

H.M. - accepted  
know great responsibilities  
- enter class.  
show unceasingly: full  
unit

Disorder - harmony

Error - truth

Doubt - faith

Dispair - hope.

Dislike people - however  
they work.

come together  
strong - strong together

A.N. - there is work to be  
done

*THE BLUE RIVER OF TRUTH*

**Following the course of Margaret Thatcher  
across the firm ground of fiction**

**A study of the impact on contemporary fiction of  
Britain's first woman Prime Minister**

**by  
Michael Johnston**

**Dissertation submitted towards the award of an  
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## **ABSTRACT**

Submitted on the thirtieth anniversary of her election victory, this dissertation studies the fiction of the past three decades to identify and discuss the impact of Margaret Thatcher on British literature. There seems to be evidence in the novels of the period immediately preceding 1979 of a rising tide of 'bourgeois hysteria' and support for a right-wing agenda. During her period in office, Thatcher became extremely unpopular with the arts and the academy who, like novelists perhaps, may have also been 'scared' of her. This did not prevent her winning three successive elections with decisive majorities. After she left office, and with the benefit of more mature reflection, some novelists submitted the lady herself, her policies and the behaviours of so-called Thatcherites to a reassessment. Not one novel, however, over the whole period, whether humorous, satirical, scabrous or critical, could be said to present a favourable image although a very limited number do seem to revel, vicariously, in the fruits of Thatcherism. Novels in the past five years seem to be moving out of her long shadow but there is scarcely any sign of a recurrence of hysterics by the bourgeoisie. Various academics and novelists have offered opinions on the reasons for the recent dearth of right-wing writing. Given the very substantial impact Thatcher had on the body politic, nationally and internationally, during and after her time in office, my conclusion is that there are surprisingly few novels which seem to engage productively with the dramatic potential of the period.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Apart from Dr Joseph Brooker whose 2008 Seminar on ‘Periodising the Eighties’ triggered my interest in the subject of how aspects of Thatcher, Thatcherism and Thatcherites are represented in contemporary fiction, I am especially indebted to those academics and writers who responded so willingly to my request for their views. Those whom I quote from or refer to are given their proper attribution in the dissertation but all of them together helped to give me a three-dimensional view of the period under study. However, for what I have written here I take sole responsibility.

Michael Johnston  
September 2009

The front cover illustration is a reproduction of the ‘crib’ Mrs Thatcher used on the steps of 10 Downing Street as she took office on 4 May 1979. The source is the Thatcher Organisation archives.  
<<http://www.margarethatcher.org/archive/displaydocument.asp?docid=109693>> [accessed 14 June 2009]

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## **THATCHERISM FOR BEGINNERS**

Maisie's governess 'knew swarms of stories, mostly those of the novels she had read; relating them with a memory that never faltered and a wealth of detail'. Even so, Mrs Wix 'had not the spirit of adventure – the child could perfectly well see how many subjects she was afraid of. She took refuge on the firm ground of fiction, through which indeed there curled the blue river of truth.'<sup>1</sup> As James Wood, who uses this sentence as an illustration, goes on to say, 'in our own reading lives, every day, we come across that blue river of truth, curling somewhere; we encounter scenes and moments and perfectly placed words in fiction and poetry, in film and drama, which strike us with their truth [such as] Dorothea Brooke in Rome, realising that she has married a man whose soul is dead'.<sup>2</sup> The intention in this dissertation is to explore the firm ground of contemporary fiction from the past thirty years, and to see to what extent we can map the course of that *particular* blue river of truth which carries images of Margaret Thatcher down to the deep blue sea.

The last thirty years, by convenient coincidence, also cover the period since Britain's first woman Prime Minister entered 10 Downing Street. For convenience, we have coined the word 'Thatcherist' to label this period. By noting how events and individuals are reflected and refracted in contemporary fiction, we hope to paint a picture of the impact the Lady has had, and is still having, on the literary landscape. One reviewer, Andy Beckett, suggests the

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<sup>1</sup> Henry James, *What Maisie Knew* (London: Penguin, 1966). p. 51

<sup>2</sup> James Wood, *How Fiction Works* (London: Vintage, 2009). p. 184

task will not be easy; or, alternatively perhaps, far too easy if, as he asserts, there are not really many suitable novels to consider.

