

## 2 A Continuum of Fragmentation

### Distinguishing the Short Story Cycle from the Composite Novel

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The first decades of the twenty-first century have witnessed the publication of several works of fiction that, though marketed as novels, wear that label rather uneasily. These works are highly fragmented texts, made up of separate textual units – short stories, novellas, sketches, textual fragments, or a mixture of these – which become progressively more integrated as the novels unfold. In their juxtaposition of different characters, voices, and lives, these books depart from the single-protagonist-driven plot of the traditional novel, especially as the characters do not share the usual novelistic ties of family, love, or friendship. Instead, they are connected through a common setting or shared history or are brought together through an accident or coincidence. In this way, these novels participate in the larger cultural debate about forms of human connectivity at a time when the limitations of high individualism have come into focus while state formations, ideology, and personal identity no longer appear as determinative as they did in the latter decades of the twentieth century. A brief description of some representative examples will help to elucidate the thematic and formal characteristics of these novels.<sup>1</sup>

A first example is Rachel Cusk's *Arlington Park* (2006), which juxtaposes the stories of different middle-class women living in an English suburb and then brings some of them together at a dinner party. A common setting also unites Donal Ryan's *The Spinning Heart* (2013), which consists of twenty-one dramatic monologues told by the different inhabitants of an Irish village, and Monica Ali's *Alentejo Blue* (2006), which depicts the haphazard lives of locals, expats, and tourists in a Portuguese village. John Lanchester's *Capital* (2012) and Jon McGregor's *If Nobody Speaks of Remarkable Things* (2002), similarly, are set on a largely anonymous urban street. In *Capital*, the inhabitants of Pepys Road live their separate lives under the looming threats of both the financial crisis and the anonymous missives they receive in their letterboxes. McGregor's novel starts from the premise of anonymity but has a tragic accident bring the characters briefly together. Tragic events also form the anchor points in

the fragmented novels of Zadie **Smith** and Colum **McCann**. *NW* (2012) traces the experiences of four characters in London's North-West suburb of Willesden up until their lives collide in a disastrous final encounter, while McCann's *Let the Great World Spin* (2009) is structured around the 1974 tightrope walk of Philippe Pettit between New York's Twin Towers as the different chapters depict the partly interconnected lives of characters witnessing this event. In **Ali Smith's** *Hotel World* (2001), the five sections contain the widely different voices of five people connected to a big inner-city hotel and in Smith's subsequent novel, *There but for the* (2011), similarly, the separate sections evoke the different lives of people who are tangentially related to – and transformed by – the man who locks himself in a room in the opening pages of the novel. In still other novels, the characters are more far-flung in space and time even as hidden connections – existential, metaphysical, or psychological – are gradually revealed. David **Mitchell's** *Cloud Atlas* (2004), with its onion-like structure of enclosed novellas, is perhaps the best-known example here, but Sebastian **Faulks's** *A Possible Life* (2012) and **Simon Van Booy's** *The Illusion of Separateness* (2013) equally hinge on the shared historical or existential connections between a disparate cast of characters.

Although these books are all advertised as “novels” in the paratext, reviewers have often expressed frustration with this label. A reviewer of *Alentejo Blue*, for instance, calls the book “a frustrating novel” because of the absence of a strong plot (Shriver), and another one dismisses the book on this very basis, arguing “[t]his novel is structurally piecemeal, a collection of vignettes with no forward narrative thrust at all” (Walter). *The Illusion of Separateness*, similarly, is judged to fall short as a novel, as it offers only “a series of interconnected narratives” (Lakso) and “hopscoches across countries and eras, introducing new characters at each point” (Power). *Capital* is criticized for the “flimsiness” of the device that connects the different storylines: the anonymous letters with ‘We want what you have’, which the inhabitants of Pepys Road receive. In an otherwise positive review, the structure of *NW* is criticized as a “bit wobbly and lopsided by design, [...] a hotchpotch in five parts” (Lorentzen 21), and a review of *A Possible Life* states:

This is not a novel. The publishers refer to it as such on the inside jacket, perhaps in an attempt to steer the reader away from the concept – apparently anathema to British publishers concerned with sales – of a collection of stories. Sebastian Faulks may well have conceived of it as a novel in his mind, as he has stated in recent interviews, but the truth is that *A Possible Life* is a gathering of five longish short stories, ranging from 40 pages to about 100, stories that span continents, centuries and subject matter, sometimes extremely skilfully, at other times less effectively.

