

***Thatcher and After: Margaret Thatcher and Her Afterlife in Contemporary Culture*, ed. Louisa Hadley and Elizabeth Ho (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). £55.12 / \$81.26 (Hardback). pp. 249. ISBN 978-0230233317**

Louisa Hadley and Elizabeth Ho's *Thatcher and After: Margaret Thatcher and her Afterlife in Contemporary Culture* is an edited collection of essays which provide a critical analysis of the enduring presence of Margaret Thatcher in the arts, and the impact that she has had on fiction, film, television and popular culture since the beginning of her premiership in 1979. It is the view of the editors and contributors that Thatcher and Thatcherism have had a long-lasting impact on shaping British culture. Despite the generous body of critical work in this area, the collection shows that there are many complexities still unresolved and that there is more work to be done in this area. The collection is helpfully divided into two sections, which reinforces the collection's intention to discuss both Thatcher *and* her impact by dedicating space to the analysis of Thatcherism in the contemporary. The first section, 'Thatcher', is focused upon her years in power, and the second, 'After', on the years following her retirement in 1990. While there are a many publications which are dedicated to analysing Thatcherism and its cultural impact, Hadley and Ho's collection is a welcomed and refreshing take on its presence in popular culture. Although the collection was only published in 2010 it has already become – and by no fault of the editors – outdated in some respects, owing to the changing political landscape in Britain, the coming of David Cameron's coalition government and, most notably, the death of Margaret Thatcher. Despite this, it does still engage in thought-provoking arguments which challenge the accepted views of previous scholarship in the field.

As with most edited collections, the tone is initially set by the co-authored introduction by Hadley and Ho. While this does set up a strong foundation for the rest of the book, particularly by making the case for considering the longevity of Thatcherism's impact, it is not without complications. Hadley and Ho put forward the view that the image of Margaret

Thatcher in contemporary writing and other media exists as a symbol of traumatic memories which serve to remind those who see Thatcher of the suffering of the 1980s. While it is true of many writers and artists who engage with Thatcherism that there is a focus on resistance narratives which are critical of her social policy and the culture of greed that emerged under her economic strategy, to simplify her presence to the status of ‘traumatic symbol’ ignores those texts which are more celebratory. Indeed, it is especially problematic that the introduction makes this suggestion as several of the essays in the collection, most notably Alexander Beaumont’s insightful analysis of Stephen Frears’ 1985 film *My Beautiful Laundrette*’s context of production, contradicts this view. Elsewhere, Heather Nunn and Anita Biressi’s chapter on the (re)emergence of an on-screen underclass presents the view that Danny Boyle’s 1996 adaptation of Irvine Welsh’s *Trainspotting* endorses Thatcherism as the sole means of escaping poverty and reaching a higher social status. While *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *Trainspotting* are by no means celebratory of Thatcher, to suggest that they invoke traumatic memories would be unconvincing seeing as both offer the view that Thatcherism can be simultaneously welcomed and detrimental. In addition, other recent scholarship in this area provides alternative views on the matter: for example Joseph Brooker, a leading name in the field, sees Thatcher’s image’s frequent reproduction as a result of her iconic appearance and status.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Ho and Hadley’s use of Cathy Caruth’s work to illuminate their views also feels tentative, with quotations from Caruth dropped into place and not efficiently explored. However, despite the issues with the generalisation that is made so early on, the idea of Thatcher and Thatcherism having the potential to invoke trauma could prove useful in an analysis of *some* texts, but the editors would have benefitted from articulating

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Brooker. "[Margaret Thatcher in the 21st Century](#)". *Alluvium*. 2.4 (2013). Web.

this point more clearly, especially given that the contents of their collection do not always support this view.

