While it might be tempting to do so, I do not wish to assert that all texts commonly labeled as postmodern insist upon a level of the historical real that both resists and precedes discourse. Rather, I wish to suggest that the critical homogenization of these texts has made this strain of thought difficult to see. The expansive scope of a hugely influential work like Linda Hutcheon’s *A Poetics of Postmodernism* gives a sense of sameness to the discourse of postmodernism that inhibits the analysis of the specificity of any one text. My own expansive treatment of individual texts can, on the other hand, inhibit the analysis of the degree to which transferability from one text to others is possible. Briefly, then, I wish to suggest that the ideas presented in this book are relevant for other texts, both fiction and nonfiction, that may, if analyzed expansively, give further insight into the nature of historical reference. While I have started to do so with brief readings of Woolf’s and Swift’s wider *œuvres*, Jeanette Winterson’s *Lighthousekeeping*, Derek Walcott’s *Omeros*, and John Fowles’s *The Magus* and *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*, it is worthwhile to expand the palette of texts in reconsidering postmodernism in terms of ethics and historical reference.

By thinking about a variety of texts through the prism of those already discussed, it is possible to see how they too may be more inter-
ested in finding the real than in denying the possibility of doing so. For example, Woolf’s interest in nonsequential (or simultaneous) temporality and moments that exceed their place in a temporal series can be seen in diverse texts like Winterson’s *Sexing the Cherry* (1990) and Carlos Fuentes’s *Terra Nostra* (1976). Winterson’s engagement with Einsteinian spacetime suggests that the past is literally always present in our unrecognized four-dimensional world. Her narrator’s assertion that common claims like “time is a straight line” and “the difference between the past and the future is that one has happened while the other has not” are nothing more than “lies” (90), is part of a rejection both of the sequentiality of narrative and of historical claims that the past is inaccessible. Her bringing together of two seventeenth-century protagonists with their late 1980s mirror images suggests that the past is always accessible because it is actually simultaneous with present and future. *Terra Nostra* likewise presents various historical and fictional eras coexisting, suggesting the possibility of bringing one time in contact with another. Both novels are typically read as critiquing purportedly objective “accepted” versions of history, and rightly so, but it is also worthwhile to consider how they offer not a rejection of “history” per se, but rather an alternative based on the capacity for the past to touch the present.

Other recent texts play with time in similar ways, and it is likewise possible, and perhaps necessary, to reevaluate their attitudes towards historical reference. In *Nights at the Circus* (1984), Angela Carter depicts a society that has no sense of past, present, and future in ways that predict and reflect Winterson’s discussion of the Hopi Indians in *Sexing the Cherry*, while in D. M. Thomas’s *The White Hotel* (1981), the future continually “returns” in the fashion of the repressed Freudian past. The narrative reformulation of “Lisa’s” past cannot explain or give meaning to her neuroses or trauma because they originate not there but in the future, suggesting again the nonsequentiality of time. Likewise, Caryl Churchill’s play *Cloud 9* (1979) functions, like *Between the Acts*, as a denaturalization of various (colonial, patriarchal) hegemonic discourses in both past and present, but it also embodies past and present subjects in the same actors, suggesting continuity of history and the material tangibility of the past in the present. Tom Stoppard’s *Arcadia* combines this strategy with a discussion of fractal mathematics, simultaneous time, and the second law of thermodynamics, suggesting the ways in which past and present touch one another. Even as the play’s “present day” characters are frustrated by the impossibility of confronting the past, the audience sees it on the stage.

As numerous critics have noted, *Midnight’s Children* owes much to texts like Gabriel García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967) and Günter Grass’s *The Tin Drum* (1959), and with this in mind, it may be nec-
ecessary to think of these texts more in terms of their allegiance to historical truth than in terms of their deconstruction of it. In particular, Márquez's delineation of the 1928 Colombian banana massacre as a truth obscured by traditional histories predicts Rushdie's concerns in regard to the Emergency and the Amritsar Massacre. Grass's novel traces the history of pre- and post-WWII Danzig/Gdansk in ways strikingly similar to Rushdie's treatment of India, and to read Rushdie as postmodernist historical fiction that insists both on referentiality and ethics indicates how Grass may be read in similar ways.

