

Caren Irr, *Toward the Geopolitical Novel: U.S. Fiction in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

Reviewed by **Bruce Robbins**, Columbia University

“During the 1980s and 1990s,” Caren Irr writes early in her astute, methodologically fascinating new book, “narratives about immigration to the United States were frequently routed through trauma” (23). Irr is not happy with these novels, which substitute “personal traumas for politics” (23).

Yet rather than dwell on her reasons for unhappiness—a characteristic of the history-as-trauma school that she seems determined not to duplicate, even to score points against it—Irr marches forward into the twenty-first century. There she models for the reader that historically knowledgeable but nonetheless cheery and untraumatized attitude that she finds in the period’s fiction, above all its immigrant fiction. “The tone of this writing downplays traumatic melancholy, striking a sharper, satiric note. These novels shift away from the personal universe of trauma and toward a public and political effort to think life stories that exceed those provided by the sending or receiving nations” (29).

Irr’s formal choices begin with an original definition of who counts as an American writer, one that does not count on birth, education or residence. For Irr, a US author is one who addresses a US audience. All that is needed is evidence that you are explaining matters about which anyone from another home culture would need no explanation. By this criterion, US fiction very nearly merges into world literature—from the world’s point of view, perhaps not so much a merger as a hostile takeover. On the other hand, Irr’s vision allows writers who are from or have lived elsewhere to slip out from under the much-discussed burden of providing information about things that have gone very wrong in those places.

For recent novelists, atrocity is money in the bank. Display intimate knowledge of a certain scale of suffering, in particular historically caused examples, and you make a prima facie case to be taken seriously. Trauma sells, and sells especially well if balanced with an eventual escape to the US, considered as a happily nontrauma-generating refuge. The writers Irr considers don’t abandon all representation of sensational mass cruelty abroad, though they might like to. Their stories often refer to foreign atrocities, like the Holocaust in Chabon’s *Adventures of Kavalier and Clay*, the Asia Minor massacre at the beginning of Eugenides’s *Middlesex*, and the torture and assassination that befall so many Dominican characters in Diaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*. According to Irr, the distinctive note that recent writing strikes is one of relative detachment

from these origin stories. This detachment involves some alienation as well as a “transnational conviviality” (29) accompanied by a certain freedom of self-invention.

Self-invention, for Irr’s post-2000 immigrants, appears to be the major upshot of arrival in the US. In US literary history, that’s not very surprising. But Irr takes the undoubted persistence of immigrant upward mobility stories and gives it an innovative twist or two. She finds considerable evidence of an unwillingness to mourn a lost national identity. And rather than describing them as celebrating US identity, she sees them as plunging into what she calls “media.” Irr calls the coming-to-America chapter “the digital migrant novel,” and the endpoint of such narratives is not so much finding an identity as losing oneself in a digitally mediated swirl of myths, comics, sci-fi, and literary intertextuality featuring writerly influences from around the world. Media is the US writ large and recoded. Irr may be a shade too confident that the heterogeneity of these mixed-up cultural resources guarantees against ethnic nationalism. Hate crimes have been committed by angry young men whose racism found sustenance online and in science fiction. But she is not alone in finding it easier to illustrate the nationalism she doesn’t like than the cosmopolitanism she does.

The most precise description of Irr’s object is serious fiction. The 125 recent novels that she focuses on are neither best-sellers nor personal favorites, but, she avers, works that have been accorded some weight by reviewers and prize-committees. This relatively mainstream list is not weighted to the political left, avant-garde form, blockbuster intentions, or any other political criterion. Trauma, which is to say sensationalism, would therefore have been built into her literary sources even if she had not already been interested in the fortunes of the political novel, which has its own reasons for caring about atrocity. So the taking of critical distance from trauma counts as a discovery about the culture at large. One of the many refreshing things about *Toward the Geopolitical Novel* is its defense, however oblique, of a literary establishment that is often described as “liberal.” When the term “liberal” comes up in the book, it’s neither as praise nor as grounds for excommunication. .

