves why, apart from its all-embracing nature, is doing cultural studies a fascinating business? The answer, in my view, is simple: because it provides material to make sense of cultural crises. This is not to suggest that we should take an apocalyptic view on life – far from it. I believe that by taking a reasonable outlook on culture, based on an articulated theory that also involves practice, cultural analysis bears the potential to make the world a better place. Saying this, I do not actually refer to any big changes like inventing a new drug to prevent AIDS – it is not in the nature of the human and social sciences to come up with inventions that may change the world on such a big scale. But they can bring about changes that enhance the understanding of how people communicate about global and world politics, about gender and ethnicity, and last but not least, between each other, nations, groups, or individual people. In this respect I want to emphasize my main concern expressed in this project, namely the little but nonetheless essential changes that fiction can initiate in readers. Books function as resources to make sense of oneself and of one's relationships. They advise, help, reassure, console. Secondly, books are not always read in the way the author, the publisher or the book-market intended, but they can also further oppositional readings. By reading books against the grain, books are 'rewritten' as it were, according to the personal preferences and needs of a particular reader. A book does not contain a meaning, but is a composite of possible interpretations.

I depart from the premise that we are in the midst of a cultural revolution which started in the 1960s and with whose impacts we still have not come to terms – and probably never will. In particular, I have two aspects of the cultural revolution in mind. They are both of scientific and personal interest to me since being a woman working in academia, I have encountered them in various ways, and it seems that they are rooted and have likewise resulted in misunderstandings be-

tween different parties, men and women on the one hand, and scholars from different academic backgrounds on the other. The first aspect refers to the cultural turn, including poststructuralist approaches, which has had an immense impact on scientific theory and on the academic discourse in which it has been negotiated. The second aspect, which is still considered to be an important reason why our culture is in crisis, is the impact of feminism. In other words, the misunderstandings that exist between men and women and those between scholars will be guiding the argument in this thesis and will be addressed in various ways.

These two cultural milestones have proved to revolutionize the whole of the human and social sciences. The way we think about meaning, sense, being, the past and the future, life and death today is shaped by the ideas and insights the cultural turn and feminism – both as socio-cultural and academic phenomena – have brought about. In other words, the very basics of Western philosophy have been put into question. Aristotle, Plato, Rousseau, Hegel, Heidegger, Marx and Freud appear in a different light, and despite the fact that they still matter, their works, which had been the very foundation of occidental thinking, have been subjected to a critical scrutiny which could not be more radical.

The changes the social and human sciences have undergone have also brought about some discomfiting phenomena, such as theory wars, blind spots, and neglects, spectres and repressions. Consequently, one could argue that there is something uncanny to the social and human sciences. The terms do not only serve as passing references to Freud and Derrida, but are meant to pay tribute to different neglects which in my view have proved to be serious obstacles within the human and social sciences.

I would here also like to take the opportunity to make transparent the position I see myself in as a researcher by way of addressing three problematic issues.

First of all, I do not believe in truth values, and hence distance myself from any research that is positivistic, essentialist and directed at ‘finding the truth’. I understand cultural research as offering ways of reading in the sense that the different discourses and discursive formations that circulate at a specific point in time are disentangled in order to reduce the complexity of culture and offer clues and intimations for feasible interpretations.

Second, I do not want to give the impression of being objective. Research is marked by human agency in terms of personal experience; any claim to the contrary would amount to drawing a veil over things. Research has much too long been governed by the wrong assumption, namely that the researcher conducts her analysis from the outside and may therefore remain detached and impartial and produces objective

data. Terry Threadgold very acutely summarises this problem, claiming that

[w]hat we have is a world constructed in and through discourse, meaning and representation, and the people in that world are constructed in the same way. The semiotic and psychoanalytic and post-structuralist and now feminist story that rewrites the liberal humanist and capitalist narrative of individualism sees subjectivities, too, as a function of their discursive and bodily histories in a signifying network of meaning and representation. This means, among other things, that there is no way for those subjects ever to be outside that network as 'objective observers. The 'knowing' subject of 'science' is no longer one of the characters in these new stories. In them subjectivities are always inside and sometimes struggling to be also outside the signifying processes and practices of/in which they speak. (1990: 3)

Doing research thus means engaging with cultural texts and by doing so, producing new texts. This is a process that involves personal experience and therefore necessarily involves a certain degree of intervention and interference. Furthermore, research is always embedded in a specific historical and social context and hence is local and temporary rather than universal and transcendent.

Third, I do not wish to dedicate myself to one single theory because I do not believe that such a monolithic perspective could do justice to the sort of research I am conducting. I very strongly align myself with Stuart Hall's concept of articulation. Articulation has two meanings: "'Articulate' means to utter, to speak, to be articulate. It carries that sense of language, of expressing, etc. But we also speak of an 'articulated' lorry (truck): a lorry where the front (cab) and back (trailer) can, but need not necessarily, be connected to one another. The two parts are connected to each other, but through a specific linkage, that can be broken. An articulation is thus the form of connection that *can* make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions" (Hall 1996: 141). It is this idea of articulation in the sense of expressing different things in conjunction with each other, in and through discourse, that I find the most fruitful. So if, for example, certain aspects of poststructuralist theory lend themselves to the analysis of narrative fiction, they may be used alongside a cultural materialist or new historicist perspective.

In terms of theory, there is another problem to be addressed. It is in fact related to my third concern insofar as it refers to the so-called 'Theory' with a capital T. Cultural Theory¹ has become a very fash-

1 Against the background of the cultural turn, most significantly the post-structuralist turn within the human and social sciences, many different approaches to culture and understandings of "doing critical (cultural)

ionable label to term the genealogy of the theoretical toolbox that has emerged over the last thirty years. It is heavily indebted to poststructuralism in which it sees a political potential for resistance. However, because this potential for resistance is mainly seen as one 'from above' it has wriggled itself around the tension between high culture and popular culture by preferring the former while neglecting the latter. The affiliation with the modernist avant-garde is quite significant – the latter has also been its main domain of analysis and in my view, makes the project of poststructuralism, despite the post a rather modernist enterprise. Therefore, it seems quite paradoxical that a) poststructuralism is busy deconstructing binary oppositions such as high/low or male/female if it does not apply this insight when it comes to choosing its subject matter, and b) that poststructuralism and postmodernism are sometimes put into the same basket.