Even texts as strange and fanciful as Angela Carter's *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* (1972) and Phillip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962) offer theorizations of the real. Carter's thematization of narrative as desire, along with the death of Dr. Hoffman and the destruction of his desire machines suggests the possibility of a real beyond narrative in ways similar to the surgical excision of narrative desire in *Midnight's Children*. Dick's alternate history of a world in which the results of World War II are reversed installs the real within it, as the titular character is the one person in the book with access to our own reality (or one remarkably similar to it), writing a book in which the Allies do win the war. The installation of an object, or idea, that represents reality, like the Man's book, can also, perhaps, be seen in a novel like Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997), in the Bobby Thompson home run ball, or in Julian Barnes's *History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters* (1989). In the half chapter, Barnes writes that “we must believe” in both love and truth “or we're lost” (244), casting not only a deconstructive eye on traditional, progressive, and hegemonic histories, but asserting the necessity of at least provisionally defining an alternative. As Hutcheon observes, many texts that typically garner the “postmodern” label depict historical events and/or comment on the nature of history. While it is possible that such texts like Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior* (1976), John Banville's *Doctor Copernicus* (1976), E. L. Doctorow's *Book of Daniel* (1971), DeLillo's *Libra* (1988), and J. M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986) invoke history in order to finally invalidate it, we would do well to consider the possibility that they may instead suggest productive ways of representing, and accessing, the past.

It is not my contention that a close and expansive reading of each of these texts would reveal that they theorize the real in the same ways, or even that nonnarrativity would necessarily be the strategy deployed in each of them. Rather, it is important to rely on their own specificity to discover what they can teach us about historical reference. With this goal in mind, I would like to consider somewhat more closely a pair of texts with similar structural features that might be misread as denying historical reference, when in fact
they insist upon it. Ian McEwan’s *Atonement* (2001) and Yann Martel’s *Life of Pi* (2001) exhibit a structure in which a series of events are presented as, more or less, real, before a final postscript, epilogue, or chapter pulls the rug out from under the reader, suggesting that everything (or much) once considered “true” in the novel must be reconsidered or rejected. They, on a global scale, reenact Samuel Beckett’s more local and repeated practice, particularly in *Molloy*, of asserting an idea or event before immediately asserting its opposite or withdrawing the first.

McEwan provides a novel that is intensely realistic, presenting events that could have happened between 1935 and 1999 in a style that almost always allows the reader to believe that s/he is being told a “true story,” despite our knowledge of its fictionality. In a final epilogue, however, it is revealed that these events, and particularly the reunification of two lovers after World War II, is not real in the context of the book but merely part of a nested novel written by one of its other characters. *Life of Pi* depicts a boy, Pi, who is shipwrecked on a small boat with a tiger before undergoing a number of adventures, many of which, in magical realist fashion, could not literally be true, despite the convincing way in which Pi tells the story. While the events of *Life of Pi* are less realistic and less linked to history than those in *Atonement*, the structure of the two works are similar. At the close of *Life of Pi* as well, we learn that Pi’s tale is not true even in the context of his own fictional world. Instead, Pi’s adventures serve to mask a much more traumatic and horrifying reality that neither Pi nor the reader wishes to face.

Despite the generally realistic elements of *Atonement*, part 3 closes with the reunification of lovers after World War II that is similar to the “happy ever after” joining of Vladek and Anja in *Maus*. In the final 1999 postscript, however, the conventional romantic ending is withdrawn, not only revealing that the story we have read thus far was merely a story but also providing information about the “actual” end of these lovers. In this section, a conventional play written by thirteen-year-old Briony Tallis some sixty-four years earlier is performed on the occasion of her seventy-seventh birthday. This play, *The Trials of Arabella*, ends with the unification of lovers and a rhyming couplet that emphasizes the complete and conventional closure of the tale. *The Trials* is clearly meant to mockingly parallel the conclusion Briony has given to the autobiographical novel that we have just read, in which her sister Cecilia is reunited with Robbie Turner after his traumatic service at Dunkirk. The novel, we learn, serves as a kind of (ineffective) atonement for Briony, who causes both Robbie’s wrongful imprisonment and the lovers’ separation in the same summer in which *The Trials* was written. Now, through the medium of her writing, she is able to bring them back together again. Although previous drafts of the novel told the sobering truth of the matter,
Briony can “no longer think what purpose would be served, if . . . I tried to persuade my reader . . . that Robbie Turner died of septicemia at Bray Dunes on 1 June 1940, or that Cecilia was killed in September . . . by the bomb that destroyed Balham Underground Station” (350). She observes that the only purpose of such an ending would be “bleakest realism” and notes that once the novel is published, “we will only exist as my inventions” (350) and therefore she may as well invent a happy ending.

