

FALL 2021 BOOK NOTES

***Class on Screen: The Global Working Class in Contemporary Cinema* (Palgrave MacMillan), Sarah Attfield**
Sarah Attfield became obsessed with watching movies about working-class people while she was working as a shop girl in central London. As she explains in her Introduction, the first such film she saw was also the first film she had ever seen with subtitles (Pedro Almodovar's *What Have I Done to Deserve This?*), and this "foreign" film reflected her life growing up on a council estate better than any of the Hollywood fare she had previously seen. Attfield is now a lecturer in Communications at the University of Technology Sydney in Australia, and she has been watching and studying movies from all countries for 30 years now. *Class on Screen* surveys what she's seen with a focus on evaluating how representations of working-class life "either reinforce or challenge stereotypical depictions." With chapters on work, class culture, immigration, gender and sexualities, and the intersection of race and class, Attfield highlights vast hosts of differences by much more than country of origin, but in the end also finds "commonalities of experience despite geographical distance and cultural difference." Attfield is the founding co-editor of the *Journal of Working-Class Studies*.

***Gun/Shy* (Wayne State University Press), Jim Daniels**

From the publisher: "The poems in *Gun/Shy* deal with the emotional weight of making do. Tinged with both the regrets and wisdom of aging, Jim Daniels's poems measure the wages of love in a changing world with its vanishing currency. He explores the effects of family work—putting children to bed, leading parents to their final resting places—and what is lost and gained in those exertions. Childhood and adolescence are examined, through both looking back on his own childhood and on that of his children. He finds solace in small miracles—his mother stretching the budget to feed five children with 'hamburger surprise' and potato skins, his children collecting stones and crabapples as if they were gold coins." One reviewer writes that "Jim Daniels' poetry explores not only the realities of a blue-collar, late twentieth-century, upper Midwest childhood, but the entirety of America's sociocultural whirlwind throughout these last six decades. Few writers believe more deeply in poetry's capacity to document the world, and documentation, in his hands, is a form of homage. *Gun/Shy* is a new chapter in Daniels' grand, literary-historical project—more importantly, it is an essential collection from one of our contemporary masters."

***Children Framing Childhoods: Working-Class Kids' Visions of Care* (Policy Press), Wendy Luttrell**

This unusual longitudinal study gave a very diverse group of working-class children in Worcester, Massachusetts, access to cameras at different ages (10, 12, 16, and 18) and asked them to "capture and value the centrality of care in their lives, homes, and classrooms." The result, according to Wendy Luttrell, "boldly refutes biased assumptions about working-class childhoods and re-envision schools as inclusive, imaginative, and care-ful spaces." The book argues that urban educational research and policy is too preoccupied with "problems, brokenness, stigma, and blame" and therefore misses "the capacities and desires of children and youth growing up in working-class communities." Mary Romero, President of the American Sociological Association, endorses the book for challenging "the deficit models of working-class children by asking them to tell us what is important to know about school and home. . . . their ways of doing care work offer adults lessons on how to create a caring environment."

***The Melancholia of Class: A Manifesto for the Working Class* (Repeater), Cynthia Cruz**

Cynthia Cruz is a poet, novelist, and essayist who in this book turns to providing a "manifesto for the working class." From the publisher's blurb, it's pretty clear that hers is a rather bleak view: "To be working-class in a middle-class world is to be a ghost. Excluded, marginalised, and subjected to violence, the working class is also deemed by those in power to not exist. We are left with a choice between assimilation into middle-class values and culture, leaving our working-class origins behind, or total annihilation." But one reviewer promises that the book "forges a merciful new footing to state what's long overdue: . . . that the sorrow of surviving poverty, if at all, is a grief finally named in this courageous and deeply true work."

***Running for Home* (Bottom Dog Press), Edward McClelland**

Pete Beatty, author of *Cuyahoga*, writes: "Edward McClelland's *Running for Home* relocates *Chariots of Fire* to the Rust Belt, with Inland North accents instead of the Queen's English, and a way better soundtrack. A blue-collar bildungsroman with breakaway speed." Poet Jim Daniels says of the novel that it is "a deeply moving coming-of-age story with a distinct, refreshing authenticity. This sympathetic portrait of a young man trying to find his way in a working-class town after the factory closes has no easy Hollywood resolution (that often involves the main character running *from* home as if escape is victory). McClelland's story rings true with the authority and complexity of an insider's perspective."