(Johnstone)

Regardless of whether the ‘novel’ tag has been the choice of author or publisher, critical dissension about the pertinence of this tag in these and several other cases points to the more fundamental question of how to label and interpret these narrative texts, which can be said to constitute something of a trend in contemporary literature. Are they indeed novels, perhaps with the qualifying addition of ‘fragmented’, ‘composite’, or ‘postmodern’?<sup>2</sup> Or should they rather be read as interlinked short story collections and placed within the tradition of the short story cycle as it has developed since the late nineteenth century, primarily in the US, but also in Britain and Ireland?<sup>3</sup> The scope of these questions extends beyond that of ‘mere’ critical pigeonholing. Generic conventions and traditions form a blueprint for writers to use, emulate, transform, or reject, while they also shape readerly expectations and influence the understanding and evaluation of a literary text. As James Nagel has argued, the lack of critical and popular recognition of the importance of the short story cycle in literary history has caused several interrelated story collections to be “misconstrued” and dismissed as failed novels (9). At the same time, the challenge posed by the many fragmented fictions published in the past two decades also uncovers a limitation of contemporary short story cycle theory, viz. its inability to unambiguously delineate the genre and to identify its borders with neighbouring forms: the short story collection, on the one hand, and the novel on the other. Hence, the question of the generic status and tradition of these contemporary narratives also forms a test case for different ways of conceptualizing the short story cycle as they have been developed over the past few decades.

A basic distinction to be made in theories of the short story cycle or linked story collection is between Anglophone and Francophone approaches to the form. While the first are obviously the most important in the context of this volume, the second are, I believe, useful to pinpoint and perhaps redress some of the limitations of Anglo-American theories of the short story cycle. These theories are all indebted to the first critical study of the genre: Forrest Ingram’s 1971 *Representative Short Story Cycles of the Twentieth Century: Studies in a Literary Genre*. On the basis of a comparative study of cycles from French, American, Irish, and German literature, Ingram sought to define the short story cycle, to describe its most important characteristics, and to propose criteria for classifying different cycles. Although his approach has since been criticized and refined, it did shape all subsequent theories in three important ways. First, Ingram’s definition of the short story cycle has provided a blueprint for all subsequent definitions of the form: “a book of short stories so linked to each other by their author that the reader’s successive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts” (11). With its rather casual reference to “author”, “reader’s experience”, and “pattern of the whole”, the definition effectively contains the elements that would

divide later critics over the importance each accrues in a definition of the genre: author, text, and reader.

Author and authorial intention were considered very important by Ingram himself: they provided the criteria for classifying cycles as “composed”, “completed”, or “arranged” (17–18). In the second monograph devoted to the form, *The Short Story Cycle: A Genre Companion and Reference Guide*, Susan Mann also foregrounds authorial intention as her different chapters trace the composition process of paradigmatic short story cycles. Yet, she complements this with a more formalist approach that seeks to map the generic markers that can be found in the text and paratext of short story cycles: a table of contents, a title that does not recur as the title of a short story, genre markers in the subtitle, a preface or authorial statement, an epigraph or motto, a frame or a specific structural organization (14–15). Mann’s textual approach has been further developed by James Nagel. In the introduction to *The Contemporary American Short-Story Cycle*, he lists the unifying devices that are most frequent in short story cycles: a recurrence of people, places, objects or symbols; a specific temporal patterning and narrative set-up; shared protagonists, settings, and themes (15–16). Other critics have placed greater emphasis on the third element of Ingram’s definition, the reader. Kerby, for instance, argues that “textual unity, like beauty, lies mainly in the eye of the beholding reader” (ix). Like Robert Luscher, he emphasizes the sequential unfolding of meaning in the integrated story collection, and therefore prefers the term short story sequence. For Luscher, the formalist and author-based approaches to the short story cycle overly emphasize coherence and closure. Instead, he argues, the short story cycle (or sequence) should be seen as “an open book” that actively solicits the reader’s participation (149).

