**Phil O’Brien, *The Working Class and Twenty-First-Century British Fiction: Deindustrialisation, Demonisation, Resistance*.** Abingdon: Routledge, 2020. xii + 172pp. £33.29 eBook. ISBN 978-1-003-00791-3.

Part of the Routledge Studies in Contemporary Literature series, Phil O’Brien’s first book opens with three urgent and ambitious questions: ‘What place do the working class have in the contemporary novel? What role does class take in twenty-first-century Britain? What is the relationship between class, capital, and neoliberalism?’ (1) To consider these, O’Brien examines the ‘articulations of class’ (1) in nine novels by six contemporary writers: David Peace, Gordon Burn, Anthony Cartwright, Ross Raisin, Jenni Fagan, and Sunjeev Sahota, all published variously between 2003 and 2015.

O’Brien begins by establishing the economic context with one of the most lucid, nuanced, and yet concise accounts of the longer development of neoliberal capitalism over the past half-century, a period defined by previous decades of deindustrialisation and Thatcherite economic policy. This was a project enacted not only by the Conservative Party but also by New Labour, who continued ‘the Thatcherite belief in individualism’ whereby social inequality was explained not by economic conditions but by an individual’s willingness to do ‘hard work’ (8). O’Brien calls this ‘the neoliberal mantra that personal failure is a result of personal failings’ (5) and locates it as the origin of the ongoing stigmatisation and demonisation of working-class communities.

The book is then structured into six chapters, one on each author, and these chapters are divided into two sections: the first on deindustrialisation, the second on demonisation. The word ‘resistance’ in the book’s subtitle refers to the act of writing itself: these novels ‘name and resist’ the forces of demonisation and ‘provide sites of resistance to the damaging logics and inequalities of capital.’ (154) For O’Brien, these novels ‘are not simple “reflections” but powerful interventions into both class discourse and the drastic changes to class formation in Britain brought about by the ideologies of neoliberalism.’ (1) The wider implication of this argument is fascinating and vital: rather than conceiving of the novel as a simple, representational form, O’Brien argues that fictional writing can make significant interventions into critical and theoretical discourses. These are not necessarily ‘novels of ideas’ and O’Brien does not use that term; this potential is instead seen as inherent in any fictional writing, due to ‘the flexibility of the novel as a form’ (152). This idea complicates the received wisdom of ‘the death of the author’ by restoring at least some agency to the novelist; it will therefore be immensely useful for any academic working on or teaching fiction.

But whilst O’Brien does examine the ideas discussed and events described in each of the novels, his analysis is not limited to content only. Close attention is paid to the language of the novels, and the arguments of each chapter are consistently justified by quotation and close reading. The careful attention paid to Fagan’s use of positive and negative verbs in a single paragraph from *The Panopticon* (2012), for example, is the basis for an especially convincing account of the protagonist Anais’s behaviour throughout the novel (117). O’Brien’s close readings are meticulously researched and carefully constructed, and they enable the reader to fully understand the argument regardless of their familiarity with the chosen text.

Thinking critically about contemporary literature can often be difficult because the subject is a moving target. By way of a solution, O’Brien consults a vast range of contemporary scholarship, such as Imogen Tyler’s *Revolting Subjects* (2013), as well as non-fiction books from outside the academy, such as Owen Jones’s *Chavs* (2011). Of the almost two hundred and fifty sources mentioned in the bibliography, over half are from 2000-onwards and over a quarter from 2010-onwards. Alongside this engagement with the contemporary, O’Brien also makes intelligent use of more established ideas from theorists such as Svetlana Boym, Michel Foucault, Sigmund Freud, Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, and of course Raymond Williams. O’Brien uses each critical term with precision: in the discussion of Raisin’s *Waterline* (2011), for example, ‘class mourning’ is used to describe the protagonist’s longing for his past glory at the 1971/2 Upper Clyde Shipbuilders work-in, rather than ‘nostalgia’ (102-4). Not only is ‘mourning’ far more appropriate within the context of the novel, but this choice also reminds us that not every melancholic look back to the past is nostalgic. Conversely, O’Brien uses Williams’s term ‘structure of feeling’ a handful of times throughout the book to describe the affective and intellectual contexts both of the novels and of working-class experience more generally, but no definition is given at any point. This is reasonable perhaps for those who are familiar with the term, but it’s a difficult one for new readers. O’Brien’s clarity throughout the rest of the book, in particular with the close readings, shows that he could certainly have provided a helpful and memorable explanation of the term.

The major weakness of the book, however, is its presentation. There are obvious spelling mistakes throughout: Reni Eddo-Lodge, for example, is misspelled ‘Renni’ in the introduction, the references and even in the index, and Cora Kaplan is misspelled ‘Caplan’ despite being spelled correctly three times on the same page (7). Naturally, a few typographical errors are to be expected (there may even be one or two in this review), but some of these mistakes are so shockingly conspicuous that you really do wonder how nobody at Routledge picked them up. The first full sentence on the very first page reads: ‘This book sets out to answer such pressings questions…’ (1). This is simply not good enough, and it undermines O’Brien’s obvious hard work. That said, the fact that this review has had to resort to complaining about presentation is proof enough of the significance of O’Brien’s contribution to the field.

*The Working Class and Twenty-First-Century British Fiction* is as thoughtful as it is rigorous. Its arguments are compelling and its close readings convincing; for these reasons alone it would make a valuable addition to university libraries. But for the wider implications of its secondary argument, that fiction has the potential to make significant interventions into critical discourses, it deserves a place on any contemporary fiction reading list. As the book’s final words attest, ‘class matters’ (154), and it will go on mattering; the same goes for fiction, and O’Brien shows us why.