Novels about Britain under Margaret Thatcher have been much rarer, then and since, than anyone who lived through the social upheaval and melodrama might have expected. Perhaps it has been because Britons are still getting used to the new country she created. Or perhaps it is the reluctance of many British writers to engage, in even a mildly political sense, with the strange and rickety modern nation all around them. Or maybe it is because Margaret Thatcher scares them.

But if she ‘scares them’, as Mrs Wix was scared, that is surely a sufficient condition for proving the case of her enduring influence and of ‘the new country she created’. Beckett provides his own very short list:

Memorable fiction that explicitly addresses what she did to Britain between 1979 and 1990 can arguably be listed thus: *What a Carve Up!* by Jonathan Coe, *Downriver* by Iain Sinclair, and possibly *Trainspotting* by Irvine Welsh. What is more, all these books add plenty of other elements - black farce, old London mysteries and the world of the modern heroin addict respectively - to their descriptions of people being buffeted and changed by the proclamations from 10 Downing Street. References to the obvious landmarks of Thatcherism are kept reasonably sparing<sup>3</sup>.

Fortunately, Beckett goes on to review one potential addition to the Thatcherist canon, Tim Lott’s *Rumours of a Hurricane*, and we hope to add others in the course of the following pages. Beckett’s suggestion that the canon is rather slim raises two questions however: firstly, whether many novels do ‘engage’ seriously with Thatcherism and, as a corollary, if there are *any* novels that see life through blue-tinted spectacles. For example, Beckett writes that Lott’s book ‘accepts the Thatcherite view of British history - that

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<sup>3</sup> Andy Beckett, 'Thatcherism for Beginners', *Guardian* 2 February 2002, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2002/feb/02/fiction.whitbreadbookawards2002>> [accessed 17 February 2009].

the 1980s simply had to happen - as much as it challenges it'. To 'accept' is not necessarily to endorse, but, for the sake of discussion, allowing Beckett's view, then where are the other Thatcherist novels that 'accept' the views of those, not simply confined to dyed-in-the-woad Tories like William Hague who, addressing the Lady at a celebratory dinner marking the twentieth anniversary of her first election win, said boldly, 'You set the British people free, you released the true instincts of our country that had been suppressed for too long, and you made Britain great again'?<sup>4</sup> There is evidence of a view that Thatcher and Thatcherism were indeed some sort of necessary, even essential, curative for the country's ills. Her speechwriter, Ferdinand Mount wrote, 'It is easy to slip into thinking that some of the things she achieved could have been achieved in a kinder style and at a lesser cost. I rather doubt it. There are times when what is needed is not a beacon but a blowtorch.'<sup>5</sup> The time would therefore seem, in dramatic terms, to be one of enormous potential for literature. There were certainly real-life dramas, not the least of which was the year-long miners' strike:

class v. class as bitter as before,  
the unending violence of US and THEM,  
personified in 1984  
by Coal Board MacGregor and the NUM'.<sup>6</sup>

For practical and periodising convenience we shall subdivide this study into three (unavoidably overlapping) phases. There are, firstly, the 'pre-

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<sup>4</sup> William Hague, 'No Giant Is Greater Than Margaret Thatcher', *Guardian* 20 April 1999, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/1999/apr/20/conservatives1>> [accessed 1 April 2009].

<sup>5</sup> Ferdinand Mount, *Cold Cream: My Early Life and Other Mistakes* (London: Bloomsbury, 2009a), p. 347

<sup>6</sup> Tony Harrison, *V*. 2nd [1989] edn (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 1985). p. 11

Thatcherist' years, from around 1975 and Mrs Thatcher's election as Conservative leader, during which we find evidence of a climate of opinion favourable to the substantial victory she achieved 1979. In terms of that period's novels, assuming they are generally published a year or more after their authors lay down their pens, we could go up to 1983 and the second Conservative victory. Secondly, there is an 'early Thatcherist' period running from 1983 to 1992 when John Major surprised many by winning the election that gave the Conservatives a fourth term. Some, like Simon Jenkins, even argue that Major, Blair, *and* Brown are all, by objective tests of actions rather than words, proponents of Thatcherism.<sup>7</sup> That would justify labelling the third phase, from around 1992 to the present day 'later Thatcherist' during which novelists could reflect on life under Thatcher but, one hopes, without being so scared of her.