The opposition between critics who emphasize the unity of the short story cycle (Mann, Nagel) and those who foreground its heterogeneity and openness (Luscher, Kennedy, Lundén) interestingly matches one of the central characteristics of the genre: its combination of openness and closure, of diversity and unity. Indeed, the paradoxical status of the component stories as both complete and discrete stories and as parts in a larger whole contributes to the central tension in the short story cycle between unity and fragmentation, fissure and interconnection, or – as Ingram already put it – “between the one and the many” (19). For Mann, the “simultaneous self-sufficiency and interdependence” of the stories is the “one and only essential characteristic of the short story cycle” (15), while Nagel argues similarly that “each component work must stand alone (with a beginning, middle, and end) yet be enriched in the context of the interrelated stories” (15). The different ways in which this tension is played out in short story cycles – with differing degrees of unity and fragmentation – leads Ingram to propose that cycles can be placed on a “spectrum”: “the limit of one extreme of the spectrum

would be the ‘mere’ collection of unconnected stories, while the limit of the other extreme would be the novel” (14). As a rule, critics have not really been interested in the outer limits of this spectrum. Instead, they have mostly focused on cycles situated near its “midpoint”, which “illustrate a balanced tension between the independency of each story and the unity of the collection as a whole” (Luscher 163).

Indeed, the problem of the genre’s specificity and its distinction from such neighbouring genres as the collection and the novel is addressed only implicitly by most critics: through a discussion of representative short story cycles or by tracing the historical development of the form. While Ingram, Mann and Luscher locate the birth of the genre in the modernist period, with its distrust of the traditional novel, other critics point to its nineteenth-century origins in regional or “local colour” writing, with its collections of tales or stories set in a particular village, town or region. Whether or not these village narratives, or “narratives of community” as Sandra Zagarell has called them, can be called short story cycles proper remains a moot point (see Harde 1–2). Yet, with their shared setting and emphasis on aspects of community, their influence on modernist cycles such *Dubliners* and *Winesburg, Ohio* is unmistakable. In fact, short story cycles unified by a shared setting represent a large part of the tradition of the genre (Kennedy xiv), while cycles staging ethnic communities, as in Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), Gloria Naylor’s *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982) or Sandra Cisneros’s *The House on Mango Street* (1984), gave a new lease to the genre in the late twentieth century (see Nagel, Davis). For Michelle Pacht, the short story cycle’s recurrent thematic concern with community is tied up with the formal characteristics of the genre, as it “expresses both the plight of an individual and the fate of a community through its very structure” (1). And Roxanne Harde’s *Narratives of Community: Women’s Short Story Sequences* is similarly based on the premise that the short story cycle has lent itself particularly well to an exploration of various forms of communal networks and identities. Precisely this interest in the possibilities and limits of networks and communities can also be found in the contemporary texts I have been describing. Yet, before turning to the question of whether the label of short story cycle can usefully be applied to these works, I will briefly outline an entirely different way of approaching the short story cycle, namely through the Francophone *poétique du recueil* or the poetics of the collecti

Contrary to the Anglophone tradition, French and French-Canadian critics do not approach the collection of interlinked stories as a separate genre, but see it rather as a particular instantiation of the publishing format of the collection.<sup>4</sup> Since stories, but also essays, poems, epigrams, and fragments, are too small to be published separately, the “polytextual” format of the collection is at heart but a pragmatic solution to a publication problem (Monfort 158). Moreover, since all collections can

invite readings that emphasize unity and interconnectedness as well as readings that prioritize difference, fragmentation, and separation, the collection of interlinked stories should not be seen as a separate subgroup of the collection. In his study of the short story collection, *Des textes à l'oeuvre: La lecture du recueil de nouvelles*, René Audet further describes the two reading processes – of “totalization” and “cross-linking” – which any collection invites and which a reader can activate on the basis of textual elements as well as readerly frames of expectation (*Des textes à l'oeuvre* 71, my translation). Unlike many American critics, Audet is interested not so much in what a collection is as in how a collection functions: he wants to identify dynamic processes in the text itself, which may or may not be activated in any given reading of the text. This leads him to compare the short story collection to a “hypertext”, since it is “constituted by textual parts and links, which form a non-hierarchic network in which the sequence of reading and exploring [...] is left for the reader to decide” (104, my translation). In an even more radical way than Luscher’s and Kennedy’s reader-oriented approaches, Audet argues that unity is not in any way an essential or inherent characteristic of the short story cycle, but rather an effect of processes of reading. Interestingly, we can also find this more dynamic and open approach to the short story cycle in an early and largely forgotten article by Timothy Alderman. He traces, in what he calls “integrated short story collections”, a “tension between cohering, centripetal forces and separating, centrifugal forces”, with the latter “disrupt[ing] the process of integration” invited by the former (135).