What has been a particular concern of mine is that I have noticed that 'cultural studies' has become an umbrella term with a rather controversial touch. Whereas some literary departments claim to 'do cultural studies' alongside 'literary studies' which at closer inspection then is simply revealed to be the inclusion of other cultural texts alongside literary texts, other literary departments refurbished themselves or split up from literary studies department, distancing them-

theory" have emerged. They may be, however, summarized by grouping them into four main "camps", bearing in mind that the term "critical theory" has more than one source, i.e. tradition. The first approach is sociological, usually harking back to the so-called founding fathers of the sociology of culture like Durkheim, Weber, Simmel, and Mannheim (cf. Jenks 1993, Smith 2000). Second, there is the critical theory of the Frankfurt School with representatives such as Adorno and Horkheimer and, of the so-called young Frankfurt generation, Jürgen Habermas. Cultural studies, which is not so much an independent approach as an interdisciplinary project that as its representatives never become tired of emphasizing, evolved out of the work of representatives of the so-called New Left such as Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart and E.P. Thompson and their critique of traditional cultural criticism associated with F.R. Leavis and his followers (cf. Milner/Browitt 1994, Winter 1999, Milner 2001) is the third perspective I have in mind. Apart from literary studies (cf. Easthope 1991), cultural studies has also challenged the theoretical and empirical framework of media studies (cf. Winter 1997b and 1999a). And fourth, there is the sort of critical theory that is strongly rooted in poststructuralism. Poststructuralism, gaining more and more influence from the 1970s onwards (cf. Belsey 1980), is at the same time an elaboration as well as critique of structuralism, emphasizing the inadequacy of the traditional understanding of truth, meaning, and knowledge, thus foregrounding the openness and instability of "texts". Poststructuralism questions the whole tradition of Western thinking and is thus attacks both idealism and materialism. For a synthesizing attempt between critical theory à la Frankfurt and cultural studies, see Kellner (1997).

selves from 'doing cultural studies' altogether, claiming to do Critical or Cultural Theory with a capital T sense, i.e. engaging in what they take to be a politically engaged poststructuralism focusing on high culture, leaving the popular culture to the cultural studies and media departments. This kind of cultural studies often stands in a somewhat hostile relationship to a third kind of cultural studies which is practiced within media studies and which focuses on the mass media as its central focal point and therefore analyses popular culture rather than elite culture or the arts. Whereas I think that the latter kind of cultural studies has brought forward the most interesting methods of analysis, including ethnographic audience research, I am still of the opinion that its focus on the mass media is rather narrow in scope. This is why I think that the study of literature, from which field cultural studies originated, should be reconsidered taking on board the insights the more media centred cultural studies has produced within the past twenty years. Cultural studies has always been indebted to the notion of intervention. Such a position radically challenges those postmodern approaches that distance themselves from political engagement and attempts at reconciling the concept of destabilized identity with identity politics that have not abandoned the possibility of agency and ultimately, a better world.

To sum up, it does not seem to be clear anymore what doing 'cultural studies' actually implies. I do not think that including the odd film or advert into the teaching syllabus alongside the works of Milton and Shakespeare does amount to doing cultural studies, nor does cultural studies solely comprise everything that is popular or broadcast in the media as often wrongly assumed by the capital T-people. Given this controversy, I believe we are in desperate need of some weeding and clearing up.

By doing so, I would like to refer to Andrew Milner who makes the useful distinction between modest and immodest cultural studies. Modest cultural studies amounts in terms of its subject matter to the second version sketched out above, i.e. the study of popular culture as it is often done at cultural and media studies departments. According to Milner, the immodest version "is defined in terms of a new methodology connecting the study of the popular to the study of the literary" (Milner 2005: 22f). The reason why this 'double movement' could happen, Milner concludes, lies in the sociological turn the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies underwent after the appointment of Stuart Hall as director in 1968.

In retrospect [...] this 'separate development' of an institutionally distinct, non-literary cultural studies alongside a still theoretically inviolate English literature appears not so much as a radical innovation but as an unhappy compromise. For the real promise of cultural studies had always been con-

tained, not in the discovery of a new empirical subject matter, but in a 'deconstruction' of the very theoretical boundaries that hitherto demarcated literature from fiction, art from culture, the elite from the popular. (ibid)

This double movement then, as Anthony Easthope put it, would be one by which "literary study becomes increasingly indistinguishable from cultural studies and cultural studies makes incursions into the traditionally literary terrain of textuality" (Easthope in Milner 2005: 23).²

Trying to be truthful to the real promise of cultural studies, I am going to suggest a multipurpose and eclectic framework according to which the male confessional novel can be made useful to grant us a meaningful insight not only into the textual but also the social fabric of specific period of time. As might already have become clear, despite my preference for certain kinds of poststructuralist thought, I do not believe that there is nothing outside the text. To put it differently, whereas I believe that certain aspects of poststructuralism and deconstruction are quite useful if not necessary to do cultural analysis, I am not completely satisfied with their treatment of the difference between text and context and agree with Balz Engler asserting that the two are complimentary (1991: 182). Being complimentary, however, does not – at least from a poststructuralist point of view – necessitate two completely distinct parts; they may overlap. I therefore would like to suggest a modified concept of context, which does not preclude the possibility to articulate poststructuralism within a cultural materialist perspective – on the contrary, it is this very conjuncture that in my view brings about the most interesting insights if one believes relativism and eclecticism are no bad things. Without fuelling any misunderstanding here, I am convinced that we live in a predominantly textual world and that meaning is indeed made textually. However, there is something that cannot be captured in texts only, and I also believe that this something is readable between texts. It is therefore neither extratextual nor locked in a text either. Rather, it is a free-floating surplus between texts. I would like to call this extra- or intratextual something the structure of feeling.

The structure of feeling of the 1990s was marked by a general insecurity as well as by the more specific crisis of masculinity. By es-

2 Milner's approach to which my study is much indebted may be summarised under the heading 'literature, culture and society' and which refers to his seminal publication of the same title. *Literature, Culture and Society* (2005 [1996]) traces the history and institutionalisation of cultural studies back to the beginnings of Left Leavisism in the late 1950s drawing on the writings by Williams and Hoggart, the influence of the Frankfurt School and Roland Barthes' semiology.

tablishing an interdisciplinary³ matrix against which these phenomena can be retrospectively made sense of, I hope to contribute not only to bridging the gap between the social and human sciences, but also to shed some light on what I believe to be a universal problem that has no particular timeframe, namely the complexity of gender identity and human relationships.

I have always felt that there is an unnecessary and to me inexplicable gap between the social sciences and the humanities. Whereas the latter have been very reluctant to include empirical investigations in their research, the former have shown little patience with the close reading practice of cultural texts. I must admit that I have found it rather difficult to gather empirical material with regard to my subject of analysis. The internet has been a valuable source, and I have been lucky enough to interview one of the most popular male confessional writers of the 1990s, Nick Hornby.