The thirtieth anniversary has produced several shelves-worth of non-fiction recollection and reassessment which, as Eliot remarked about the continuous readjustment of the canon, will reshape our view of what we have already read and thought we understood.<sup>8</sup> It remains to be seen if novels published since 2000 mark the end of the long Thatcherist period, a point to which we return in the conclusion.

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<sup>7</sup> Simon Jenkins, *Thatcher & Sons: A Revolution in Three Acts*. 2nd edn (London: Penguin, 2007), p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> T S Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in *Selected Prose*, ed. by John Hayward (London: Penguin, 1953), pp. 21-30.

**‘PRE-THATCHERIST’ NOVELS: c.1975-c.1983**

“We don’t have to take this Thatcher thing seriously, do we?”<sup>9</sup>

D J Taylor is entitled to return to the ground he surveyed extensively some seventeen years ago and point out how his critical judgement has withstood the test of time. Recently, Taylor noted the ‘torrent of print [that will mark] the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Margaret Thatcher’s ascent to power’. The build-up to a General Election begins many years before the new Premier is photographed returning from the Palace. Against this background, Taylor argues that while press attention in the 1970s focussed on the noise of battle between elected governments and trades union ‘barons’, there was, just as significantly, a brouhaha of ‘bourgeois hysteria that rose intermittently above it’. With hindsight, he says, it may seem exaggerated to fear that one’s

children would wake to the spectacle of Russian tanks cruising the streets [but] by mid-decade, right-wing punditry had taken an unrelievedly gloomy turn. [...] However exaggerated, [...] attitudes of that kind were an authentic reflection of how millions of middle-class people actually felt. If, like my father, you were a fifty-something middle-manager trapped between a terrified executive and a gang of surly shop stewards, with the inflation rate at 20 per cent and the country in hock to the [IMF], you could be excused a little bourgeois hysteria.<sup>10</sup>

Beckett’s father, ‘then a colonel in the Royal Engineers’, was also concerned. ‘The firemen were on strike and he had suddenly become Kent’s chief fire officer’<sup>11</sup>. On Taylor’s question of how ‘millions of middle-class people’ actually felt, E H H Green comments: ‘In an interview with Thatcher,

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<sup>9</sup> E. H. H. Green, *Thatcher* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2006). p. 2; R A Butler to Chris Patten cited in Campbell, *The Grocer’s Daughter*, p. 299

<sup>10</sup> D J Taylor, ‘Middle-Class Mania’, *Independent* 10 May 2009.

<sup>11</sup> Andy Beckett, *When the Lights Went Out* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), p. 2

the *Evening Standard* noted that “there is a considerable air about Mrs Thatcher of ‘the middle class c’est moi’ and she does embody almost all of its virtues and weaknesses”.<sup>12</sup> Although the political climate was not unhelpful, ‘right-wing pundits’ had been stoking the fires with the Freedom Association’s propaganda, often reported without challenge in the largely anti-Labour press, and with law suits against trade unions. It was effective because, as Taylor pointed out in his 1993 book, ‘The mid-1970s with their rising wage and price inflation and social insecurity, hurt the middle classes badly. Even the certainties of bourgeois comfort seemed suddenly to be imperilled’.<sup>13</sup>

The point being made here is that, while there was nothing identifiable as ‘Thatcherism’ until some little time after there was a Prime Minister Thatcher, there was, particularly from 1975, a growing climate of acceptance of the need for a right-wing agenda, and in 1979 she knew her moment had come. ‘She knew there was a tide to seize, a powerful movement of economic thinking in favour of the New Right free-market agenda that she and Keith Joseph had been preaching for the past four years’.<sup>14</sup> While Mrs Thatcher famously offered the nation an epigraph to her premiership from St Francis of Assisi, the mantra of her trail-blazers had for many years been, in effect, ‘Milton [Friedman]! England hath need of thee.’

