

# Waiting for the New Writer: An Interview with Malcolm Bradbury

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## Abstract

Malcolm Bradbury is one of the classics of contemporary British literature. Apart from being a university teacher, he has combined his career as a novelist with that of literary critic, and in this interview he speaks about those aspects of British culture that are central to his interests: the campus novels, the universities, the authors of the fifties and his own beginning as a writer and teacher during that period. He also evaluates British culture during the 80s and wonders if the great writer of our time will ever appear.

**Q.** In your novels the main characters are usually teachers of English, and there appears to be a recurrent image about them. Describing the protagonist of *Rates of Exchange*, Dr. Petworth, you say that “He is white and male, forty and married, bourgeois and British—all items to anyone’s contemporary discredit...” (Bradbury 1987, 19). And there are many like Dr. Petworth in your books and in the so-called campus novels. Why is it that the teachers of English are portrayed as comic, ridiculous figures, and particularly by teachers of English themselves like you or David Lodge?

**A.** Well, he’s an anti-hero in my view; this isn’t the kind of character who will change the world or who will make an enormous difference but he is present at very important political events, so that’s part of it. In *Rates of Exchange* and I think in nearly all my novels the central characters, except for Howard Kirk, are anti-heroes, they are somewhat passive figures who enter a situation that is much bigger than them. That’s one way to write stories—you don’t have the sort of character who is master of the situation, you have the sort of character who is the victim or the observer of the situation. There are an awful lot of novels about that in every culture, it’s not all that unusual. In this particular case, there are quite a lot of novels about English visitors to America, and what they are often concerned with is a kind of recessive period in British culture itself. It’s a time when British power is diminishing and so the Briton in America is no longer a sort of Dickensian ‘bold traveller’ but someone who, as I saw when I went to America in the early 1950s, has no money, is just broke. You were only allowed to take so much money out of Britain if you were travelling, because of the currency regulations and controls, and so you were in a very feeble position, you ended up in a country that was absolutely rich and there was an amazing contrast between you, this rather feeble figure, and them.

**Q.** Could it be said, then, that the figure of the Englishman coming from Postwar Britain and left in the heartland of America is in some way a symbol of the diminishing power of

Britain after the war?

A. Yes, certainly.

Q. When one studies the campus novels one finds that almost all of them are compared to Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* and most of their characters to Jim Dixon. What is your consideration of this novel? Was it some kind of precursor?

A. Well, I think it's a very good example of its kind but the field had, as it were, already been prepared for the book. I started my book *Eating People is Wrong* well before *Lucky Jim* came out—I started it in 1952 and it came out in 1954—so the book wasn't 'new born', it came out in an atmosphere which had been shaped by quite a few other books and by the way these books had been interpreted as culturally important. That would include Philip Larkin's early novels *Jill* and *The Girl in Winter* which are earlier than Amis's, and it would include William Cooper's *Scenes from Provincial Life* which appeared in 1950.

Q. And there were even earlier examples like Max Beerbohm's *Zuleika Dobson*.

A. Well, yes, but I think the great difference is that ours were the first university novels that were also provincial. There had been university novels before but I think the term campus novel is really associated with the kind of novel that is not about Oxford or Cambridge. *Zuleika Dobson* was something like 1912, and there are all these very romantic novels about Oxford or Cambridge as the home of style, art, eccentricity, the aristocracy, and then Evelyn Waugh develops that.

Q. So basically the campus novels are very connected with the 50s.

A. Yes, and they're a very different version of what you could call our intellectual culture, if universities are intellectual environments in the first place. They are a very true version of intellectual culture: what intellectuals are about, where they come from, how they feel in relation to the society and power in the society. All of this has changed in these novels, and I think the basic theme is a mixture of a great sense of cultural transition, and so Jim Dixon, the spirit of Amis in *Lucky Jim*, is 'the new lot has arrived, the new generation has arrived'.

Q. But recent writers still write campus novels, like Howard Jacobson's *Coming from Behind*.

A. Sure, the genre hasn't disappeared; the question is how it locks into a significant and relevant commentary on British society and what its relationship is to the culture. I think Howard Jacobson's book is a wonderful 'turn of the screw' as Henry James would say. What I mean is that he assumes that this genre already exists but there are all sorts of

things that it's failed to do: it hasn't been set in a polytechnic in Wolverhampton, it hasn't been written by an Australian author ... so he's teasing the thing.