The value of this more dynamic approach is that the poetics of the collection, with its interplay of interlinking and unifying forces as well as diffracting and diversifying ones, can be traced in a wider range of literary texts and genres. Moreover, the refusal to isolate the integrated short story collection as a separate case, let alone a separate genre, saves critics from the contentious issue of distinguishing the short story cycle from the ‘mere’ collection of uncollected stories. Still, delineating the other end of Ingram’s short story cycle spectrum, the distinction between integrated collection and fragmented novel, which this paper is concerned with, remains problematic in the *poétique du recueil* as well. Discussing late twentieth-century and contemporary Quebec fiction, Audet describes the popularity of both “quasi-novels”, story collections that are almost novels, and “fragmented novels”, “novels that reject strong internal cohesion in favour of manifest fragmentation”, but fails to specify the distinction between the two (“To Relate, to Read, to Separate” 108–109). In addition, the Francophone focus on the architecture of the collection also impedes a study of the tradition of the short story cycle, in terms of a “genre memory” (Lynch 14), the formation of a national canon, or the staging of recurring thematic concerns. Hence, theories of the collection and theories of the short story cycle can be considered

complementary rather than oppositional approaches to the same literary texts, and I will draw on both to investigate whether contemporary fragmented novels can usefully be labelled short story cycles.

Reading these novels through the lens of the short story cycle easily reveals some common characteristics. Both sets of texts offer a compilation of separate and distinct text pieces, whereby the whole adds up to more than the sum its parts. Both also challenge unity and the single story through an embracing of multiplicity, difference, and fragmentation. The contemporary novels thus share with the short story cycle the tension between “the one and the many”: between centripetal forces that bring the separate texts together through repetition, cross-referencing, similarities, or a shared fictional universe and centrifugal forces that separate the texts in terms of style, narrative perspectives, and protagonists. In most novels, moreover, this tension between separateness and interconnection is explicitly foregrounded as one of the central thematic concerns. In *Cloud Atlas*, for instance, the distinct narratives could not be more different in terms of stylistic, narrative, and generic features, just as the diversity of protagonists is realized in terms of age, gender, class, ethnicity, and time period. Nevertheless, similarities in personality – symbolized by the same comet-shaped birthmark – as well as subtle cross-references between the chapters do create effects of totalization and cross-linking, as described by Audet. In Cusk’s *Arlington Park*, to give another example, the unity implied by the bird’s eye perspective of the prelude and interlude and the shared setting of the novel are counteracted by the variations in perspective and experience highlighted in the individual stories. In *Hotel World*, to give a final example, the radically different voices and styles of the different I-narratives reveal the characters’ very different relation to the same setting and events: the Global Hotel and the tragic accident that happened there.

In most novels, indeed, this exploration of the tension between the individual and the collective, or between difference and commonality, is also staged in a shared locale: a street in *If Nobody* and *Capital*; a suburb in *Arlington Park*, *NW*, and *There but for the*; a village in *The Spinning Heart* and *Alentejo Blue*; and a city in *Let the Great World Spin*. This reinforces these novels’ closeness to the many short story cycles unified by setting and brings out their indebtedness to the village narrative tradition as one of the earliest instantiations of the cycle tradition. This heritage is ironically invoked in Cusk’s novel through a reference to an idealized “Olde England” of idyllic villages full of neighbourly support (Cusk 217, see D’hoker 17), and *The Spinning Heart* also flags its awareness of the nostalgic village narrative even as it testifies to the fundamental separateness of its characters in post-Celtic-Tiger Ireland. Even such blatantly cosmopolitan novels as *Cloud Atlas*, *A Possible Life*, or *The Illusion of Separateness* evoke the traditions of the narrative of community and the short story cycle by staging communal networks

that are explicitly non-localized, offering a more globalized sense of connection and belonging.