By embedding literary analysis in a broader, socio-cultural investigation of the 1990s I wish to address a readership interested in interdisciplinary research. Therefore, the question of how much of the theory on which my argument is based can be taken for granted, is a serious question to be considered. Since I do neither want to bore those who are familiar with the theoretical approaches I am using nor to overwhelm those who are not trained in literary and cultural analysis to the same extent, a good part of the theoretical approaches I am indebted to are explained in the footnotes.

It is my decided aim to make literary analysis socially relevant. Even though most literary scholars think that this is the case with any analysis presented, I often feel that these analyses are not easily accessible to those who come from a different scholarly background. I think

3 In the light of the fact that cultural studies as a project has foremost been described in terms of interdisciplinarity – and been attacked for the very same matter because of its apparent fuzziness, the concept must be freed from its reputation as a term of convenience to describe an approach that goes beyond the sort of analysis that is conducted in more clearly defined academic fields such literary studies or critical and cultural theory. Interdisciplinarity, sadly, is more a buzzword (Moran 2002: 1) than an achievement.

The reason for this might partly be grounded in the reluctance with which expert knowledge is shared among scholars, but also the fact that the formation and institutionalisation of disciplines as it can be accounted for historically does not actually further interdisciplinarity. Our systems of knowledge, including those of higher education, i.e. the universities, have not yet undergone the institutional changes that are needed to achieve interdisciplinarity, let alone transdisciplinarity. As long as the established power regimes that govern academic institutions are not reformed, creative inter-/transdisciplinarity will always be a thing of the future.

it is necessary that the social sciences and the humanities try to find a common discourse because they have a mutual interest in understanding cultural phenomena such as human relationships. Furthermore, I think it is high time that the insights gained from critical investigations within the social sciences and humanities were made accessible to a non-academic readership as well. This is one of my main concerns here, which is reflected in the structure of the book as well as in my language use.

INTRODUCTION: THE STRUCTURE OF FEELING IN THE 1990S

Do you think it's easy to be a man in the 90s?

MILLENNIAL TURN AND CRISIS MANAGEMENT

This question, screamed by Gary in utter desperation at his girlfriend Dorothy in the comedy *Men Behaving Badly*,¹ epitomizes the crisis of masculinity that was omnipresent in the 1990s. Men did not know what was expected of them, nor how they should relate to women. Was it more appropriate to adopt the New Man-behaviour that was hailed during the 1980s and to come across as sensitive, emotional and knowledgeable about the latest invention in the men's cosmetics market? Or was it more advisable to subscribe to the concept of the New Lad and behave in a reactionary and antifeminist, or quite simply – as the title of the sitcom suggests – in a bad way? In short, men were confused.

My subject of analysis, the male confessional novel of the 1990s, stands in direct relation to this 'men are in crisis-phenomenon'. Termed 'ladlit' by the book market and the media, this specific genre of fiction gives voice to the confusion and uncertainty the young men of the 1990s were allegedly preoccupied with. I say 'allegedly' because it cannot be established whether, as Beryl Benwell puts it, New Lad was simply a necessary new market invention, or a genuine manifestation of the *zeitgeist* of the early 1990s [...]” (2002: 150). In my

1 *Men Behaving Badly* was a highly successful comedy series in the 1990s, created by Simon Nye and broadcast on BBC from 1992 to 1997. The situation comedy is based around two male characters, Gary and Tony who share a flat, and their two female counterparts, Dorothy, Gary's girlfriend, and Deborah, who lives above Gary and Tony. Deborah fights Tony's advances until she finally gives in to him in the last series. The two men mostly indulge in drinking beer in front of the television, talking non-sense. As Neil Morrissey, who stars as Tony, admits: "Like most blokes we resolve all our problems by having a lager in front of the TV and not talking about anything" (www.bbc.co.uk/guide/articles/m/menbehavingbadly_7774265.shtml).

view, it was a mix of both. However, it does not matter whether the market created or reflected the New Lad-phenomenon since it was an issue widely discussed and hence of a certain social importance. People who could relate to it probably did not let the “chicken or egg” question influence their conviction that men were in crisis, nor did they give too much thought to whether the reaction to this crisis manifested itself in the guise of New Laddism. To put it differently, the crisis of masculinity and the New Lad-phenomenon were part of the public discourse at the time and therefore form a serious object of analysis.

It is believed that the phenomenon of the New Lad and the genre of ladlit were initiated by the publication of Nick Hornby's *Fever Pitch* (1992) and the launch of the British magazine *Loaded* (1994) (Cockin 2007: 107). The latter targets the young, urban male who is into girls, sports and fast cars, but who also has an interest in lifestyle questions. The promotion slogan of *Loaded* runs “For Men Who Should Know Better”. Given the fact that the magazine was started as a response and challenge to the 1980s ‘feminist-friendly’ and ‘fashion-based’ (Benwell 2003: 6) New Man-magazines such as *GQ*, *Arena* and *Esquire*, it implies a return to a more traditional form of masculinity – men should be men again.² They should know better than to adopt the sensitivity the 1980s movement of the New Man promoted. Before the launch of men's lifestyle magazines, this view was also shared by the publishers themselves who felt that men were less enthusiastic about reading general lifestyle material. “Glossy magazines were seen as rather feminine products, and ‘real men’ didn't need a magazine to tell them how to live” (Gauntlett 202: 154). The clash of these discourses, in my view, was responsible for the insecurity that allegedly affected men in the 1990s. This insecurity cannot be considered isolated, though; it has to be placed within the wider context of the *zeitgeist* of the 1990s.

When the world was getting ready for the year 2000, the hopes that were linked to that incisive moment were clouded by the various alleged crises that had marked the 1990s and that were undoubtedly going to stay with us beyond the millennium – the millennial anxieties were manifold. The impact of globalisation had reached a point of no return, probably culminating in the terrorist threats and attacks fuelled by an increasing fundamentalism at the beginning of the new millennium. Hardly a day went by without the media telling us that our cul-

2 According to Ben Crewe, *Loaded's* clear-cut image that ultimately guaranteed its success is based on the editors' aversion to the concept of the New Man. Apparently, James Brown, one of the editors, in a controversy with *The Guardian*, insinuated that “the middle-class identity that the New Man signified was incompatible with masculine heterosexuality (Crewe 2003: 101f.).

ture was in crisis. Gone were the days of security one might once have felt as a result of both the nation state and the nuclear family. Everything had changed – everything was different as the postmodern structure of feeling had captured us without exception; the effects of globalisation, from an economic as well as general cultural perspective, seemed inescapable. Electronic mail and the establishment of the worldwide web had opened incalculable possibilities in terms of communication and globalized marketing and trading. At the same time, the newly established electronic networks soon came to be considered a huge risk because as the new millennium was approaching, the danger of widespread computer malfunction, usually referred to as the year 2000-problem, also known as the millennium bug, became imminent. The concepts of time and space had been transcended, and the notion of where and who we were had become challenged by the multiple options of the risk society including the already mentioned global media and communication technologies that enable us to take part in spectacles hundreds of miles away from our location.³ Furthermore, interventions such as cloning or the human genome project began to challenge the traditional notion of natural reproduction. Man has succeeded in manipulating nature to a point where virtually everything may fall victim to human interference and manipulation.