**Q.** Would you say it's a genre or a sub-genre?

**A.** I think what Howard's book shows is that there is a genre by this time, so you can take the genre and play with it, whereas there was an earlier stage when there wasn't quite a genre yet, and so if you were writing in this area you didn't think you were a genre writer.

**Q.** There is an interesting difference between the characters in the campus novels by other authors and your own characters. The teachers of English in other campus novels usually despise their jobs, they hate the university and get drunk, chase female students... But the teachers of English that you portray, or at least some of them, are different in the sense that they like the university, they believe in teaching and in the university as a place of transmission of knowledge. Where do you place yourself with respect to the university as a concept?

**A.** Yes, well, I've stayed in universities all my life which means that I believe in them.

**Q.** You haven't retired, like David Lodge.

**A.** Yes, and like particularly Kingsley Amis and John Wain who actually did leave and they had about 8 or 10 years in academic life but it was in a way staged, establishing themselves as authors and that's a very different career and a very different attitude from the one that I had. I for all sorts of reasons was very committed to every stage of my academic life. In my first job, I took over from Richard Hoggart in the extramural department and there was a very missionary spirit, I mean, I really felt that I was an educational missionary. I had a great deal of belief and then of course I went to a new university, the University of East Anglia, and I was given the chance in a way to write my own ticket, I mean, I was professor of American Studies and I was also able to start the creative writing programme. I was teaching exactly what I wanted to teach. Unlike *Lucky Jim*, I wasn't ill-treated by boring old dons from another generation and I wasn't in some Cambridge college where people said "Oh, I gather this young man is a writer. Why have we let him into the college?". Nobody ever made my life difficult for being a writer in a University, quite the opposite; unlike Kingsley Amis who was often at odds with whatever institution he taught in, he always had a quarrel with his professor or with the head of the college or whatever.

**Q.** Are you acquainted with him?<sup>1</sup>

**A.** Yes, I know Kingsley pretty well now, I didn't when our books were compared. Well, as I say I think Kingsley really is his generation's version of Evelyn Waugh, he was a

loner, a maverick, a very spirited, independent individual. Kingsley ended up being the Evelyn Waugh of the next generation, he simply created his own vision of the world, he wasn't interested in pleasing anybody or accepting any institution. Waugh would join those institutions, whether it was the Catholic Church or the British Army, and for a time would have the highest expectations of them and then they would disappoint him in one fashion or another by whatever it is, not believing in God enough or not winning the war in the way that it should have been won, and so he ended up disappointed in all the institutions, in traditional attractions. Well, Kingsley was the same. When *Lucky Jim* came out everybody thought that he was very left wing and that there was a political agenda that he was writing from, but there wasn't. He was, as I say, another Evelyn Waugh who got involved in this and then he was disappointed, and he got involved in that and he was disappointed.

**Q.** The movement of the Angry Young Men turned out to be a very conservative movement, but at the beginning it didn't seem so.

**A.** They weren't really very politically involved, they were individuals.

**Q.** One more thing about the universities. Obviously they have suffered the budget cuts of the eighties and David Lodge has recently said that the austerity has badly affected the conference cycle. Speaking about lecturing abroad he says that "the days of wine, roses and sex are coming to an end" (Bonazzi 1994, 19). Do you think that there has been a golden age of going to conferences as a sort of pilgrimage, a time that has now ended?

**A.** Well, it's probably ended for our generation but I don't think it's ended. It's true there was a time when there was enormous intellectual excitement about the conference world, just as there was about the university world, and that had to do with the fact of its growing power and influence. You see, when I went to university in the early 1950s there were only about 20 universities in Britain and now there are 125.