Nevertheless, there are also several elements that disqualify these composite novels from belonging to the tradition of the short story cycle. On a paratextual level, one cannot help but note the absence of generic markers typical of the short story cycle. There are no references to the genre in the subtitle, blurb, or in author interviews, nor are there any other marks of “genre memory”, such as references to paradigmatic short story cycles or other traces of genre consciousness. Moreover, while most of the different sections have titles, a table of contents – a characteristic feature of collection and cycle – is lacking. This points to the problematic status of these distinct chapters/stories/sections in more general terms. While the component parts of the novels are usually clearly distinct and separate, they do not always qualify as short stories. Several of the novels combine texts that have the unity, independence, and closure of short stories with other narrative texts that lack these properties. In *Alentejo Blue*, for instance, the closing text brings closure to the plotlines developed in the other stories, but thereby fails to qualify as a story itself. In the books of Cusk and McCann, on the other hand, omnisciently narrated prose sketches alternate with short stories focalized through or narrated by different characters. In other books, the narrative sections, while clearly distinct and different, lack the closure that characterizes most short stories and would rather qualify as sketches or fragments. This is the case for the twenty-one monologues that constitute *The Spinning Heart* as well as for the short separate texts that describe the lives of the different inhabitants in *If Nobody* and *Capital*. Like the longer and more story-like sections in *Hotel World* and *There but for the*, moreover, the sections build on one another to carry the plot and, hence, don't really qualify as independent stories. In *Cloud Atlas*, *A Possible Life*, and *NW*, finally, the discrete sections, though closed and unified, are very long and would qualify as novellas rather than as short stories. Of course, as many critics have observed, short stories can take many different shapes, and providing a single, exhaustive definition is well-nigh impossible. Still, brevity, unity, intensity, and a sense of closure can be said to characterize most stories, and this disqualifies at least some of the component parts of the contemporary novels I am concerned with.

As we have seen, this generic specificity of the component parts is not an issue in the Francophone poetics of the collection. What matters are the processes of linking texts, not the generic status of the texts themselves. As Audet notes about French-Canadian literature, “many contemporary works present themselves as collections of narrative texts, rather than collections of short stories. A creative play on genres thus appears, causing many to reject the more conventional label of the short story” (“To Relate, to Read, to Separate”: 108). In these works, too, he sees the poetics of the collection at work, with its dynamic tension



between the parts and the whole. The same holds true, I would argue, for contemporary British and Irish composite novels. Here, too, the reader is invited to search for links between the distinct narrative texts and to unify the different storylines into a single plot or coherent whole. At the same time, these processes of cross-linking and totalization are also constantly counteracted by the gaps and contradictions, the dead and loose ends, or the irreconcilable differences that these narratives also present. Nevertheless, to label these works as collections would be a bridge too far: they have been constructed as textual wholes, not as a retrospective gathering of separate, let alone previously published, texts. In his discussion of French and French-Canadian “fragmented novels”, **Audet** theorizes the affinity but non-identity of the collection and the fragmented novel by means of a “poetics of diffraction” as a kind of novelistic twin to the poetics of the collection. Fragmented novels, he argues, “represent a world in which unity is lacking (or inappropriate). Views, character roles and stories are disjointed, fragmented, as if the text, the narrative voice and the plot had been put through a prism that decomposed their complexity” (“To Relate, to Read, to Separate” 109). Fragmentation and discontinuity rather than assembly or collection are the “organizing principles” of these works given “their obvious patchwork quality, and their borrowed textual elements lead[ing] to continuous interruptions, diversions and digressions” (110).

If this poetics of diffraction might well describe **postmodern** novels of the 1970s and 1980s, it does not seem entirely adequate for the contemporary novels I am investigating. After all, their narrative set-up is marked as much by connection and coherence as it is by fragmentation and diffraction. Similarly, their formal architecture, with its often tight structure of repetition, alternation, and variation, emphasizes commonality as well as diversity. And in their thematic exploration of communal structures, too, the focus is on what brings people together as well as on what keeps them apart. As I have argued, it is precisely this creative dynamic, based on the tension between the whole and its parts, that the novels have in common with the short story cycle or integrated story collection. In other words, while there are generic and authorial obstacles to reading these **composite novels** as short story cycles, the profound influence of this literary genre on contemporary fiction at large demands to be recognized. For the novels I have been discussing, this influence manifests itself on two levels. On the level of structure, the novels’ interplay of unifying and diversifying elements borrows from the dynamic tension between centrifugal and centripetal forces, which has long been recognized as a central characteristic of the short story cycle. Hence, the reader’s activity in construing an aesthetic and semantic coherence through strategies of cross-linking and totalization, as described in the poetics of the collection, can usefully be applied to the reception of these novels as well. On the level of theme, secondly, the novels are clearly

indebted to the short story cycle's long tradition of staging communities and of exploring the links and barriers between people more generally. Here, too, an awareness of this literary genealogy may contribute to a better understanding of these contemporary works and of the way they criticize, borrow from, or emulate earlier **narratives of community**. A recognition of this literary heritage in both theme and form would prevent an unjust dismissal of these composite works for failing to adhere to generic norms they have no interest in.

