

McMillan, G., ed. (2022). *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Class*. Routledge.

Review by John Lennon

Reading through edited collections can often feel like a late-night viewing of *The Blob* (1958): some collections are unwieldy, they take up a lot of space, and I never quite know where it begins and ends. That confusion was my initial feeling when reading *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Class*. I was sucked into spaces not clearly defined—I am reading about politics and Depression-era British literature one moment before finding myself entangled within an essay on West African rhetorical voices the next. Class subjectivities are centered in one essay before critical race theory becomes the anchor of ideas three essays later. Queer studies is applied to three (somewhat) related novels, while the next chapter is a Marxian analysis of Irish theater. Since I did not find a strong lifeline to hold onto when wading through this collection, I was absorbed into it, spent time fighting and trying to find my footing before giving up and reading through 32 essays that covered an enormous number of novels, countries, time periods, methodologies, and theorists. I was often disoriented, trying to find markers to ground myself and I eventually created some: Marx, Rancière, Bourdieu, and Deleuze were the most referenced theorists. Dickens was a popular author to analyze in several essays, and Depression-era texts were often invoked, either as the subject of the essay or as a reference point. In addition, lesser-known (to me) texts and methodologies were discussed within the collection: I know very little about Australian Indigenous literature (analyzed in the first chapter) nor have I ever thought about a corpus methodology such as ‘Social Class Metaholon-Based Literature Analysis’ (defined in the last chapter). In the thirty essays between these two bookends, I found myself surprised by what I would read, and often wrote down primary texts that piqued my interest to (hopefully) read at some point down the line. It would have been helpful to have some clearer markers linking these texts together besides an amorphous notion of ‘class,’ but the opportunity to float through this collection did let me pass through interesting spaces.

Reading through the 456-pages, I discovered some excellent essays. Carrie Conners’ ‘Productive Disruption in the Working-Class Poetry of Jan Beaty, Sandra Cisneros and Wanda Coleman’ exemplifies the kind of essay that works well in this type of collection: clear, straightforward prose that introduces these poets to the reader by connecting them together, offering specific stanzas to analyze, and concretely linking all of the analysis to her three major concerns— isolation, marginalization and embodied resistance. While there is little theoretical grounding, the essay, as constructed, does not call for it. Connor seamlessly links several strong close readings to tell a story of women working-class poets carving a space within patriarchal society, in general, and working-class poetry, specifically. Heather Laird’s article ‘Writing Working-Class Irish Mothers’ similarly wants to (re)introduce authors to readers by discussing several urban-centered texts and writers with an intent to show how literary representations of Irish working-class mothers are often invisible to scholars who see mostly tropes and not fleshed out characters. Like Connor’s, Laird’s

essay works because the intent is clearly stated and the follow through is unencumbered by theoretical posturing.

Other essays in the collection work from a defined theoretical concept before applying the theory to particular texts. Peter Kuch's essay 'Class and Upper-Middle-Class Consciousness in Katherine Mansfield's Stories' integrates Pierre Bourdieu's work on class (specifically his definitions of 'habitus' 'field' and 'status') with post-colonial theory to show that Mansfield's work is centrally concerned with class consciousness. Without getting into the weeds of Bourdieu, Kuch introduces the theorist's concepts while also reading against the grain of literary critics who feel that Mansfield is not primarily concerned with class dynamics. It is easy to see a professor in an introductory class assigning Mansfield's 'The Garden Party' along with Kuch's essay in order to frame how theory can help us read texts in a new light. In Mattius Richard's essay 'The Urban Spatiality of Street Literature,' the author focuses on a few key theoretical terms such as bell hooks' 'vernacular architecture' and Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s 'signifying,' to explore how street novelists represent and construct spaces of African American autonomy in the city. Both essays are good introductions in applying theory to literary texts.

A third (loose) strand of essays that I mentally formed in this collection were those that based themselves in historical context. Simon Lee's essay 'Social Class and Mental Health in Contemporary British Fiction' is a model essay with the stated intention to show how class and mental health intersect. Instead of discussing numerous books (a distraction I found in several of the essays in the collection), Lee focuses on Richard Milward's 2007 novel *Apples* and grounds his analysis within a context of the way mental health was framed from a governmental position in post-World War II Britain. Ingrid Hanson's 'Victorian Socialist Obituaries and the Politics of Cross-Class Community' similarly grounds her analysis in historical context, focusing on death notices in the socialist journal *Commonweal* and examining the way grief is a tool for solidarity. Both Lee's and Hanson's essays are great introductions to the way historical context matters when doing literary analysis.

Despite containing a fair number of strong essays, it is the lack of overall framing that I felt was the biggest obstacle to appreciating this collection. Although it is being marketed as a pedagogical resource, the hardback version from Routledge is \$250.00 dollars and the e-version is \$50, which makes it prohibitive for faculty and students to buy and given the wide range of authors, texts, and time periods represented, the collection is ill-suited for undergraduate courses. My problem with *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Class* is that it is not concerned with marking distinctions and similarities between nations, methodologies, time periods, or theories but collects whatever it can collect, bringing them all together in a blob-like fashion. As a 'companion,' I wanted something that would walk along with me, alerting me to possible ways of reading these essays as a group or at least putting markers down to light my path. While I created some of my own while reading, I found it frustrating to do and after leaving the collection, my memories of the essays quickly jelled together, and the distinctions disappeared.

Reviewer Bio

John Lennon is an associate professor of English at the University of South Florida and author of *Conflict Graffiti: From Revolution to Gentrification* (University of Chicago Press, 2021).