**Q.** Does it mean that there is a university in each small town?

**A.** Yes. Last year all the polytechnics were turned into universities, so now England is filled with universities and the rarity value of the university experience has disappeared. It's no longer a mysterious wonderland out there and it's just sort of the next level of school really, and in the same sort of way I think the mystique of the conference has disappeared because in the early days conferences had to do with the putting together of a new vision of the world. So it was terribly important to go, to travel everywhere because the connections hadn't been made, and one of the most important things about the post-war atmosphere was how disconnected the world had become. If you were a writer in the fifties none of the things that had fitted together for your predecessors actually did—even in the 1930s when Europe was collapsing in all sorts of ways, including here in Spain with

the Civil War, British writers actually felt very European and they spent most of their time in Europe, and indeed they ended up spending most of their time here in Spain. But I belong to the first generation of Brits who actually couldn't travel, I mean, I couldn't travel when I was 18 because of the currency regulations and restrictions, you had to have visas to travel abroad. For years the great big world that our predecessors had travelled in, the Evelyn Waugh's, the Graham Greenes, the George Orwells or the D. H. Lawrences, we couldn't explore. As I say you had to apply to the government, to the treasury, in order to get a visa and you had to explain why you wanted to travel and it was extraordinary, it simply reflected the poverty of Britain of the time and the fact that every penny that was spent outside the country was making the balance of payments situation worse. There was nothing in the grand sense 'political' about it, just a reflection of sheer bloody poverty and all of Europe was poor after 1945.

**Q.** We have talked before about how budget cuts affected British universities during the eighties. How do you consider that decade and how do you evaluate the years of Mrs. Thatcher's government?

**A.** Really rather differently from the way that I did at the time when it was actually happening. In retrospect there is a different meaning, first of all because it seems to me that the 70s in Britain and in the United States, and in a number of countries, was an era of totally arid politics, and this because there was the oil crisis, economies were running out of control. In America there was Watergate and the loss of the power, of the authority of the Presidency, and there was the feeling that none of our political leaders could actually provide any kind of leadership, and then at the end of the 70s there was Jimmy Carter's administration and the American hostages crisis. So in fact there was an atmosphere right through the West of enfeeblement, and this atmosphere was particularly bad in Britain in the winter of 1978-79, which was called the 'Winter of Discontent'. So I think either we would have had a totally feeble political leader who just let the problems get worse and worse, or we had to have somebody with a great instinct for leadership, which in fact is what we had. And it was because in their guts a lot of people absolutely hated Maggie Thatcher, as most intellectuals still do, but in their guts they knew that the country was in a mess and that their hatred finally had to be tempered, to be controlled. It did have to be said that she managed a political minefield terribly calmly, and for a great many people in Britain actually did reconstruct the prospects of the society. The people who are really paying the price for this are the present generation of conservatives in Britain who are supposed to come up with the same kind of goods but can't, and so I have no doubt that at the next election the Labour Party will get elected.

**Q.** Margaret Drabble, who as you know was completely against Thatcher, said recently that she now realised that some of the measures that Thatcher took were necessary. Do you think that British intellectuals are re-thinking this period again, that they have changed their minds?

A. Yes, I do actually.

Q. Is it your case? Have you changed with respect to Margaret Thatcher or do you still think the same as ten years ago?

A. It's a dumb feeling. I'm particularly dismayed about the state of British Culture, I suppose World Culture. I find it very hard to put the blame for the things that dismay me entirely on Maggie Thatcher, as many of my friends are inclined to do. First of all it seems to me the story of the 80s is really about the Cold War itself, it was about who was going to win the Cold War. Reagan and Thatcher were almost a married couple, they were a twosome and the major politics in the period have mostly to do with the relationship between Western Europe and America and Russia, and so that politics ended in what was ostensibly the total success of the West. So anyway, the 80s ended in an extraordinary victory for the West and monetarism. Now, within a couple of years, for most thinking people in the West, it seems to be a totally hollow victory, I mean, it's a victory for what? It's a victory for Armani and Versace and Gucci and Safeways and international corporations, and so somehow the world has been handed over to these international corporations and international creditors and the organizations that go with them. And that wasn't what we meant, that wasn't what this cold war was about, it was about the difference between totalitarianism and liberal democracy, and nobody talks anymore about liberal democracy or its values. It was as if the values were simply a small underpinning, and this is exactly what the Western intellectuals always feared: that if they defended the idea of liberal democracy maybe what they were really defending was the great capitalist corporations, you know, JP Morgan, etc.