If these contemporary novels cannot really be called short story cycles, but also violate the generic standards of the traditional, single-protagonist-driven novel, what label would then be most appropriate? In the available literary criticism on these works, some alternative labels have already been proposed. Emma Smith, in an interesting reading of *Hotel World*, calls the book a "multivoiced novel" (83) and compares it to Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (which many critics, incidentally, would read as a short story cycle). *Cloud Atlas*, which has received a fair amount of critical attention already, has been labelled "a **postmodern** novel" (McMorran 155) and a collection of "six interlocked and rotating novellas" (Wood), while Berthold Schoene also discusses the book as a "cosmopolitan novel", in view of the large span of countries and eras in the book. With the exception of **'postmodern** novel', however, none of these labels seems sufficiently broad to encompass more than a few of these novels. 'Multivoiced novel' foregrounds a diversity in narrative voices without taking into account the composite or fragmented architecture of these novels and would in fact equally apply to more seamlessly integrated multivoiced novels such as *Mrs Dalloway* or *Parade's End*. 'Cosmopolitan novel', on the other hand, only takes the novels' transnational dimension into account and fails to cover more localized novels such as *The Spinning Heart*, *Arlington Park*, or *Alentejo Blue*. 'Novella cycle' might be an appropriate term for *A Possible Life* and *Cloud Atlas*, as they consist of a handful of very long and largely independent stories. Yet, the term has only a restricted reach and does not apply to any of the other titles, nor to many other twentieth-century texts.

Other traditions and terms that can be considered are 'multiplot novel', 'collective novel', and 'network novel'. The first has been coined for those Victorian novels that integrate multiple plots with a view to offer an inclusive representation of society (Garrett). Unity is established through coincidence, a shared locale, and the discovery of past connections. Some of these elements recur in the contemporary works: coincidence is a strong factor in *A Possible Life* and *The Illusion of Separateness*, while *Let the Great World Spin*, *If Nobody Speaks*, and *Capital* aim to give a broad view of contemporary society, staging characters of different ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, and occupation. Yet, the Victorian multiplot novel typically does have one privileged plotline and a central protagonist. Its subplots are unified to a far greater


degree as the different characters marry, discover hidden family links, or simply know each other well. The characters and plotlines in the contemporary novels, to the contrary, tend to remain far more separate and isolated, their interactions typically fluid and transient. This is reflected in the style and structure of the contemporary novels, which also lack the unity conferred by a single narrative voice of the Victorian novels.

The collective novel, a modernist counterpart to the Victorian multiplot novel, on the other hand, tries to depict and give a voice to “the masses” by staging many different characters, typically belonging to a particular social class (Foley, Butts). Again, this interest in the collective can be traced in some of the contemporary texts, but they are different in their attempt to depict the heterogeneity and diversity of twenty-first-century society. The network novel, thirdly, would seem a good candidate to capture both the structure of the novels, with their network of interlocking stories, characters, and perspectives, and their thematic concern with the networks of links that connect human beings, whether implicit or explicit, tenuous or closely knit, enduring or fleeting. Moreover, the term network novel carries useful echoes of both Bordwell’s term ‘network narratives’ for recent films that depict the separate but intermingled life stories of several protagonists (19) and social theory’s characterization of contemporary society as a “network society” (Castells). Less useful, however, are the digital connotations of the term. ‘Network fiction’ has been used by Ciccorigo to describe “narrative texts in digitally networked environments that make use of hypertext technology to create emergent and recombinant narratives” (4). Moreover, the term ‘network novel’ might again be too specific and unfamiliar to cover the whole range of novels that operate on the crossroads of the integrated novel and the short story cycle.