Yet, despite the introduction, other essays in the collection do propose new critical perspectives which could prove to be agenda-setting in the Thatcherism in contemporary culture debate. Two of the chapters in the collection do this in a similar way. Alexander Beaumont's "'New Times' Television? Channel 4 and *My Beautiful Laundrette*" (53-75) and Heather Nunn and Anita Biressi's "Shameless? Picturing the 'underclass' after Thatcherism" (137-158) both give a critical insight into the context of production and reception that surrounds the texts they discuss. For Alexander Beaumont, the fact that *My Beautiful Laundrette* – a film usually associated with the anti-Thatcherite views of its writer Hanif Kureshi – is funded by Channel 4's film arm presents a new debate that needs to be considered. Beaumont is of the view that the context of production surrounding the film serves to undermine the criticism of the narrative. He notes that Conservatives, particularly supporters of the Thatcherite values of neoliberal economics and the advanced capitalist model associated with Thatcherism, saw Channel 4 as an exemplar model of a commercially successful enterprise. Furthermore, in comparison to the state-funded BBC, Channel 4 was the preferred organisation for Thatcherites as it had gained critical and commercial acclaim without the same state support given to the BBC. Beaumont's critical insight into the text as a cultural product which has its own afterlife in the marketplace raises new questions (and, incidentally, provides thoughtful answers) in this scholarly field. Beaumont positions the text as a cultural product and finds that the narrative's critique can be undermined by the fact that the product and its creators exist within, and even enjoy, the capitalist marketplace and associated prize culture: indeed, their success supports the establishment that the narrative attempts to criticise.

Much like Beaumont's contribution, Nunn and Biressi's chapter on the underclass raises a point about the marketplace – but in a much more minor capacity – in relation to *Trainspotting*. The two authors draw on the work of Claire Monk in their analysis of the film adaption of Welsh's novel. While the film did concern itself with the life of the working class, it did so in a way which propped-up the aesthetics of New Labour: a vision of Britain which was modern and marketable. In addition, they also refer readers to the solution to poverty that is presented here, namely the Thatcherite values of capitalism and family. Again, the return to a discussion of the dialectic relationship between a critical textual narrative and a supportive contextual relationship with the markets strengthens one of the main attractions of the collection: a thought-provoking discussion of the (im)possibilities of resisting Thatcherism, perhaps offering more insight into why Thatcherism has had a sustained impact on literature and the arts than any other chapter in the book.

The final chapter which I wish to draw attention to is Kim Duff's "Let's Dance: *The Line of Beauty* and the Revenant Figure of Thatcher" (180-199). While the title of the chapter may suggest some form of support for the editors' introductory thesis about trauma and Thatcher, the content is actually more supportive of the aforementioned view of Joseph Brooker. Brooker's idea of Thatcher as an icon – reproduced in images because of her distinct appearance – is channelled in Duff's view that Alan Hollinghurst queers Thatcher's identity in *The Line of Beauty*. Furthermore, she also points to examples in popular culture where Thatcher's distinctive image is invoked and satirised which only highlights her view's closeness to Brooker's. Duff's chapter also follows the introduction's lead in making tentative links to critical theory. Duff, in her discussion of Thatcher's gender performance in popular culture, makes reference to the work of Judith Butler. Much like Hadley and Ho's deployment of Cathy Caruth, the work of Butler is introduced in snippets which are not fully engaged with and, given Butler's dense style, the extracts that appear in Duff's chapter make

for a clumsy read owing to their lack of integration and compatibility with Duff's own style of writing. Additionally, the references to Butler are by surname with no fuller introduction, which requires the reader to recognise Butler's theory before they can engage with Duff's work. Duff's chapter is further marred by the obvious proofreading errors (the inadvertent underscore where a space was intended, and the absence of a hyphen between words) that are not characteristic of the otherwise well-written collection.

Although there are inconsistencies that occur between the editors' introduction and the writers' views which could have been avoided if Hadley and Ho had simply been more careful to not generalise a reading of Thatcher that is only applicable to some texts, the collection makes for insightful reading. This is by no means a collection that is only useful for an introduction to the emerging debates in the field; it is an agenda-setting work of high quality. In particular, the chapters by Beaumont, and Nunn and Biressi serve to emphasise the importance of the text's relationship with the commercial marketplace. Despite its minor inconsistencies, the collection is an essential read for anybody working on, or interested in, Thatcherism and contemporary cultural studies.