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<sup>12</sup> Green, p. 18.

<sup>13</sup> D J Taylor, *After the War: The Novel and England since 1945*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1993). (Further references prefixed *ATW* in the text) p. 212

<sup>14</sup> John Campbell, *Margaret Thatcher: The Iron Lady*, 2 vols. Vol. II (London: Pimlico, 2004), p. 4

Margaret Drabble has two Milton-related epigraphs at the beginning of her 1977 novel, *The Ice Age*. The second is from the Wordsworth sonnet (1802) calling Milton to England's aid and imploring, 'Oh! Raise us up, return to us again; / And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.' The first, from Milton's *Areopagitica* (1644), reads 'Methinks I see in my mind a noble and puissant Nation rousing herself after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks'. Curiously, although I first read this as another call to *England*, as the quotation continued, I did begin to picture a different 'she' rousing herself. Milton speaks of 'the whole noise of timorous and flocking birds [...] amaz'd at what *she* means, and in their envious gabble would prognosticate a year of sects and schisms'.<sup>15</sup> I have dwelt for a moment on these epigraphs to underscore the point that there is an unavoidable problem of being dazzled by the bright lights of hindsight. Thirty years after Margaret Thatcher became Prime Minister, there is a considerable danger of now reading particular texts as evidence that someone, anyone *knew* what was going to happen and selecting quotations to confirm their gift of, in Milton's word, prognostication. I suggest, however, scholars are entitled to examine evidence of the climate of feeling and opinion, such as Taylor's 'bourgeois hysteria', which make subsequent events seem, if not inevitable, at least highly likely. On this basis, then, we might identify a 'pre-Thatcherist period' of contemporary fiction from around 1975 to as late as 1983/4, going by publication date; inevitably a lagging indicator of the mood of the society which novelists refract.

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<sup>15</sup> Margaret Drabble, *The Ice Age*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1977), p. 5, added emphasis.

Novels predicting grim fictional futures can be intriguing and entertaining, not least when read from the comfortable position of knowing they ‘didn’t happen’: classically Orwell’s *1984*. Kingsley Amis illustrates a hysterical over-reaction – perfectly legitimate from a literary standpoint but of dubious merit if the author is seeking to be didactic – in his 1976 novel *The Alteration*.<sup>16</sup> This is fantasy fiction based on the premiss that the Reformation did not happen and that ‘present-day’ Europe is under the powerful influence of a Roman Catholic Church which still employs the Inquisition. The tenor of the book makes it sound like what we would now label as a Fascist regime but the villains are, with no subtlety whatsoever, given the names of Foot (as in Michael Foot, left-wing socialist intellectual and contender for leadership of the Labour Party) and Redgrave (as in Vanessa or Corin, the actors, both then active supporters of the Workers’ Revolutionary Party). Their names were, at one and the same time, well-known and recognised by the public and regularly used by the right-wing press *pour épater les bourgeois* (see *ATW*, 211-2).

Taylor suggests a 1979 novel by Piers Paul Read as another source for evidence of the hysterical bourgeoisie but here, I feel, he is less convincing. True, Stevenson writes: ‘In portraying a reluctant Labour candidate in *A Married Man* [he] outlined a tawdry, strike-bound 1970s England’ but, in comparing Read’s novel to Greene’s *The End of the Affair* (1951), he goes on to say ‘while also examining a number of issues of morality, faith and redemption [...] *A Married Man* suggested divine power directly,

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<sup>16</sup> Kingsley Amis, *The Alteration* (London: Cape, 1976).