Q. You have said that the 80s were a great time for English literature, and there are many good novels written during the 80s, and this was so even when the problems of Britain were bigger and socially it was a harsh time for many people. Was this situation a sort of breeding ground for literature?

A. I think that most people who wrote fiction in the 80s actually thought they had a real job to do, writing for a reason, not just writing to sell their books.

Q. In a recent book you say that recent British fiction is very plural, "ranging freely from one genre to another, from the detective story to science fiction, the historical novel to the post-modern pastiche, reviving forms of writing from the past while experimenting with the often media-based forms of the future" (Bradbury 1992, 9). Is recent British literature so plural? Do you see any force guiding it or is it as chaotic as you put it?

A: Well, I think the novel is chaotic but then the chaos will resolve itself. I think the reason it's chaotic is, first of all, that the 80s was a strong powerful period energized by the realization that Britain was in a period of fundamental change and, therefore, if you

were a British writer there really was something to write about, whereas in the 90s I don't think there is a very strong feeling of that kind even, let's say, among people who in the 80s for different reasons also had something to write about, the feminists, the multiculturalists ... so nearly all of their best work is in the 80s as well. In other words, an awful lot of new agendas were written into the British novel in the 80s and now you have most young writers seem to be producing versions, feeble versions of what was very strong then. I mean, the political novels that I read now don't seem to be original, the politics is the same politics that I've read before.

**Q.** One of the common characteristics that we as readers feel in recent British fiction is the re-working of history, the re-writing of the past. How do you explain this trend in modern novels?

**A.** Again I think that this is the fundamental theme of the 80s too, so for me the people who were writing about that in the 80s were Graham Swift, Peter Ackroyd ... and as far as I am concerned their best books are the books they wrote ten years ago, it's *Waterland*, and Julian Barnes in *Flaubert's Parrot* and *A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters* ... those are very good books indeed and so the situation now is far less lively than that, but on the other hand, the writer, the new writer, or indeed the old writer, has the terrible job of coming to terms with the fact that the world has changed completely. It changed in a few minutes in November 1989 when the Berlin wall fell and the Cold War ended, and it seems to me the task of the writer is now redefined, I mean, everywhere, in whatever country you think about, writers are struggling with this fact, in America, in Britain, in the former Czechoslovakia, in Russia, in Poland, South Africa.... The world has changed far more than writing has and we haven't yet generated the new writing. And I say this in a kind of guilt because it seems to me that, as a writer who takes the world of literature very seriously, I should have figured out better than I have what to do next. But then I'm no different from Milan Kundera, Ivan Klima, Václav Havel, Martin Amis and E.L. Doctorow, so I think we're all in a state of bewilderment.

**Q.** Could it be said that the recent past hasn't been assimilated and that's why writers look back to the past?

**A.** Yes, but at the same time you can read the anxiety there as well. I suppose if I were Dr. Frankenstein who was trying to produce not the perfect new scientific creature, but the perfect new writer, I would actually seek to find someone who, when the world really started on Day 1 in November 1989, has to describe the world that follows this, and describe it not just in terms of its habits, and not some commonplace facts, but a story that was really about that great sense of difference, and who could actually articulate this as the writers of the Romantic Movement did after the French Revolution. I have the feeling that we are now writing in a totally different world.

**Q.** The critics must be in a state of expectancy, waiting for something new to come, something new to be written, which according to you hasn't been written yet.

**A.** Well, I haven't found it.

**Q.** Not even the writers writing in English but who are not British?

**A.** Not in the sense that I'm describing it. I mean, I'm not saying that we don't have good writers, but I'm talking about the writer who is as it were 'the magician' of the moment. Certain writers can take on this role—the world is filled with very good writers indeed, so it's not that we are troubled by the existence of lousy writers, but what we lack is the good writer who has chosen to write about this, who has found the way of writing about this.

**Q.** Someone to grasp the spirit of the times.

**A.** Exactly, and I very much understand why because I spend a lot of time struggling with these thoughts and trying to define that book, and I can't say I've ever come up with it.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This interview was conducted in December 1994. Kingsley Amis died in 1995.

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