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## Review

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## REVIEW

# Review of *Will Self and Contemporary British Society*

*Will Self and Contemporary British Society* by Graham Matthews, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, \$95.00/£58.00, 2016

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Over a writing career now stretching more than a quarter century, Will Self has established himself as one of the most prolific contemporary British authors, tallying to date 12 novels, 5 original volumes of short stories (with an additional collection of selected tales and a special edition chapbook of two previously published stories), and 7 collections of non-fiction, mostly gathering essays and reviews first published in a wide array of newspapers and periodicals. This output has arced from *enfant terrible* beginnings to a recent endeavor to reclaim and rework high modernism's literary legacy. Self's fiction encompasses works imagining a realm where the dead live a grey afterlife; a post-apocalyptic London governed by a society treating its only text, the rantings of a mentally-ill early twenty-first century cabbie, as a mandate for life and society; a psychiatric theory postulating sanity as a zero-sum quality, so its presence in one place indicates an absence elsewhere; a world in which humans and chimpanzees have exchanged places. Throughout his work, Self positions himself as a novelist of ideas, one whose conceits grapple with the nature of consciousness, the way technology remaps conceptions of the self, the ethics of different psychological theories, and the experience of an increasingly administered and marketed world. Graham Matthews's *Will Self and Contemporary British Society* provides an admirable assessment of this increasingly central literary figure, one whose prolix

talents refuse easy classification. Matthews situates Self's sprawling *oeuvre* against broader contemporary cultural trends to assess running concerns in this "Magus of the Quotidian" (119). The monograph focuses on Self's texts, bypassing lurid excursions into biography to track the development of a singular satiric voice and a fiction providing not only a satire of "British society but a comment on the function of satire, which not only defamiliarizes the world but in the process suggests that the everyday appears normal and therefore lies unquestioned" (23). Matthews's readings precisely chart these surrealistic defamiliarizations in Self's fiction.

The book is arranged around six thematics serving as trunk lines for Matthews's readings of individual short stories and novels: satire, psychiatry, medicine, gender, consumer culture, and psychogeography. Within each chapter, Matthews briefly assays Self's arguments and concerns relating to the theme, then proceeds to survey relevant texts from Self's fictional corpus in (largely) chronological order; unfortunately, this technique does over-emphasize earlier work at the expense of fully treating more recent novels. Matthews's readings are strong and the cumulative accomplishment of the book is to wrangle a broad and inventive body of works into a matrix of ongoing motifs. He finds that this sprawling work—in turn, self-consciously literary, absurd, scholarly, earthy, comic, and bleak—is "an attempt to construct an alternative world that maps over the 'real' world and attempts to achieve veridicality, freed from the ideological constraints of realism, naturalism, characterization and conventional plot structures" (3). Matthews's thesis centers on the satiric thrust of Self's fiction, novels and stories employing fantastic corporeal events (a woman who suddenly grows a penis, a man whose knee sprouts a vagina; a drug causing those who ingest it to experience all events as engrossing). This focus on the body fleshes out what Matthews suggests are arguments made by Self's tales, positions separating the novelist from free-floating postmodern irony. The psychiatrists figuring throughout his fiction help personify this intersection of satiric idea and body, most particularly the seemingly ever-present character Dr. Zach Busner. Psychiatry is lampooned for its murky and shifting diagnostic categories, an expanding classification system seemingly geared to prescribe

expensive medications. Similarly, medicine exemplifies “the excesses of consumer society and a wider cultural malaise” (69). Regarding gender, Self foregrounds the “indeterminacy” of such identities. His fictions inventively excoriate the “nihilistic self-reflexivity” of a postmodern moment increasingly oriented around marketing and consumption. Against this loss of situation, Self’s interest in psychogeography attempts to ground experience in the concrete texture of time and place, a reorientation conducted without technological mediation. The chapters’ rough structure does finally skew Self’s oeuvre by overemphasizing short stories and novellas, discussing some several times while only fitting in a single treatment of more substantial novels like *Umbrella*.

Given the sprawling corpus to chart, it is difficult to generate a larger, organizing argumentative thrust. The book begins by emphasizing Self’s farcical and surreal re-imaginings as satirical, an emphasis petering out in later chapters which are generally not as strong consequently. Satire is largely understood as an explicit refusal of postmodern irony and a self-referential consumer society through implicit appeal to “a normative moral standard” (7). However, a more extensive consideration of what is meant by postmodernity and broader situation of Self against relevant theories of postmodernism would better deliver the titular promise of considering the author against contemporary British society. It would also enable postmodernism to move beyond ill-defined and slippery bugbear (whether as late capitalism, cultural dominant, literary period, or theory). Moreover, a more specific definition of the postmodernism Matthews positions Self against would more precisely articulate how to make sense of Self’s project in fiction, one ranging from an initial “post-postmodernism” (to use Jeffrey Nealon’s term) to the most recent fiction, novels that might be linked to a wave of contemporary authors reviving modernist concerns and techniques David James has labeled “metamodernism.”

The book’s overall weighting of earlier works foregrounds a fiction of farcical conceits, one supporting the focus on satire; however, with the trilogy initiated by *Umbrella* (*Shark* appeared in late 2014, too late to be treated by Matthews; *Phone* has only now appeared in 2017), Self has moved toward a new phase as a novelist. Leaving

behind surrealistic points of departure, Self's fiction no longer simply explores conceits and grotesques but now employs rivers of consciousness, deltas that abruptly shift characters and historical moments, offering heart-rending moments in roiling consideration of how technology has reworked consciousness and identity over the long twentieth century. Matthews gestures toward this turn, but his thesis cannot adequately limn this transformation. However, overall, Matthews's critical readings and ability to map major strands of Self's fictions ensure his book is an important contribution: *Will Self and Contemporary British Society* charts an *oeuvre* that constitutes "a sprawling whole that stretches out over the terrain of the quotidian in order to dismantle our prejudices and reconfigure our expectations" (4).

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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