miraculously at work, within the human sphere'.<sup>17</sup> But the stage-managed political arguments between caricatures of Right and Left seem rather more illustrative of what Bill Buford, in the third issue of *Granta* (cited by Stevenson, p. 432), called 'a false context of realism . . . a postwar, premodern variety of the middle class monologue, with C P Snow on the one side and perhaps Margaret Drabble and Melvyn Bragg on the other (Kingsley Amis will always be nearby . . . (p. 9)'. A typical line would be 'There was much talk among the Stricklands' friends of a communist conspiracy'.<sup>18</sup> One feels *A Married Man* could be categorised, in Buford's terms, as realism and as an illustration of that middle class monologue (or possibly dialogue, as the central characters, barrister and champagne socialist John and his Tory banker friend Henry debate politics, education, religion and their other angsts), but the condition-of-England depicted – the miners are striking, electricity is cut off from time to time and the three-day week is pending – is only the backdrop to a more significant personal story and scarcely an illustration of a general 'bourgeois hysteria'.

By contrast, Anthony Burgess, in his prescient novel *1985* (1978), partly written as an *hommage* to Orwell, deliberately uses the literary device of a trade union strike being the cause of innocent deaths to turn his readers against the overweening power of labour syndicates which, in his fiction, he imagined would be in control of national life by then. 'It is felt that deliberate

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<sup>17</sup> Randall Stevenson, *The Last of England?* ed. by Jonathan Bate. 13 vols. Vol. 12, 1960-2000, *The Oxford English Literary History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 424.

<sup>18</sup> Piers Paul Read, *A Married Man* (London: Pan, 1979), p. 125

advantage was taken of the firemen's strike, now in its third week'.<sup>19</sup> This is more like a scene of 1978 bourgeois hysteria and in his 1993 introduction Burgess says, 'What the novella presents is a Britain totally in the control of the Trades Union Congress [...]. In the late 1970s the situation did not seem at all unthinkable' (v). Interestingly, Taylor does not mention Burgess at all but, in support of his case, offers Julian Fane.

The gentler work is the short story 'Notes for a Ghost' taking the form of a letter from an archetypically self-deluding narrator to the ghost writer working on his autobiography. A 'real' trade union baron, Lord Cochrane of Kidderby, apparently sees no irony in saying that, after a very expensive divorce settlement, 'my impoverishment converted me to Socialism. Naturally I was also influenced by the Depression and the Spanish Civil War'.<sup>20</sup> Fane's book and the fictional letter dated '197-' might be illustrative of the mood in the country as it lurched through an acanaceous autumn into a discontented winter but it is not an example of 'hysteria' nor even hysterically funny. More rebarbative is Fane's *Revolution Island* (1979) which prognosticates a dystopia developing out of the conditions of the 1970s and in which the Unions get the Labour government they want – but it does not work out happily.

Who is to blame? Who is to apportion the blame? We elected Ben Scarr<sup>21</sup> who conspired with the Trade Unions to call down the future on our heads. They wanted the biggest slice of the cake, we

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<sup>19</sup> Anthony Burgess, *Future Imperfect: The Wanting Seed; 1985* (London: Vintage, 1994), p.386

<sup>20</sup> Julian Fane, 'Notes for a Ghost', in *Happy Endings* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1979), pp. 86-91, p. 88.

<sup>21</sup> Hinting at Benn and Scargill?

wanted a quiet life. We spoilt them – and for that matter ourselves – literally to death.<sup>22</sup>

The narrator wanted to be a novelist and reveals that it is in a *gulag* in Ireland, as a prisoner of the Fascist counter-revolution, that he is writing his memoirs and expressing this proto-Thatcherite personal credo.

Give me a libertarian form of capitalism with all its faults, for the pursuit of money does infinitely less harm than the pursuit of power through politics, and the more people are responsible for their financial fate the less likely they are to cast their democratic votes in favour of experimental interventionist government. (42).

Returning to Drabble's *The Ice Age*, the central character muses in the opening chapter on his bleak financial situation which he accepts is his own fault. Nonetheless: 'Casualties of slump and recession strewed the business pages of the newspapers, hit the front-page headlines. Old men were convicted of corruption and hustled off to prison, banks collapsed and shares fell to nothing' (14). And that was written over thirty years ago. While some of Drabble's readers in 1977 might just plead ignorance of the Leader of the Conservative Party, very few playgoers in 1982 would hear Marlene without knowing to whom she was referring.