Certainly, it is possible to read this conclusion as a means of denaturalizing the principally realistic novel that comes before it, suggesting that all we know and all we can ever know are texts that may influence us in particular ways, or serve our purposes (as Briony’s novel helps assuage her guilt), but which do not accurately represent the real world. Because the novel seems so rigorously realistic for most of its 300+ pages, the way in which the final section denaturalizes all that has come before seems to function as a “postmodern” deconstruction of sorts. That is, it makes us reevaluate everything we took to be “real,” and therefore makes us question the possibility of encountering the real. At the same time, the mere presence of this final section introduces us to a level of narrative that encourages us to look beyond the “happy ending” narrative initially presented and to confront us with the “bleakest realism” of war, bombs, and septicemia. While it is true that even this postscript is mere construction (McEwan’s this time) without mimetic component, by creating frames around Briony’s narrative, it also allows readers to see the text they are reading as an interior frame that has, in its turn, an external frame that is the real world in which we live. When Briony thinks to herself, “how can a novelist achieve atonement when, with her absolute power of deciding outcomes, she is also God?” (350), the novel makes us think not only of Briony’s novel but also of the novel we are completing, Atonement. In doing so, it makes us consider the ethical quandary at the heart of both novelists’ decisions. Is it more ethical to conclude the horrors of Dunkirk and the Blitz with a lovers’ reunion that implies that all that has come before it functions as mere impediments to the “happy ending,” or is it more ethical to end the tale with a more “realistic” death, emphasizing the traumatic reality of Dunkirk and the Blitz? In “real” life, after all, there were many lovers who died, but also many who were reunited. The reference to the novelist as God is reminiscent of The French Lieutenant’s Woman. Like that novel, the connection of author to deity encourages the reader to articulate both the similarities and the differences between a textual world that is governed by a controlling presence and a real world that is likely not.

Neither of the endings of Atonement is true in any conventional sense, of course, since the people involved are characters, not real people. At the same time, however, when Briony observes that “the letters the lovers wrote are in
the archives of the War Museum” (350), there is a reference to the real-world Imperial War Museum, from which McEwan used “letters, journals, and reminiscences of soldiers and nurses serving in 1940” (n.p.) for his source material. While, in a historical sense, it may not be possible to confirm or deny the final disposition of Cecilia and Robbie, McEwan here gestures to a world beyond those in the novel’s pages, a world where specific facts can be confirmed, and where one’s ethical responsibilities may exceed that of the novelist’s. That is, while Atonement’s postscript acknowledges a postmodernity in which reality is always mediated by texts, it does not merely settle for this observation, but instead also questions what responsibility the artist, creator, or historian has to history and its documents.

The final section, then, moves the novel beyond a simple realistic transcription that never acknowledges its own mediation, but it also moves it beyond a simply “postmodern” notion that the truth can never be known. By revealing a level of the real underneath the seemingly realistic, Atonement encourages us to do the same in regards to history itself. It is too easy and self-serving for Briony to abandon “bleakest realism” in the name of “atonement.” While Cecilia and Robbie are not of our real world, they are of hers and deserve the truth from which ethical responses can arise. McEwan’s novel encourages his readers to think seriously about their own responsibilities to the truth, whether they have a novelist’s God-like capacity to control representations or not. Briony’s efforts to get the details of the Battle of Dunkirk right (339) are paralleled by McEwan’s own fidelity to wartime documents in Atonement, or to the practice of neurological surgery in his later novel, Saturday (2005). While on one level Briony does not seem to consider her rewriting of her sister’s history as any kind of transgression, she does refer to her “offenses against veracity” (336), a phrase that would be impossible to deploy if there were not some base level of the real that she, and the novel, were not configuring as more true than Briony’s own novel. Briony’s acknowledgment that she could not retain the “courage of [her] pessimism” (350) likewise implies that her retreat from the truth is a kind of cowardice, as are her efforts to suggest that her revisions are meaningless because Cecilia and Robbie are mere texts, not truths. In fact, in her world, they are both. As in Rushdie’s errata, Atonement’s postscript provides a disnarrated segment of the text that does not fit into Briony’s narrative, but which nevertheless insists upon historical accuracy. That this postscript is subsumed into McEwan’s narrative does not invalidate its insistence on the historical real.

Winner of the 2002 Man Booker Prize, Life of Pi has a similar structure and leads to somewhat similar conclusions. Like Briony, Pi reveals that the stories he has been spinning are not true in the context of his own world, and like Briony, he suggests that despite this lack of truth the stories he has
been telling are preferable to “bleak realism.” In the more exotic tale, Pi is shipwrecked on a lifeboat with a tiger, a hyena, an orangutan, and a zebra. The tiger, named Richard Parker, is the lone survivor among the animals after internecine battles, and Pi then has a series of adventures with him over the better part of a year, before being recovered by Japanese officials.

