

de Waal, Kit, ed. (2019) *Common People: an Anthology of Working Class Writers*, Unbound, London, UK.

Connolly, Nathan, ed. (2017) *Know Your Place: Essays on the Working Class by the Working Class*, Dead Ink, St Ives, UK.

Reviews by Owen Clayton

For many, the idea of working-class culture is an oxymoron. Being working class is understood to be a trap to be suffered or, if possible, escaped. These two volumes set out to challenge such ideas. *Know Your Place: Essays on the Working Class by the Working Class* examines what it is like to be working class in the United Kingdom, with essays focusing on leisure, place, culture, class barriers, and the ways in which ethnicity, gender and sexuality overlap in the experience of being working class. *Common People: an Anthology of Working Class Writers* has, as its title indicates, a more literary focus, providing a series of short memoirs and vignettes from established and emerging authors. Both volumes highlight the broad and diverse experience of being working class. More than this, they depict the real and lasting barriers faced by working-class people, while also celebrating working-class culture as something more than a burden to be overcome. Taken together, these volumes are extremely welcome additions.

Despite the trendiness of the term ‘white working class’, the working class is not, and never has been, white. *Know Your Place* in particular explores the difference that race makes to the experience of being working class, as when Sylvia Arthur describes being given the more physical tasks in her supermarket job because, as her manager tells her, ‘It’s a lot easier for you than it is for us’ (*Know Your Place*, p.56). The legacy of slavery marks black bodies as beasts of burden, or as Arthur puts it, ‘Our blackness is indivisible from the perception of us as proletarian’ (*Know Your Place*, p.57). In a different way, being from an immigrant family affects the way that language can mark class, as in Rym Kechacha’s memory of his father, who learned two different Englishes on his arrival from Algeria: one that was ‘cool, clear and slightly old fashioned, each syllable enunciated, never using any slang’ to be used with representatives of officialdom, such as teachers and doctors, and ‘the common English...the one he would use with the bloke behind the counter in the petrol station’ (*Know Your Place*, pp.227-8). This highlights the way that Received Pronunciation, or RP, has been used more generally as a tool of class domination. As Kechacha asks, ‘Should a Receiver of Pronunciation go forth in the world a changed being, their tongue transformed from base lead into an eloquent gold, forever elevated from their working class status by this new accent?’ (*Know Your Place*, p.229).

The answer, of course, is no, but the question highlights the way that cultural markers stand as indicators of class. A middle-class person’s ability to control the conditions of their labour

might be almost the same as those of a working-class person, but a posh accent and a knowledge of French wine are useful ideological tools to allow one exploited worker to assume superiority over another. And thankfully both volumes emphasise the arbitrary and even comic nature of class identity markers. For Jenny Knight, for example, a desire to become middle class was summed up by the act of drinking ‘Mat-oose Row-say’ (Mateus Rosé) wine (*Common People*, p.205), while Louise Doughty describes the trivial differences that symbolise the cultural class divide: ‘we didn’t have a sitting room; we had a lounge. In the lounge we sat not on a sofa but on a settee. We had dinner at lunchtime and the evening meal was called tea.’ (*Common People*, p.134). A particular absurdity, as Kath McKay notes, is the way that the term ‘professional’ is used to divide middle-class from working-class jobs: ‘if you are working class you can’t be professional’, she states, even though the term denotes someone doing a particular job for a living (*Know your Place*, p.180). No one would call a cleaner a professional, yet she is. Indeed, as Cath Bore writes, in Britain a cleaner is more likely to be called a ‘scrubber’, just one more in a long line of class-based insults (*Know your Place*, p.151).

While race, gender and sexuality are protected characteristics in the UK, class is not. And as both volumes show, class barriers remain. Trying to break into scriptwriting, for instance, Wally Jiagoo asks and answers a question posed by every working-class person who has attempted to make it in a middle-class industry: ‘why was I so terrible at schmoozing...? The reason is: cliques’ (*Know your Place*, p.104). Oxbridge networks dominate, and even when a working-class person does manage to sit down at the same dinner table as the scions of the upper crust, as in Riley Rockford’s wonderful vignette, they are discouraged from participating by conversations about backpacking holidays and prestigious (unpaid) internships at tech companies (*Common People*, p.106). In a brilliant essay, Kate Fox describes how her Northern accent prevented her from being considered for a role as a national TV news presenter: ‘British people would rather be invaded by Hitler than have a Northerner reading the news’, she quips (*Know your Place*, p.192). Essays in both volumes describe the chippiness (defensiveness) that results from working-class people internalising shame about their origins.