I think the eighties are going to be stupendous. [...] And for the country, come to that. Get the economy back on its feet and whoosh. She's a tough lady, Maggie. I'd give her a job. She just needs to hang in there. This country needs to stop whining. Monetarism is not stupid. [...] It takes time, determination. No more slop. And who's got to drive it on? First woman prime minister. Terrifico. Aces. Right on. You must admit. Certainly get my vote.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Julian Fane, *Revolution Island* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1979), p. 43.

<sup>23</sup> Caryl Churchill, *Top Girls* (London: Methuen, 1991). Act III, pp. 83-4.

In sum, while ‘Margaret Thatcher’ herself was, to a significant extent, a fiction; an image redesigned, rebranded and then marketed with the help of her advisers, the literary fiction of the pre-Thatcherist period does tend to confirm that her time was coming.<sup>24</sup> And yet, opinion on her, at the outset of her premiership, was divided.

Her admirers – who included, crucially, many former Labour voters – saw her [1979] election as the last chance for a failing country to pull itself out of the spiral of terminal decline. Others – including many in her own party – feared that on the contrary she was a narrow-minded dogmatist whose simple minded remedies would prove disastrous if she was not restrained by wiser counsel.<sup>25</sup>

In the years ahead, her perceived image would alter and even start to spit on television, while ‘the “political” fiction of the 1980s, and the characters who populated it, were of a correspondingly different order’ (*ATW*, p. 215). And, on that note, we turn now to fiction published during the ‘reign’ of Margaret Thatcher.

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<sup>24</sup> John Campbell, *Margaret Thatcher: The Grocer's Daughter*. 2 vols. Vol I (London: Vintage, 2007), pp. 402-407 in particular.

<sup>25</sup> Campbell, *Iron Lady*. 2004, p. 2.

THE 'EARLY THATCHERIST' PERIOD: c.1983-c.1992

As a chemist with a good degree, and as an attractive woman whom men like to work with, I could have taught in a university or got a job doing worthy work behind the scenes.<sup>26</sup>

And while we are contemplating just what might have been, one wonders how Andrew Lloyd Webber would have tackled one so-far unrealised project:

At the end of August 1978 Millar took her to see *Evita*, then beginning its long run in the West End. She wrote to him the following day: "It was a strangely wondrous evening yesterday leaving so much to think about. I still find myself rather disturbed by it. But if they [*the Peronists*] can do that without any ideals, then if we apply the same perfection and creativeness to our message, we should provide quite good historic material for *an opera called Margaret* in thirty years time!"<sup>27</sup>

By 1983, there was already a wealth of anecdote and impressions conditioning those on both sides of the political divide. As the election approached, the Left took the view that too much damage had been done already and published *A Guide to the Ruins*.<sup>28</sup> Writers of fiction lived through those same experiences and, in their individual ways, reacted to them when setting their novels in contemporary Britain. A number of major novels were written in which their reactions seem to be present in more than just homeopathic quantities. These range from depicting the climate of political and social life as a backdrop to the unfolding story, to bringing 'Mrs Thatcher'

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<sup>26</sup> Jeanette Winterson, *Sexing the Cherry* (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 125.

<sup>27</sup> Unknown Author, 'Recollections of Ronnie Millar', Thatcher MSS (digital collection), (1991), <<http://www.margareththatcher.org/archive/stfrancis.asp>> [accessed 14 June 2009] added emphasis.

<sup>28</sup> David Keys, *Thatcher's Britain: A Guide to the Ruins* (London: Pluto Press and New Socialist, 1983).

herself, or an interpretation of her ideas, their exponents and opponents, into the text itself.