In short, nothing is certain anymore – everything is in crisis. We worry about culture and identity and for that matter, about our cultural identity. We struggle against the decline of our cultural tradition into postmodern disinterestness and eclecticism, and the impending downfall of ‘serious’ culture.⁴ We also fear that the nucleus of any healthy society, the family, is in danger because of the genderquake.⁵ There are no clear-cut demarcations anymore. In terms of cultural and artistic appreciation, being ‘cultured’ no longer refers only to knowledge

3 Risk society is a term coined by the sociologists Anthony Giddens (1990) and Ulrich Beck (1992) who understand risk society as one that is future-oriented and prepared to deal with the plethora of problems that modernization has caused such as pollution, natural disasters and unequal wealth. The definition also incorporates new family concepts. Neither Giddens nor Beck talk about postmodernity as they understand their approach as the project of reflective modernity (cf. Beck 1996 and 1997).

4 I do not argue that the phenomenon of cultural crisis is particularly postmodern or specifically characteristic of the 1990s because culture, at least from the viewpoint of some cultural critics, has always been in crisis. Therefore, Terry Eagleton has a point when he claims that “[i]t is dangerous to claim that the idea of culture is nowadays in crisis, since when was it not? Culture and crisis go together like Laurel and Hardy” (Eagleton 2000:37). I do however claim that the some aspects of the cultural crisis of a period such as the 1990s are particular and specific.

5 The term is used by Imelda Whelehan (2000) and refers back to Naomi Wolf’s *Fire with Fire* (1993).

of the so-called canonized classics. In today's postmodern, predominantly middle-class culture, Pierre Bourdieu's (1987) thesis about the homology between class distinction and aesthetic appreciation already sounds rather old-fashioned because being an expert on hiphop music, soap operas and internet chat-rooms now belongs as equally to our cultural capital as does the expertise on Shakespeare's plays. Or so it is claimed. Being a mother does not automatically mean being a housewife anymore. Being a father does not mean one has to be the full-time breadwinner anymore. There are different models of being a mother or father, husband or wife, male or female partner; in short – of being a woman or a man.

These crises, we are told, have an immediate effect on how we perceive ourselves, i.e. on how we construct and negotiate our identity. Consequently, we are faced with an identity crisis. To answer the question 'who am I?' is no straightforward business anymore because the choices that may be made are not only multiple but also unfixed and short-term. Someone might be a middle-aged husband, father and business man during the day, but take on a completely different identity when entering a virtual chat-room in the evening, for example by pretending to be a 25-year-old, unemployed bachelor. He might decide to start a second family at the age of forty, or when faced with a midlife crisis, take time out on Barbados or open a pub on a Greek island. He might even get tired of being heterosexual and either become homosexual, transsexual, or, if willing to undergo surgery, a 'proper' woman, i.e. take on an altogether different gender and/or biological identity. What does it mean to be a man at the turn of the millennium anyway? Given the fluidity of gender concepts and their permeable boundaries, is it still adequate to talk of men and women? Are two genders enough, or was it not time to accept that there are more, as does Anne Fausto-Sterling in "The Five Sexes: Why Male and Female are Not Enough" (2002).

The question of gender identity will be of importance throughout this book because against the background of postmodern identity politics, masculinity cannot be conceived as an essential category anymore.⁶ While still being married, our man in question might be a New

6 Because the confessional novels that are at the centre of attention in this book exclusively focus on heterosexual masculinity, reference is here made to heterosexual maleness and masculinity only. It goes without saying that this is just one – albeit the dominant one – version of masculinity, and I am aware of the fact that by discussing just one specific form of masculinity, I am excluding homosexual masculinity, the whole spectrum of female and transsexual masculinity, and thus considerably reducing the complexity of the subject. For the study of alternative masculinities, I would like to refer to Sedgwick (1985 and 1990), Feinberg (1996 and 1998), Halberstam (1998 and 2005) and Noble (2004). For insight into how female masculinity is thematized in

Man, looking after his children and doing the washing-up to give his wife some space to have a professional and private life apart from being a wife and a mother. He might even use cosmetics and shed the odd tear when he is unhappy. But he also might want to do away with all that 'feminist stuff' in order to be a 'lad', especially when he goes out with his male friends. In other words, constructing one's gender identity is a multi-layered and very complex process.⁷

In this book, I am going to concern myself with the question of how the notion of masculinity and male identity is negotiated and articulated in the male confessional novel. One reason why this particular genre makes such an interesting research topic with regard to gender identity formation is the fact that, before the turn of the millennium, the two new forms of masculinity already touched upon above, the New Man and the New Lad had emerged. According to Sean Nixon, these two types of masculinity are in fact 'two distinct cultural scripts through which the link between masculinity and consumption is established' (Nixon 2001: 375). The New Man-script developed in the mid-late 1980s and started to dominate the consumer markets in the UK, most of all those of menswear, grooming and toiletries, and, as in the case with the later, New Lad, consumer magazines (*ibid.*: 374). "The New Man is generally characterized as sensitive, emotionally aware, respectful of women, and egalitarian in outlook – and, in some accounts, as narcissistic and highly invested in his physical appearance" (Gill 2003: 37). He is as likely to be gay as straight. By contrast, the New Lad is depicted as hedonistic, post-(if not anti-) feminist, and pre-eminently concerned with beer, football and sex. His outlook on life could be characterized as anti-aspirational and owes a lot to a particularly classed articulation of masculinity. A key feature of some constructions of the New Lad is the emphasis on his knowing of and ironic relationship to the world of serious adult concerns.⁸ To summarize, the New Lad is reluctant to grow up and tries to prolong adolescence at all costs. Benwell argues that the implications of the masculinity crisis

the fiction of the 1990s, see Feinberg (1993), Winterson (1993), Kay (1999) and Waters (1999); for established classics in the field see Hall (1982 [1928] and Woolf (1992 [1928])).