As a result of this shame, confidence (and its lack) becomes another indicator of class: Durre Shahwar Mughal argues that ‘the working classes are constantly riddled with self-doubt and imposter syndrome’ (*Know Your Place*, p.72), while Cathy Rentzenbrink says ‘What I envy most about posh people is their confidence’ (*Common People*, p.79). What enables such confidence, of course, is a lack of worry: a breezy sense of having always been taken of, that everything will always be OK, even if Mummy and Daddy have to step in on occasion. In contrast, as Rebecca Winson rightly notes, ‘When you’re working class, worry is just there, a constant background hum everyone can hear’ (*Know Your Place*, p.132). The permanent stress caused by a lack of money means that working-class people know that tomorrow will not be OK, because today was not OK.

Both volumes also focus on the class implications of leisure. Many working-class activities are frowned upon by the middle classes, such as eating processed food. Suffering the thousands of micro stresses that affect working-class life means that Laura Wadell has come to associate ‘bad food with free time’, a connection that many middle-class people would fail to understand (*Know Your Place*, p.26). For Yvonne Singh, who grew up brown seeing ‘PAKS [sic] OUT’ and ‘NF’ slogans graffitied on walls near her home, it was not eating but going to the seaside that meant experiencing ‘a magical landscape unlike anything I’d known’, a place where she could imagine a better world (*Know Your Place*, pp.35-37). Similarly, for Anitha Sethi, a trip to the Lake District during her childhood gave her a ‘new perspective...The heart has opened up huge enough to be filled with those deep lakes and mountains’ (*Common People*, pp.215-

217). I think we can all enjoy the image of William Wordsworth, who opposed the London & North Western rail line to Kendell and Windermere on the grounds that the working classes would 'contaminate' his beloved Lake District, spinning in his grave.

In poetry, novels, films and television programmes, stereotypes abound: misery, poverty, abuse, drugs, and violence are the standard ways of representing working-class life in each of these forms. When not exploiting these limited stereotypes, literature tends to push the working classes to the margins. Kit De Waal, who appears in both volumes, asks who she would be in the novel *Jane Eyre*, concluding that the most likely candidate would be 'Leah, the maid of whom we are given few details and no sense of her life and passions' (*Know your Place*, p.65). Working-class cultural pursuits are similarly excluded from novels: as Cathy Rentzenbrink puts it in her excellent essay, 'You don't get much about darts in literature' (*Common People*, p.73).

Despite these exclusions, both volumes describe the pride that contributors feel about growing up working class, and about the positive aspects of working-class culture. Genamour Barrett writes about living on an estate where 'everyone knew everyone' and where people would say hello in the street, providing at least a modicum of collective identity (*Know your Place*, p.158). In a beautiful moment, Stuart Maconie describes looking at a photograph of his former tower block in Wigan, taken by a photographer to represent modernist alienation, commenting that the image 'works as a symbol of a depersonalised urban aesthetic, but it was also home' (*Common People*, p.43). And one of the most touching moments in either volume is the end of Damian Barr's piece, in which his grumpy 'Granny Mac' uses all of her savings stamps, collected over many years, to pay for his school uniform, such is her pride and selfless love for her grandson (*Common People*, p.154).

Both volumes, which were published thanks to fundraising efforts on Unbound and Kickstarter respectively (itself quite a telling fact), have much to teach us about the diversity and gradations of British working-class experience. Of the two volumes, *Common People* is more formally adventurous, which is unsurprising given that it is written by established and up-and-coming authors (though in truth the submissions from the more established writers feel throwaway). Some of the articles in *Knowing Your Place* read like newspaper opinion pieces and are bound to date quite quickly; in fact, some already have. But both volumes are of value to anyone with a personal or 'professional' interest in working-class culture, particularly in working-class life writing. Both are compellingly and clearly written, eschewing academic language for the most part. I recommend both volumes to every member of the Working-Class Studies Association.

Reviewer Bio

Dr. Owen Clayton is Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Lincoln (UK). His current research focuses on representations of vagrancy and homelessness. He is working on his second book, provisionally entitled *Vagabonds, Tramps, and Hobos: the Literature and Culture of American Transiency*. His first monograph, *Literature and Photography in Transition*, came out with Palgrave MacMillan in 2015.