***Right of Way: Race, Class, and the Silent Epidemic of Pedestrian Deaths in America* (Island), Angie Schmitt**

More than 6,000 pedestrians in the U.S. were hit and killed by cars in 2019, and that was nearly a 50% increase over the previous decade. Angie Schmitt, a journalist turned urban planning consultant, documents that you are more likely to be hit by a car if you live in a low-income, Black or Hispanic neighborhood and if you live in one of the 19 most dangerous metro areas in the Sun Belt – areas modeled on sprawling suburban development and highways. As one reviewer explains, “Low-income, Black and Hispanic neighborhoods, in addition to being populated by people who are more likely to have to walk, are more likely to force walkers to go near large, busy roads and be subject to other conditions like the absence of sidewalks, crosswalks, or nighttime lighting—that increase their odds of being hit.” The book shows that if you look hard enough, as Schmitt does here, you will find class and race making life more difficult in every way for very large groups of people.

***Re-Union: How Bold Labor Reforms Can Repair, Revitalize, and Reunite the United States* (Cornell U. Press), David Madland**

This is a deeply wonky book that seeks to strengthen and build on existing labor union structures and bargaining practices by supplementing them with government-enforced sectoral bargaining across entire industries and with strong incentives for workers to join unions. By drawing on a wide range of strategies and practices that have worked in other advanced capitalist countries as well as some that have worked in the U.S., either in the past or currently, Madland presents a compelling case for extensive labor law reform. The book has been praised by numerous labor leaders, like Mary Kay Henry, president of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), who says: “Madland has done a great service to American workers by showing how to unrig the rules so working people can bargain for a better life.” Likewise, Sara Nelson, president of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA, says: “Madland understands that strengthening workers will strengthen our economy and our democracy, and proposes bold solutions to reimagine how labor law can give working people a real chance to build lasting power through solidarity.”

***Down on James Street* (Hard Ball Press), Nicole McCandless and illustrations by Byron Gramby**

Set in 1930's Pittsburgh, *Down on James Street* is the story of Dorothy, who wants to dance the Lindy Hop, and George, her 'perfect partner.' The two of them just want to dance, but Dorothy, who is black, and George, who is white, run into racism head-on when the police storm the dance hall and shut it down for interracial dancing. From the publisher: “Dorothy has faced racial prejudice all her life, and she's not giving up on the dance, while George comes face to face with his own white privilege. He must choose between going home or joining Dorothy in the fight to keep the dance alive.” *Down on James Street* is a book for young readers that helps them understand the jazz era and the historical forces that created and surrounded it.

***Poorly Understood: What America Gets Wrong About Poverty* (Oxford U. Press), Mark Robert Rank, Lawrence Eppard, Heather Bullock.**

The chapter titles of *Poorly Understood* clearly state the various myths the book aims to shatter. Most Americans experience poverty, for example, because “poverty spells are short but frequent.” Or the poor tend to live outside of impoverished inner-city neighborhoods, and whites are the largest racial group experiencing poverty. Those facts are the subject of the book's first four chapters, and it goes on from there to expose common beliefs about what causes poverty and what works and doesn't work to alleviate or eliminate it. The team of authors is made up of professors of social welfare, sociology, and psychology, bringing a wide range of expertise to the subject. One reviewer explains: “the usual bromides about escaping [poverty] through hard work, education, and upward mobility no longer hold water. Poverty is more prevalent and deeper than in other industrial nations, and anyone who wants a clear-eyed analysis of why poverty persists and how it can be overcome needs to read this book.”

***A Working Class State of Mind* (Pierpoint Press), Colin Burnett**

A Working Class State of Mind, Burnett's debut book, is written entirely in East Coast Scots. According to the publisher, the book “brings the everyday reality and language of life in Scotland to the surface.” The publisher also describes the book as taking “themes in the social sciences and animat[ing] them in vivid ethnographic portrayals of what it means to be working class in Scotland today.” Describing the book, the author says, “It's about the dark underbelly of working-class Edinburgh. The stories are dark comedies, blending drama with comedy.”