- 7 I am referring to these cultural changes in the present tense because they have been affecting society for the last couple of decades and are still very dominant today. It was, however, during the 1990s that they got the greatest attention, especially concerning gender relations and the impact of the new media.
- 8 As we will see, the awareness of not acting one's age is articulated in a very ironic fashion that results in the fact that most male confessional novels are supposed to be very 'witty' and 'funny'.

arguably resonate in the widely observed regressive and adolescent tendencies acted out by New Lad- magazines in which a nostalgic retreat to infantile forms of behaviour, including scatological obsessions, puerile humour, an absence of references to work or social responsibility, an obsession with 70s and 80s culture [...] and a kind of rebellious posturing against 'adult' authority (or possibly feminism' could arguably be seen as symptomatic of some sort of crisis of adult masculinity. (2003: 14)

While I agree with Benwell's observation, I want to draw the attention to the difficulty of accounting for these tendencies. Some scholars have assumed that laddish behaviour must be viewed as retrosexist (cf. my discussion of Whelehan's position below) and a backlash against feminism and feminist achievements (Gill 2003), others claim that there is no crisis of masculinity but of working-class (Heartfield 2002) or that men have always been in crisis (Kimmel 1989).⁹

In view of the above outlined *zeitgeist* of the 1990s, I personally understand the crisis of masculinity as a specific, gendered form of identity crisis. Whereas I am aware of the fact that the reasons for the masculinity crisis are manifold, I here mostly confine myself to the discussion of masculinity as an unstable and ongoing identity project. The postmodern condition has furthered the proliferation of lifestyles and gender scripts, two of which are going to be of specific interest. New Man and New Lad are frequently represented as products of particular chronological moments, with New Man representing the *zeitgeist* of the 1980s and the New Lad the 1990s. Indeed, one of the most common cultural narratives of masculinity in the 1990s (alongside the discussion of its alleged crisis) is the story of the displacement of the New Man by the New Lad.

I will claim that the distinction between these two types of masculinity which are often depicted as mutually exclusive only ever be-

9 Psychoanalysis offers an explanation to a more general crisis of masculinity. In *Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex* (1924) Freud tries to explain how incestuous desires of little boys towards their mothers are brought under control through the fear of castration. These desires are sublimated by the super ego and at puberty become directed towards girls/women. This sounds very simple and straightforward. However, the process of redirecting ones desires has been challenged by a different view on how males and females gain their gender identity. See for example Karl Figlio (2000). In how far the claim about the male insecurity due to the fear of castration holds true is probably something that will never be answered, especially in contemporary society where the notion of gender has replaced the concept of sex, and gender identity and gender roles are perceived as socially constructed rather than biologically transferred. The distinction between sex and gender has again been radically questioned, cf. Butler (1993), Elam (1994: 42ff.) and Frey Steffen (2006: 75ff.).

comes apparent in the market segments mentioned above, most of all in men's magazines. In the genre of the male confessional novel, however, this clear-cut demarcation blurs. By drawing on a number of male confessional novels I will show how protagonists struggle to reconcile these two cultural scripts, including a number of variations thereof. I understand this juggling of gender identities to be a direct effect of postmodern uncertainty and the crises I mentioned above.

I consider the (re)articulation of masculinity and the experimenting with gender scripts as an expression of the structure of feeling of the 1990s, a term I prefer to the one of *zeitgeist*. The structure of feeling is a concept proposed by the Welsh cultural critic Raymond Williams in the 1960s, and is supposed to capture the tension between experience in the sense of culture as it is lived and the forms through which it is lived.¹⁰ The structure of feeling differs from the hegemonic culture because it refers to the "emergent culture of a new generation" (O'Connor 2005: 79). With regard to my object of analysis, I propose to understand the crisis of masculinity as experience and the male confessional novel as one form through which the crisis is expressed.

The concept of the structure of feeling that has probably been more criticized than approved of, but that has never ceased to preoccupy cultural studies scholars up to the present day.¹¹ Specifically, it has always been emphasized how difficult, if not impossible, it is to bring structure into accord with feeling, i.e. the empirical with the emotional. It is important to realise, however, that the need for recon-

10 Williams sometimes calls 'experience' practical consciousness, cf. (Couldry 2000: 122).

11 Williams concept has widely been accused of being "fuzzy", implying too much while yielding too little in terms of analytic potential. Most critics, however, have overlooked that the coinage between structure on the one hand and feeling on the other hand opens up a whole variety of analytical as well as practical possibilities. The structure, i.e. the material basis of cultural articulation, tied up in the market and technology of late capitalism, constrains the ways in which cultural production, for example in the form of narrative fiction, is achieved. The feeling on the other hand implies a kind of articulation which may transcend the practicalities of modern technology and give voice to socio-cultural phenomena such as gender or race relations, career planning, or just the "banalities" of everyday life. It is important to note that at least in his early use of the concept, Williams "insisted upon the privileged position of the literacy documentation of a period, despite his admission that literature could only be understood alongside other, social, economic and political practices" (Ashley 1989: 166). In cultural materialism (cf. Sinfield 1989), an approach to literature that emerged out of Williams's work, literature is understood as one practice among a whole variety of cultural practices, and it is in the latter sense that I want to emphasize the importance of the structure of feeling with regard to my analysis. Despite its ambiguous reception, the concept has recently enjoyed some sort of a revival (cf. Filmer 2003).

ciliation of the two parts of the concept has become redundant if seen from a poststructuralist point of view. The critics who doubt the validity of the structure of feeling have been trapped in what Derrida terms logocentrism, searching for a stable centre, an origin that enables the structure but cannot account for something as ‘fuzzy’ as feeling. It is precisely this seemingly insurmountable paradox that accounts for what we term identity crisis and which is reflected in the novels under scrutiny. It is no good claiming that the alleged crises deprive us of stability and hence endanger our existence. Rather, it is to argue that those crises, including the paradoxes on which they are grounded, lay the very foundation for our existence. This may sound somewhat obscure at first. However, given the fact that (gender) identities have ceased to be clear-cut which results in the freedom – or agony – of choice, we can only ever acquire an identity, as fluid and unfixed it might be, by choosing from a whole spectrum of identity scripts, without knowing whether what have chosen the ‘right’ one. In short, the structure is destabilized, or rather, dislocated, by the feeling. From this perspective, Williams’s structure of feeling becomes a truly deconstructionist concept and hence makes more sense than ever.¹²

To substantiate this argument I will bring my analysis of the male confessional novel into dialogue with post-structuralist and contemporary sociological thought that was produced during the same period. Specifically, I will draw on Jacques Derrida, and to a slightly lesser extent, on the sociology of Anthony Giddens and Zygmunt Bauman.¹³ It is my contention that despite being completely different in terms of genre, style and readership, all the texts in question share the issue of uncertainty and the problem of identity crisis, expressed through the discourse of difference, and it seems far from coincidence that all these books were produced and published during the same decade. Reading these texts alongside each other rather than using the one to analyse the other opens up a particularly fruitful way of doing intertextual research in the field of literary and cultural studies. Secondly, by combining literary analysis with sociological thinking, I not only

12 Derrida was very reluctant to propose a clear-cut definition of deconstruction since that would be against the principle of deconstruction. There are however, a couple of publications in which he explicitly refers to the concept, such as in “Letter to Japanese Friend” (1995) and in “A Taste for the Secret” (2001, with Maurizio Ferraris).