Fernández Sánchez (2000) compiles a composite picture of the ‘Thatcherite hero’ summarised from Taylor’s chapter on ‘The Literary Consequences of Mrs Thatcher’ (*ATW*, 265-288) and which he goes on to use to measure up a range of such ‘heroes’ in the literature. With no difficulty, though some occasional detachment from their context, he finds ample textual evidence of selfish, caddish and contemptible behaviour and concludes that this identikit portrait conspires to

produce the sharpest criticism on the prevailing political and economic system in Britain. It was a much more effective form of censure than other themes common to the narrative of the period, like the description of urban squalor or the state of social conflict in the nation at large, because these characters show that the translation of enterprise culture to the sphere of private life creates citizens insensitive to other people’s problems. [...] The denunciation of Thatcherism, then, has its most pointed end in the description of the new emerging class.<sup>29</sup>

Until we look at individual novels, we must leave unanswered the question this begs of whether ‘satire’ or ‘documentary’ is the more effective critical weapon but we must first ask the question: *does* much of the literature of that period ‘denounce’ Thatcherism, directly or indirectly, or does it, more credibly, simply hold Stendhal’s mirror up to society? Martin Amis offers one answer.

When it was first published, critics appropriated *Money* (1984) into the anti-Thatcher canon. The book was, however, written in the early years of the first Thatcher administration and I shall argue here that it may not really

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<sup>29</sup> José Francisco Fernández Sánchez, 'Thatcherite Heroes: The Fictional Representation of the New Emerging Class of the Nineteen Eighties', *Estudios Ingleses de la Universidad Complutense*, 8 (2000), 267-77, p. 276.

belong in the 'early Thatcherist period' since it does not seem, in any deliberate way, to be a considered (or even an ill-considered) reaction to Thatcherism. Amis himself said (to Haffenden, cited in Tredell) 'I started it in 1980. It could have been set any time [...]. I [...] thought it amusing to write a historical novel about something which actually happened only the other day. .'.<sup>30</sup> It does not mention Mrs Thatcher except somewhat obliquely.

The Western Alliance is in poor shape, I'm told. Well what do you expect? They've got an actor and we've got a chick. More riots in Liverpool, Birmingham, Manchester, the inner cities left to rot or burn. Sorry, boys, but the PM has PMT.<sup>31</sup>

The paradoxically well-informed glibness of that quotation, 'Self's impossible voice, a job who thinks the way Martin Amis writes'<sup>32</sup>, suggests to me the work is, in practice, self- (rather than Self-) obsessed: dare one say Amis seems to be contemplating his own novel. Amis's believed that '*Money* is a dramatic monologue, but Self never actually says anything intelligent in the whole book' (Tredell, 62). Indeed, one could, like Showalter, characterise it as 'the apotheosis of the Ladlit genre'.<sup>33</sup>

Looking, then, at the strength of the case for *Money*'s inclusion, one needs to ask if the cringe-making scene as Self and his partners go to lunch (assuming one identifies with the 'middle-aged pair at the next table') is a reflection of its specific Thatcherist period or could just as easily have come out of Fielding's *Tom Jones*. Self has spotted them. 'No, the rest of the meal

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<sup>30</sup> *The Fiction of Martin Amis: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism* ed. by Nicolas Tredell, (Cambridge: Icon Books, 2000), p. 61, added emphasis.

<sup>31</sup> Martin Amis, *Money: A Suicide Note* (London: Penguin, 1984), p. 155, added emphasis.

<sup>32</sup> Joseph Brooker, 'Satire Bust: The Wagers of "Money"', *Law & Literature*, 17 (2005a), 321-44; p. 334.

<sup>33</sup> Elaine Showalter, 'Ladlit', in *On Modern British Fiction*, ed. by Zachary Leader (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 60-76; p. 69.

isn't going to be much fun for those two, I'm afraid. I suppose it must have been cool for people like them before people like us started coming here' (*Money*, 82). Doan, (cited by Tredell) seems to believe that Amis had 'the grander aim of unmasking the ideological underpinnings of Thatcherism' (79) but that he has failed in this regard.