When these officials do not believe his story, he offers them another (much shorter) one, in which the lifeboat is peopled by Pi, his mother, the ship’s cook, and a wounded sailor. Here, the other inhabitants amputate the sailor’s leg for fishing bait, leading to the cook’s cannibalism, the murder of Pi’s mother by the cook, and Pi’s subsequent killing of the cook and consumption of his heart. The Japanese officials take on the role of the reader, interpreting the first story in light of the second. They identify the zebra as a symbol for the sailor, the orangutan as Pi’s mother, the hyena as the cook, and the tiger as Pi himself. The two stories, then, are not two stories at all but (largely) the same story, with metaphorical content provided to make the first more entertaining and more religiously meaningful, as Pi “turned to God” as a means of survival (311). Since neither story provides an explanation for the sinking of the ship, Pi asks the officials which story they prefer, and they choose the “story with the animals” (317).

As Pi points out to the officials, “you can’t prove the question either way,” (317) and “[t]he explanation for the sinking of the Tsimtsum is at the bottom of the Pacific” (316). Pi succeeds in convincing them that neither story can be “proven” as true, and since this is the case we may as well choose the more enjoyable and entertaining story. If this is the case, however, one wonders why Pi (and Martel) does not give us only the first story and not the second. While some elements of the longer story have no clear analogue in the more realistic one, and others, like the sinking of the ship, simply have no explanation, it is clear that the second story, despite its own unrealistic elements, is meant to be seen as “more real” than the first. While Pi loses his parents in both stories, the witnessing of his own mother’s murder and Pi’s own treatment of the cook in the second story give the first emotional weight. Because of the second story, Pi’s fanciful adventures in the first begin to take on elements of trauma, loss, transgression, and redemption that serve to explain Pi’s turn to God more adequately. In this, the novel makes a shambles of Pi’s premises. He claims he wants the officials to choose the first story for their official report because it is “better,” but, as in Waterland and Atonement, it might be more productively seen as a narrative that therapeutically salves his trauma. The second story is too close to the real and perhaps explains his tears of relief when the officials choose the first.

From this perspective, the first story is not “better” than the second, but supplemented by it. The real trauma on board the lifeboat produces the
extravagances of the Richard Parker story, just as the Richard Parker story makes it possible to cope with the real trauma. These are not merely two stories from which we can choose (as a more traditionally “postmodern” reading of the novel might suggest), but an exploration of the dialectic relationship of mimetic reproduction and signifying representation. While the novel acknowledges certain limits to historical recovery, it also explores the pervasive power of the real to generate stories, and of stories to transmit the real. *Atonement* and *Life of Pi* both insist on a world more real than the fictions that occupy the majority of their pages, and even though this more real world is just another fiction, it, in turn, reminds us of the distinctions between those worlds and our own.

My attention here to two twenty-first century texts foregrounds the substantial period of history covered by this book. *Between the Acts* is, no doubt, distant in perspective from *Atonement* and *Life of Pi*, as the sixty years between their publication dates would indicate. That is, while the texts considered in this study have some similar theorizations of the notion of “history,” there is little doubt that history itself, the actual events and discourses in the world that surrounded their production, impacted their writing and their attitudes toward history more theoretically conceived. While my conscious decision to focus on relatively few texts in great detail makes any generalizations about how history itself generated the ideas in these texts suspect, there is little doubt that different circumstances and discourses influenced and directed Woolf’s writing of *Between the Acts* than those that provided similar impetus to the early-1980s *Midnight’s Children* and *Waterland*. Likewise, it seems hardly coincidental that two texts with such striking structural similarities as *Atonement* and *Life of Pi* arrived in the same year of the new century.