13 I will draw on concepts put forward by Derrida in the 1990s, such as for example the archive, the arrival or the notion of hospitality. However, some of his older writings such as on the pharmakon and the supplement will also be discussed. While the latter date back to the 1970s, they have marked Derrida’s writing throughout his career and I therefore consider it justifiable to bring them into play even though I am claiming that his main concerns coincide with those discussed in the male confessional novel of the 1990s.

intend to transgress boundaries, but try to bridge the unnecessary gap between the social sciences and the humanities. Thirdly, I hope that my interdisciplinary approach helps to free deconstruction from its often rigid application to canonical texts and thus regains its political implication that more often than not is overlooked by its critics.

Before I go on commenting on my scholarly intentions with regard to the male confessional novel, I wish to establish what consequences the feminist movement has had on the conceptualisation of masculinity. In doing so, my main concern lies with the third wave feminist movement.

WHO IS NOT AFRAID OF FEMINISM? – NEW LADDISM AS A RELAPSE INTO PRE-FEMINIST BEHAVIOUR?

The third wave feminist movement preoccupied itself with the definition of gender categories and their implications, especially by drawing on poststructuralist theories.¹⁴ According to Andrew Milner and Jeff Browitt, “[t]he politico-intellectual effects of the developing union between feminism and post-structuralism were essentially twofold: first there was a shift in general feminist preoccupations from political economy and sociology to literary and cultural studies [...]; second, there was a shift within feminist cultural studies, away from a characteristically structuralist interest in how the patriarchal text positions women, and towards a new interest in how women readers produce their own resistant, or at least negotiated, pleasures from texts” (Milner and Browitt 2002: 135). This mainly French post-structuralist feminism is very ‘intellectual’ in character and therefore sometimes

14 Feminism nowadays, from a historical as well as thematic viewpoint, is usually divided into three separate phases. The first phase dates back to the 19th century suffragette-movement that was primarily designed to acquire political rights for women. In literary studies, first wave feminism is often associated with the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft (cf. *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, published in 1792).

The term feminism as it is used in everyday conversation usually refers to this second wave feminism, as do the derogative term ‘libber’ or the German term ‘Emanze’ (from ‘Emanzipation’ En: emancipation).

Second wave feminism was initiated with the above mentioned ‘revolution’, namely the women’s liberation movement in the late 1960s. It is directed against the unequal distribution of power between men and women in private and public life, work and culture. Second wave feminism has triggered the academic study and feminist theories that focus on the complex ways women have been denied social power and equality. Feminism has widely been received in sociology, philosophy, literary and cultural studies and in various ways has analysed how the patriarchal social structure has favoured and empowered men while putting women at a disadvantage.

gets accused of being “centred on the deconstruction of male-dominated academic knowledge, rather than on the empirical reality of women’s life in patriarchy” (ibid).¹⁵ However, the Australian feminist philosopher Grosz maintains, “feminist struggles are [...] occurring in many different practices, including the practice of the production of meanings, discourses and knowledges [...] This struggle for the right to write, read and know differently is not merely a minor or secondary task within feminist politics” (Grosz, cited in Milner and Browitt 2002: 136). This struggle has reached yet another level, with regard to both men and women. Reference is here made to Stuart Hall who calls the process of how texts are produced, circulated, and received ‘the struggle to signify’ by which he tries to capture the complex relationship between language and ideology. The latter influences the way texts are produced and received, or in Hall’s terminology, encoded and decoded. What is at stake here, of course, is how signifying practices define who we are, that is, our identity. The Cartesian dictum *cogito ergo sum* has long been substituted by the dictum *I signify therefore I am*.

It is almost forty years since the beginning of the women’s movement, but the quest for equality has not yet ceased to preoccupy feminists, sociologists, cultural critics and human scientists. Should we not have already entered the post-feminist phase? Some people seem to think so. Women have been invited to leave their domestic realm to take part in the public sphere of economic managerialism and global capitalism; there are female engineers, female doctors, female pilots and female bus-drivers. And male nurses for that matter.

But as Whitehead and Barrett point out, “[d]espite the fact that the situation of women has been ameliorated, they still carry the burden of multiple roles, still receive lower wages, suffer discrimination in terms of job opportunities and stepping up the career-ladder. Therefore, there can never be a ‘post-feminist’ era” (2001: 5). Imelda Whelehan seems to share this opinion, claiming that

[...] feminism’s success has been announced rather prematurely, and what we seem to witness at the level of popular culture is, on the one hand, a flourishing of nostalgia for the ‘old order’ of babes, breasts and uncomplicated relationships, and on the other a sense of powerlessness that as, taken individually, such images are ‘harmless’ or trivial, so there is no clear platform for critique (Whelehan 2000: 178).

15 Typical exponents of French post-structuralist feminism are Julia Kristeva, Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray. For an introduction to feminism and poststructuralism, see Weedon (1987).

While I totally accept Whelehan's argument in the sense that there is a current tendency to re-naturalize areas of sexism, i.e. that we have somehow entered an era we might term retrosexism, I would like to put into question the second part of her claim namely that the 'post-modern ironic laughter' with which this retrosexism is received can be simply put down to postmodern cynicism. Contemporary male-authored or male-focused popular culture is often summarised under the term 'laddishness' or New Laddism. It is new in the sense that men were asked not to behave in a laddish way in the light of second and third wave feminism. This emerging new laddishness is now viewed as a backlash against feminism. And in some aspects, rightly so. However, it is my argument throughout this book that we have to differentiate between different sorts of articulated 'laddishness' and that we must not toss every single contemporary popular cultural product addressed to men or focused on men into the same bin labelled 'retrosexism'. There are always different perspectives from which a social phenomenon – and such I understand the re-emergence of laddism, including the male confessional novel which is accused of retrosexism by feminist critics and scholars – can be addressed and criticised. But there is no clear-cut message, and as Bradford accurately summarises, ladlit

is a particular brand of fiction by men that has proven both popular and contentious – contentious because commentators are divided on whether it is a commendable examination of maleness or the perpetuation, thinly disguised prefeminist manifestation. (2007: 143)

It is exactly this tension between the different reaction to the popularity of ladlit or the male confessional novel that makes it into an interesting subject of study. It furthermore underscores the claim that meaning cannot be pinned down, and the discourses that follow a literary or publishing phenomenon such as this particular genre create a battleground for contesting interpretations. I will provide sufficient evidence to show that there are different categories and gender scripts, and that at least part of the retrosexism accusation may be qualified in the light of my findings.