***The Tolls of Uncertainty: How Privilege and the Guilt Trap Shape Unemployment in America* (Princeton U. Press), Sarah Damaske**

Sarah Damaske interviewed about a hundred unemployed people across Pennsylvania and then focused on intimate portraits of four of them as they struggled in different ways with seeking work. The insufficiency of our unemployment compensation system is pretty well known – mostly involving a lack of money to cover most unemployed people and meager funds for those who are covered. But Damaske's study focuses on the multiple harms, and often a cascade of reinforcing problems and obstacles, this insufficiency causes – from poor health to strained marital and parental

relationships to psychological coping mechanisms that do harm as well as good. Stephanie Coontz calls it an “eye-opening book” that “explores how class, race, and gender affect people's experience of unemployment and reveals the ways men's and women's reactions to job loss have changed in recent decades.”

The 32: An Anthology of Irish Working-Class Voices (Unbound), edited by Paul McVeigh

Paul McVeigh's debut novel, *The Good Son*, won The Polari First Novel Prize, and he is twice winner of The McCrea Literary Award. The anthology he edits here includes work by Kevin Barry, Dermot Bolger, Roddy Doyle, Lisa McNerney, and Lyra McKee, among others, and it is a celebration of working-class voices from across Ireland. One reviewer says of the collection that “The 32 voices in this anthology are truly diverse, culled from all corners of our island.” She also writes that “*The 32* is an insightful, funny and touching collection, with a range of voices and viewpoints that must be heard.”

Brewing a Boycott: How a Grassroots Coalition Fought Coors and Remade American Consumer Activism (U. of North Carolina Press), Allyson Brantley

The boycott against Coors beer was started by brewery workers in Golden, Colorado, in the 1970s, but spread nationally as many groups had reason to detest the conservative ideologues who ran the company and championed reactionary causes. Other unions responded to the call to boycott the regional beer that was just then seeking a national market based on the semi-cult status it had built in the West. But the Coors family was also prominent in railing against gay rights at a time when the LGBTQ movement was gaining strength, and gay bars happily joined the cause, organizing within and outside the movement, eventually attracting progressives of all varieties. Allyson Brantley's account of the boycott traces the development of this unusual coalition, rooted in its time but also presenting a possible model for future coalitions that bring together what are usually thought of as strange bedfellows.

Railman's Son (Finishing Line Press), LeRoy N. Sorenson

The publisher describes Sorenson's collection of poems as “Narrative poems about working class life in a small prairie town. A protest book about the damages and sorrow poverty causes on humans interwoven with tragedy and personal loss.” Reviewing the collection, author Thomas R. Smith (*Storm Island*) writes that “LeRoy Sorenson's gritty, visceral poems in *The Railman's Son* are deeply informed by the wounding of class. In this, Sorenson is brother to poets like Philip Levine and James Wright, daring to break the silence on an ‘ism’ kept by many otherwise progressive peers. Rarely in recent poetry do we encounter so many vivid details of the traditional working-class life. ‘There is nothing so pure as work,’ Sorenson says without apparent irony, yet work is also what chews up and spits out so many lives. Thus, this book becomes a kind of ambivalent elegy to an older way of being in the world. In harnessing such tensions, Sorenson frighteningly reads ‘the shorthand of American rage,’ of which we should all take heed.”

Imperial Intimacies: A Tale of Two Islands (Verso) Hazel Carby

Just the core facts about Hazel Carby tell an interesting story. Growing up on a council estate in postwar London, Carby was the daughter of a Welsh mother and a Jamaican father. Always out of place wherever she was, she was constantly asked “Where are you from?” which often meant “Who are you – really?” This book traces her investigation into the roots of her white family in Wales and her mixed-race family in Jamaica in her exploration of who she is or might be. Her Welsh grandmother, “challenged by poverty and disease,” was not English or even close, but Carby was thrilled to grow up sort of English in the cosmopolitan city. But her family in Jamaica was even more complicated. It had its origin in children fathered by a white plantation aristocrat and a free woman of color in the 18th century. Family historian Alison Light says: “Angry and lyrical, uncompromising and vivid, *Imperial Intimacies* is a daughter's reckoning with the bitter legacies of slavery and colonialism as they come to shape the lives of families and individuals, their dreams and desires. A deeply searching and often moving book.”