Virginia Woolf’s critique of a purportedly objective patriarchal “realism” may perhaps be linked to similar anti-objectivist discourses circulating in the 1920s and 1930s, both in historical discourse and elsewhere. Einstein’s theories of relativity and Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle are widely acknowledged as important (if widely misinterpreted) influences on a nascent “relativism” during the period. Woolf’s knowledge of and similarities to Henri Bergson’s notion of the subjective experience of time indicates how her critique of objective history arises out of contemporary discourses and not independently of them. In fact, American historians in the interwar period like Charles Beard and Carl Becker were already questioning the Rankean objectivity that had dominated the profession. Interestingly, Peter Novick notes that World War I “posed a fundamental and sweeping challenge to the
profession’s posture of disinterested objectivity,” since it was often “optimism and faith in progress which . . . had grounded their faith in objectivity” in the first place (That Noble Dream 111). That is, the faith in Enlightenment rationalism to solve the world’s problems was irrevocably shaken by the First World War, and the natural result was a questioning of rationalism itself, which in turn could not help but negatively impact faith in science and history. Woolf’s own view of the trauma of World War I is available in Jacob’s Room, Mrs. Dalloway, To the Lighthouse, and the fractured stream-of-consciousness narratives therein may easily be read as a rejection of some kind of objective “third-person” historian’s view, although not necessarily of the capacity to access the past.

The effort to build a new cultural consensus in response to the threat of the Axis powers made Woolf’s challenge to patriarchal histories and objectivity unfashionable rather quickly, as discussed earlier, and the discourses that challenged her later work are similar to those that reasserted objectivity as a possibility and a goal for the historical profession in the years that followed. To oppose Hitler, the West had need of the kind of cultural consensus that notions of “objective truth” suggested, and relativist thinkers like Becker and Beard were largely disregarded in favor of a reasserted objectivity in the 1950s and early 1960s. While these decades do find some writers later labeled as “postmodern” emerging, the decay of consensus seen in the objections to the Vietnam War, the feminist movement, “reverse colonization,” and the “black power” movement of the later 1960s and 1970s undoubtedly contributed to the more widespread critique of “objectivity” in philosophy, historical discourse, literature, and popular culture that followed in the 1970s and 1980s. The student revolts in France of 1968 undoubtedly generated and influenced poststructuralist philosophy, just as that philosophy became influential on the historical profession, as discussed in the introduction. Certainly, texts like Waterland and Midnight’s Children seem part of a discursive field that includes Hayden White, Michel Foucault, Thomas Kuhn, and Edward Said, rather than independent of them. All of these thinkers, of course, focus on how “discourses” or theoretical paradigms create our perceptions of reality or “facts,” rather than the possibility of their transparent transmission. Novick suggests that it is Foucault who was the most “broadly influential” of these thinkers (That Noble Dream 535), and it is little surprise that ideas propagated by Foucault surface in fictional texts in the years that follow, whether he was a direct influence or not. Likewise, it is not difficult to ascertain that Foucault’s own political commitments are generated by his historical moment, not independent of it.

It may be too soon to try to determine cultural or historical influences on twenty-first century texts, although there is little doubt that recent back-
lash against “postmodernism” may be linked to efforts to generate a new cultural consensus post-9/11. It is possible that texts like *Atonement* and *Life of Pi* may someday be seen as the last gasp of a dying movement no longer relevant in a world forced once again to “choose sides” between Enlightenment rationalism and fundamentalist fanaticism. What this book attempts to articulate, however, is how this binary, like so many others, is an untenable one to apply to postmodernist texts. To configure postmodernism as a kind of irrational radical relativism is to ignore the ways in which its discourses, literary and otherwise, insist on a complex rationalism, an allegiance to historical fact, and a rejection of the relativism of which it is often accused. A rejection of consensus is not, after all, the same as a rejection of truth. Certainly, these texts, and postmodern theory itself, cannot help but be a product of history, but this does not mean that they cannot help us theorize what history is and can be.

Throughout this book I have suggested that postmodernism, literary and theoretical, is frequently more dependent upon notions of history, reality, and truth than is generally acknowledged. Both Hayden White and Frank Ankersmit, widely considered to be two of the more extreme exemplars of postmodern historiography, admit at various times to the intractability of certain historical events to discursive deformation. Reading these theorists closely may yield insight into the relationship of representation and reality, rather than the radical relativism so often ascribed to their names. Similarly, postmodern authors provide a plethora of approaches to the representation of reality, not a blanket rejection of that possibility.

Kundera’s “guerilla” histories, Woolf’s “Moments of Being,” Swift’s “Here and Now,” Rushdie’s use of antinarrative errata, and Spiegelman’s encounters of past and present in the single comics panel all suggest that despite barriers of textuality and signification, reality can be encountered. I hope to have suggested both why such an assertion is ethically necessary and why it is theoretically possible. While it is common to read postmodernism as antimimetic and therefore inimical to ethical investigation, it is perhaps now time to confront the postmodern as a version of mimeticism and as a confrontation with the ethical, whatever its historical origins.