THE MALE CONFESSIONAL NOVEL AS A MIDDLEBROW PHENOMENON OF THE 1990S

As already pointed out, there exist other labels such as *ladlit* (Showalter 2002; Cockin 2007) or *cynical young men* (Niergaden 2000) both of which at least partly comprise the writers I count among the male confessional novel writers. Elaine Showalter views the *ladlit* of the 1990s as a continuation of the “romantic, comic, popular male confessional literature, stretching from Kingsley to Martin Amis” (2002: 60) to writers such as Nick Hornby, Tim Lott or David Baddiel.¹⁶ Showalter makes a vital point by denying Kingsley Amis’s novel *Lucky Jim* (1958) the status of a typical angry young man novel, claiming that “[t]his lad is not an angry young man at all, not an existential rebel or political revolutionary, but rather someone who would prefer to be happy, loved, and settled” (2002: 65). Unlike Jimmy Porter in *Looking Back in Anger* or Arthur Seaton in *Saturday Night, Sunday Morning*, *Lucky Jim* does not make use of the defiant working-class rhetoric that characterizes the works of the Angry Young Men of the 1950s. Therefore, I also understand the male confessional novel to belong to the tradition of Kingsley Amis rather than of Alan Sillitoe. At the end of her comparative study of the laddish Jim of the 1950s, the lucky John of the 1980s and the funny Jim of the 1990s, Showalter comes to the conclusion that the genre of *ladlit* has exhausted itself and is in need of redefinition. From a contemporary viewpoint, I would now argue that Showalter was at least partly wrong because *ladlit* has proved to be surprisingly persistent even though – and there I agree with her – a lot of the publications read like mere imitations of the early novels such as those by Hornby or Lott. Cockin comes to a similar conclusion, asserting that

[i]n their use of contradiction, ironic wit and ideological vacillation, chicklit and *ladlit* have elicited diverse responses of intense identification and alienation, proving to be a surprisingly long lasting phenomenon, provoking

16 Joseph Brooker refers to Showalter, maintaining that she identifies *ladlit* as a key sub-genre of the 1990s which follows the tradition of Kingsley and Martin Amis. In Brooker’s view, the latter’s “mixture of sexual confession, cheeky humour and anxious introspection has been vital in shaping the sub-genre, though as verbal craftsmen none of the other writers mentioned by Showalter [Nick Hornby, Tony Parsons and Tim Lott, *ao*] are fit to light Amis’s cigarettes” (2006: 6). Brooker’s rather condescending tone and his insistence on the term ‘sub-genre’, which Showalter does not use in her article, makes clear that he does not think the *ladlit* authors share Amis’s literary talent. This example, again, shows how reluctant literary scholars are to accept authors such as Nick Hornby as ‘literary’ authors who deserve the same sort of attention as Martin Amis, Julian Barnes or Salman Rushdie.

debates about aesthetic value and contemporary ethical questions. (Cockin 2007: 120)

Cockin endorses Bradford's view (see above), but puts the success of the genre down to the tension between identification on the one hand and alienation on the other. In my analysis of reader reviews that I include in the discussion of the novels in Part II, the claim of the responses in terms of identification and alienation will be thoroughly confirmed.

But let me come back to the problem of offering a clear-cut definition of the genre of *ladlit* or the male confessional novel, which is by no means as easily achieved as sometimes insinuated by the critics of popular literature. By the same token, I tend to disagree with Göran Niergaden who has coined the term 'cynical young men' as a comparative category to 'angry young men'. In a very lucid and plausible essay Niergaden exemplifies how the protagonists of the 1990s are too tired to feel angry anymore and have become cynical instead. However, his argument lacks credibility in terms of categorisation. Niergaden tries to underscore his thesis by using the work of three authors as examples; Christopher Brookmyre's *Quite Ugly One Morning*, Nick Hornby's *High Fidelity* and Irvine Welsh's *Trainspotting*. Whereas Brookmyre's and Welsh's protagonists undoubtedly display the sort of cynical behaviour Niergaden describes, and I agree with his rather explicit conclusion that they "show a terribly disillusioned type of hero which cannot be matched with the concepts of Sartre's 'nausea' or Camus's 'alienation' any more" (2000: 231; my translation), these novels share more with the tradition of the American hard-boiled novel than with the English lineage from Amis to Hornby. In my view, putting Hornby in the same basket with Brookmyre and Welsh does not stand up to scrutiny; Hornby's characters maybe cynical to some extent, but they neither take drugs, murder people nor harbour any preferences for sodomy or necrophilia. Therefore, I regard the concept of the cynical young men – in Niergaden's sense – as unsuitable for the novels of my corpus. As for the term *ladlit*, I have certain reservations, too, because it is a rather broad term and is sometimes applied to all books written by male authors for a predominantly male readership. Writers who are usually listed among the *ladlit* authors are, for example, Ben Elton, Andy McNab or Alex Garland, all of whom, in my view, are rather different from those I consider to be typical male confessional novel writers. It is interesting to note, however, that on amazon.co.uk *ladlit* exists as a separate genre, which includes

most writers mentioned above, i.e. the representatives of ladlit, the cynical young men and the male confessional novel.¹⁷

The category or genre ‘male confessional novel’ is in fact a label created by the publishing industry, trying to match the *zeitgeist* of the 1990s and the then increasing interest in this type of genre fiction and was born with the publication of Nick Hornby’s bestseller *High Fidelity* in 1995.¹⁸

The typical male confessional novel is a first person narrative written by a male author in the 1990s. It is likely to have an urban setting (London in most cases), and features a male protagonist who struggles with adulthood both in terms of professional and private choices he is forced to make. “[...] ladlit creates for the reader a sense of the immediacy of youth and the strangeness of maturity imbued with an awareness of its inevitable onset” (Cockin 2007: 108). Male confessional novels usually contain long, pseudo-philosophical monologues as well as witty dialogues and more often than not display a rather ironic tone, bordering on the cynical from time to time.