Methodologically, much of the excitement sweeping through Irr’s study comes from her critical insistence on naming genres. Aligned with Franco Moretti’s “distant reading,” her research is not distanced in the digital or sociological senses. It admires Moretti’s effort to be objective and comprehensive about his object, but it also shares Moretti’s excellent eye as a critic, which enables him (with or without the help of quantification—I think more without than with) to point out significant, hitherto unrecognized configurations, especially at the level of genre. Irr tells us she chose only those genres that included at least 10 novels. Merely to name genres that didn’t make the cut, like the nanny or backpacker novel, is to invite appreciative readers to see the interest in working

alongside her. The genres she does discuss include, along with the digital migrant novel, the Peace Corps novel (as variant of the political thriller), the national allegory (now as a take on neoliberalism), the postapocalyptic (as a mode of discussing revolution), and the expat novel. Each by itself is worth the price of admission, especially as each is embedded in an argument about the narrative conventions which the subgenre presupposes and from which it seeks to depart. You learn, for example, that the new expat novels—for Irr, “world” novels—tend to double rich and poor protagonists (as in O’Neill’s *Netherland*). You learn that the postapocalyptic novel, seen in the light of novels of failed revolution, does without the latter’s compulsion to represent both terror and ideology.

Defending Fredric Jameson’s much-maligned concept of national allegory, Irr agrees with Aijaz Ahmad that the nation was never as central to Jameson’s argument as the phrase seemed to imply. What was, and continues to be central, is the linking of private and public. The two are re-linked, for example, in Irr’s brilliant aperçu about the failure of privacy in the new neoliberal allegories and the salience of compound housing.

What about the literary history? If there a “resurgence of the political novel” as the title of introduction suggests, then there must have been a time when the form was in abeyance. But was there? The period since (roughly) September 11, 2001 is distinct, in Irr’s view, in that there are fewer novels of political argument or about public figures; what we have are novels of ordinary people wrestling with social problems that we would call political, whether they think of them as political or not. This means that Irr does not accuse novels of being private or domestic. Almost anything that looks private or domestic can be seen as public and political. Nor are novels marked off for being insufficiently oppositional or engaged. Although Irr cites Walter Benn Michaels, she does not express any of his contempt for that weaker version of the political that merely offers ethnically diverse writers the chance to get their story heard. Nor does she demand that attention be paid to severe and increasing economic inequality. Her criteria for the political are actually pretty soft. In order to admit to the political novel so many new members, the rules of membership have to be pretty loose. An elaborate chart arranges Irr’s 125 authors on a line from localists to globalists; another one distinguishes among aesthetes, reformers, collectivists, and universalists. Neither is very enlightening on old-fashioned political questions of left and right. Neither asks for positions on capitalism, say, or economic inequality, or US military intervention. Readers who are looking for politics in those senses will be intrigued but probably unsatisfied.

In a rather clever if underhanded move, Irr does bring politics in a concrete if more restricted sense back into the picture. Her superb chapter on the Peace Corps novel as a variant of the political thriller notes that, for the first generation of this sort of fiction, as

in Cold War thrillers, the real villain was bureaucracy—for Peace Corps volunteers, often the Peace Corps bureaucracy itself. There was always something illusory about this accusation, she notes: it was psychologically convenient for young people suffering some geographically primed identity crisis (pace Erik Erikson) to pick an antagonist resembling impersonal, soulless institutions. After 2000, this became much less true: now the protagonist's problem is less likely to be a specific crime than an aspect of "global conditions." Failure to deal with those can no longer be blamed on the relevant bureaucracy; the problems that are too big for the protagonist are also too big for the bureaucracy. Hence a protagonist's "discovery of the limitations of the bureaucracy comes as less of a shock" (86). Although Irr does not underline the point, her argument leads there: as a conclusion, disillusionment has become inadequate. Thus the option of working within existing institutions, whether state institutions or nongovernmental organizations, becomes more eligible. Her treatment of Mischa Berlinski's *Fieldwork* admires how the novel gives up the quest for personal authenticity and instead "makes a virtue of institutional and formal logic—preferring them to the visionary authenticity and discovery of one's own identity so dominant in more formulaic interpretations of the Peace Corps thriller" (91).

But this is only one of several head-turning senses that Irr gives to geopolitics. The hero of the Peace Corps novel chapter is Norman Rush, who shows in *Mortals* that "'alien politics' matter" (99). It's not a trivial thing to show.