‘Postmodern novel’, finally, is of course a term that covers a wide range of texts and is widely known as a shorthand for literary experiment and the deconstruction of established plots, characters, and conventions. Applied to the works in my corpus, it underscores especially elements of fragmentation and multiplicity in their narrative structure. Yet, as with Audet’s poetics of diffraction, this perspective threatens to ignore the novels’ fundamental interest in bringing together a variety of personalities, lives, and stories, for however brief a moment, so as to show the isolation as well as the interconnectedness of these lives in a global world. Moreover, while postmodern novels are typically concerned with questions of identity, these contemporary works seek to abandon this individualist focus in favour of an investigation of human togetherness. Finally, while novels like *Hotel World*, *There but for the*, *Cloud Atlas*, and *NW* contain a fair degree of stylistic experimentation, *Capital*, *The Spinning Heart*, and *The Illusion of Separateness* are written in a quite straightforward kind of realism, and the work of Cusk and McGregor has been described as modernist or neo-modernist (Boileau). In fact, the differences between

these twenty-first-century works and the typical postmodern novel highlight precisely the significant literary developments that have taken place since the **postmodern** movement of the later twentieth century, so it would be a pity to cover up that distance by an enlarged use of the term.

Given this new emphasis on connection and coherence as the necessary flipside of fragmentation and difference, **'composite novel'** would seem the most appropriate term for the works I have been discussing. The term is sufficiently broad to cover a range of texts that consist of distinct but interrelated narratives, forming a patchwork of different voices, characters, and storylines. In addition, the term highlights the closeness of these novels to the tradition of the short story cycle, whose composite nature has long been recognized in the definitions and terminology of the genre. It would be necessary, however, to open up the term 'composite novel' beyond the narrow definition it received in the hands of **Dunn and Morris**. Indeed, since their use of the term as a synonym for 'short story cycle' has not caught on in studies of the genre, it seems more useful to apply it to literary works that extend some of the characteristics of the cycle to the genre of the novel. The composite novel could then be defined as a work of fiction that consists of several distinct narrative texts, storylines, and protagonists, which are integrated by means of cross-references, thematic concerns, a common plotline or a shared story-world. The composite novel is characterized by a dynamic tension between the whole and its parts, which results in an open text that demands an active participation of the reader in constructing aesthetic and narrative coherence. In this way, the composite novel occupies the other side of the dividing line between short story cycle and novel envisioned by Ingram: some distance from the paradigmatic single-protagonist-driven novel, but still within the larger remit of the genre.

Labelling these and similar contemporary texts as composite novels also allows us to reserve the term 'short story cycle' for works that have the short story at the centre of their composition. Given the renewed popularity of the short story in recent years, the short story cycle too has gained wider resonance in Britain and Ireland, with linked collections such as Helen Simpson's *In-Flight Entertainment* (2012), Colin Barrett's *Young Skins* (2014), Kirsty Gunn's *Infidelities* (2014), Jon McGregor's *This Isn't the Sort of Thing That Happens to Someone Like You* (2014), and Lucy Caldwell's *Multitudes* (2016) – all flagging their genre awareness in blurb or subtitle. It is ultimately in the interests of the short story and of integrated short story collections such as these that the term short story cycle remains specific enough, retaining its ties to the genre of the short story, rather than being stretched to include all forms of composite fiction. For if literary texts themselves more often than not exceed **genre**  **is and creatively play with genre boundaries**, as critics we do well to use these labels with precision if they are not to become mere marketing tools or catchall terms that cease to be meaningful.

## Notes

- 1 While there are also many American novels that fulfil this description, such as Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2011), Nicole Krauss' *Great House* (2010), Tom Rachman's *The Imperfectionists* (2010) or Benjamin Markovitz' *Either Side of Winter* (2005), I am limiting myself to British and Irish examples for the present purpose.
- 2 I should point out that I use the term 'composite novel' in the broad sense of novels that consist of clearly distinct parts and foreground different storylines and characters, and not in the restricted meaning given by Dunn and Morris in *The Composite Novel: The Short Story Cycle in Transition*. As the subtitle of their study makes clear, they propose the term composite novel as an alternative to short story cycle, even while following Ingram and Mann in their approach to the genre. They prefer the term composite novel because it brings out the form's "kinship to the novel" and "in the pigeon house of genre the novel occupies a lofty level, and any generic label that emphasizes 'story' rather than 'novel' roosts at a lower level" (5).
- 3 Given the unfortunate connotation of circularity inherent in the term short story cycle, several rival terms have been proposed for the collection of interlinked stories: "short story composite" (Lundén), "composite novel" (Dunn and Morris), "short story sequence" (Kennedy, Luscher, Ferguson), and "novel-in-stories" (Kelley). Yet, the term short story cycle continues to be the one most widely used (Mann, Nagel, Lynch, Pacht, Smith).
- 4 For a more fully developed comparative discussion of Francophone/Italian and Anglophone approaches to the collection of interlinked stories, see D'hoker and Van den Bossche (2012).

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