Usually at the beginning of the novel, the main male protagonist who is in his late twenties or early-to-mid-thirties has come to a point in his life where he evaluates the *status quo* in terms of career, love and friendship, and in most cases, starts thinking about mortality and death. Another characteristic of the male confessional novel is that it openly addresses the question of gender in general, masculinity in particular and therefore the issue of identity formation. Most of the male anti-heroes in these novels have failed in one way or another and are thus busy trying to come to terms with their being average and finding a place where they fit in. Most novels do not offer a straightforward solution but draw attention to the problem of how life is governed by the very possibility of undecidability and making choices. To sum up, male confessional novels usually express a distinct fatigue with post-modern ontological insecurity, as well as an implicit critique of present-day consumerism.

Even though the British male confessional novel is a specific cultural phenomenon of the 1990s, just as its female counterpart – the female confessional novel or chicklit – have their precursors; Charles Dickens and Charlotte Brontë might just be two cases in point.

Just as their forerunners that today belong to the canon but were not considered ‘high literature’ when they were first published, the male confessional novel is more often than not considered to be popu-

17 The books can be found under fiction/contemporary fiction/1970s onwards/ladlit (www.amazon.co.uk/Lad-Lit-Books/s/qid=1220558832).

18 Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones Diary* is often considered to be *High Fidelity*’s female counterpart, a novel that, like Hornby’s, has enjoyed great popularity and has been turned into a likewise popular film of the same title.

lar rather than literary.¹⁹ As this is certainly true if one judges the popularity of fiction in terms of sales figures, it does not do justice to its manifold cultural implications, i.e. to the various uses it may be put to. I am going to elaborate on the problematic distinction 'high culture versus popular culture' later (chapter 3). Here I confine myself to emphasizing that when it comes to categorizing the male confessional novel, I give preference to the term 'middlebrow'. I will elaborate on the term more extensively in chapter 3, but I do already pre-empt my argument by emphasizing the twofold use middlebrow suggests. On the one hand, it can bridge the gap between high and lowbrow; on the other hand it questions the dichotomy high/low by replacing them both.

Despite its popularity, the male confessional novel, so far, has not really been a research topic for literary scholars. One reason for this is of course its connotation with 'light' rather than 'serious' fiction. Furthermore, the books published by other British authors, those considered 'serious' and who became well-known around the same time as Nick Hornby's, were preoccupied with a different set of questions than the *ladlit*-authors. As becomes visible from a number of essay collections on the contemporary novel published in the late 1990s, the topics dealt with during that time were questions as to how to make sense of history and deal with the past on the one hand, and how to accommodate ethnic minorities (either immigrant or national minorities such as Welsh or Scottish) and cultural hybridity on the other hand. Authors such as Graham Swift, Julian Barnes, Pat Barker and Ian Sinclair represent the former whereas Salman Rushdie, Hanif Kureishi, Zadie Smith, James Kelman and Caryl Philips belong to the latter. In short, the 'serious' novel of the 1990s had its rather limited fields of interest such as, for example, the past, myth, cultural hybridities and social pathologies which located the mode of narrative somewhere between magical realism and surrealism. This is why giving the male confessional novel closer attention is required because it tried to satisfy the revived need for realism.

But there are other reasons why, despite this neglect from academia, the male confessional novel is a compelling genre to study. To start with, the sales figures themselves indicate how popular these books are, and therefore, we can assume that a wide segment of the reading public takes an interest in this specific type of fiction and adopts what they have read into their daily discourse. Second, these books were produced, circulated and read at a specific time. The study of these books gives us insight into what the generation of twenty to

19 For a discussion of how contemporary literature could be canonized, especially in a teaching context, see Bentley's article "Developing the Canon: Teaching Contemporary Fiction" (2007).

thirty-somethings were preoccupied with. The 1990s were some kind of a transitional phase, the big caesura being the change of parliament in 1997 when Labour won the general election after eighteen years of Conservative government and Tony Blair took office. The authors as well as readers of those books grew up in Thatcherite Britain, hoped for the big change and later, to a greater or lesser extent, were disappointed by New Labour and its Third Way Politics. I will elaborate on the socio-cultural and political climate of Britain in the 1990s in more detail in the following chapter.

A third reason why it is worthwhile having a closer look at the desperate young men of the 1990s is that the gender topics discussed in those books tie in with the post-feminist discussion of their time. A lot of what is being negotiated in terms of gender relations and labour division stands in direct relation to the ongoing gender debate either inside or outside academia. Linked to that, I see a fourth reason in the fact that during the 1990s, quality papers increasingly began to cover social and gender issues. Therefore we are here confronted with a high degree of intertextuality.

Last but not least, and as I have already mentioned above, the male confessional novel has its various precursors. There has been a long tradition of confessional writing, initiated by Jacques Rousseau and taken up by people such as Thomas de Quincey. What might even be a more plausible starting point in terms of comparison is of course the *Bildungsroman*, which has a primary and often quoted representative in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*. It will therefore be one of my arguments that there are striking parallels between the *Bildungsroman* and the male confessional novel. A third precursor I see in the Angry Young Men Generation, because both the 1950s and the 1990s were decades of transition and dissatisfaction even though the exponents of the 1990s were not so much angry as maybe cynical or defeatist. These generic similarities will be put under closer scrutiny in chapter 2.

● OUTLINE OF THE BOOK

In Part I, I will first provide a short summary of the most important developments that marked the political and cultural discourses of the 1990s before discussing the literary landscape of that period. I will then elaborate on the notion of identity and its various crises, including the problem of inadequacy and the crisis of masculinity. In the second chapter, I will focus on the relationship between gender and genre and between the male confessional novel and its precursor, the *Bildungsroman*. Part I will be concluded by the chapter that forms the

core of my theoretical approach, namely the discussion of the notion of popular culture.

Part II contains the analysis of eight male confessional novels, subdivided into three sections; structures of obsessions, structures of non-commitments and structures of prolonged adolescence, followed by a concluding chapter, summarising the insights gathered from the analysis. In order to get an insight into how the male confessional novel was conceived by its readers, I supplement my interpretation with reader reviews I collected on amazon.co.uk. Readers' opinions are very rarely taken seriously in academic practice because literary scholars are usually not too fond of empirical material, which, in my view, is a big shortcoming.

My analysis will be supplemented by an epilogue discussing *The Lad Lit Project* and an appendix consisting of an interview I conducted with Nick Hornby.

The novels that will be discussed in the main part are *High Fidelity* and *About a Boy* by Nick Hornby, *White City Blue* by Tim Lott, *The Best a Man can Get* by John O'Farrell, *Man and Boy* by Tony Parsons, *Time for Bed* by David Baddiel, and *My Legendary Girlfriend* and *Mr Commitment* by Mike Gayle.