The character of John Self simply cannot work as a metonym for Thatcherism. The discourse of Amis's novel ostensibly exposes the false tenets of the new Toryism and impugns the greed of Thatcherite England in order to call for the transformation of the existing capitalist system. However, by casting his protagonist as a member of the working class, Amis endangers this purpose and instead devises a *telos* that valorises the class and gender systems. (79)

I might agree with her first sentence but the rest does not convince me: Amis was not writing a 'political' novel and, therefore, did not have that sort of 'ostensible' purpose. Jon Begley identifies Amis's purpose somewhat differently. 'In contrast to the despairing indictments of Thatcherism offered by the majority of 1980s condition-of-England novels, Amis elucidates Britain's disintegration and national shame within a more intractable process of historical decline and economic relegation'. However, Amis does so, says Begley, *early* in the 1980s

in that precarious interlude between the collapse of consensus politics and the "high noon" of Thatcherism in the mid-1980s. [...] Amis's protagonist is better understood as a transitional figure, a harbinger for an emerging culture that remained incipient in Britain during the early 1980s.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Jon Begley, 'Satirizing the Carnival of Postmodern Capitalism: The Transatlantic and Dialogic Structure of Martin Amis's "Money"', *Contemporary Literature*, 45 (2004), pp. 79-105; p. 82

If, then, I attach weight to what Amis says of his own aims and objectives – ‘I’m not excited by anything except by how I’m going to arrange the words’ (Tredell, 64) – I remain unconvinced that *Money* is a specific critique of Thatcherism.

The closer one looks, the more interesting the parallels seem to be between *Money* and Alasdair Gray’s 1982, *Janine*, published in the same year.<sup>35</sup> Both are cast as the first-person recollections of alcoholics who unsuccessfully attempt suicide in the early 1980s, and who hear the nagging voice of conscience, or even of God. President Reagan and Mrs Thatcher have walk-on roles in both texts. The Preface to *Money* is dated September 1981 (n.p.): Jock McLeish’s failed suicide happens during the night of 25/26 March 1982 (*Janine*, 322). On an artistic level, they are riots of inventive and innovative language, conveying the tone of their local demotic, west of London proletarian English and west of Scotland middle-class Scots. In the case of the latter, there is less of a dichotomy between the voice of the narrator and his erudition. Looking at *1982, Janine* through the tighter focus of this study we need to see if there is evidence of any influence or impact on the text of the political climate of that time, the mid-term of Mrs Thatcher’s first administration.

“But Prime Minister, for the last twenty years the interest rate/inflation/unemployment/homelessness/strikes/drunkenness/breakdown of social services/crime/death in police custody have been steadily increasing, how will you tackle this?”  
“I’m glad you asked me that, Michael. We can’t change things overnight of course.” (12)

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<sup>35</sup> Alasdair Gray, *1982, Janine* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984).

While Jock may admit that he is an alcoholic, he is still denying it affects him: 'self-control is perfect, the work is not affected' (12). But he does not deny, despite his family's socialist background, that he is a Conservative:

[A]lmost everyone of my income group is Conservative, especially if their fathers were trade unionists. [...] Every intelligent Tory knows that politics is a matter of people with a lot of money combining to manage people with very little, though of course they must deny it in public to mislead the opposition. (61-2).

Gray goes on here to illustrate what a Scot would call his 'pawky' sense of humour, using the sudden deflation of bathos to make his jokes, as indeed Martin Amis does so often in *Money*. The last sentence in the following extract is a classic example.

[L]ike everyone else I would rather be thought wicked than stupid. A man with money in the bank who speaks out for the poorly paid always sounds stupid or a hypocrite. I heard one once. (62).

For a confessing Conservative in the Seventies and early Eighties, however, Jock is something of a maverick. What was officially called the 'Scottish Conservative and *Unionist* Party' at that time had buried its head, and much else besides, in the political peat-bog in opposing devolution: not so Jock.

Well, a majority of the Scots voted as I did, even though politicians from both big parties appeared on television and told us that a separate assembly would lead to cuts in public spending, loss of business and more unemployment. [...] [We] lost the race. Then came cuts in public spending, loss of business and increased unemployment and now Westminster has decided to spend the North Sea oil revenues building a fucking tunnel under the English Channel. (66).

However, the political battle Jock describes took place under the previous Labour Government, and he is wrong about the finances of the Channel

Tunnel which Mrs Thatcher made private enterprise fund from the English end. This helps to make the point that much of the text of *Janine* concerns the earlier life of its narrator and only its framing narrative in the hotel bedroom actually occurs in the 1980s. Like Amis's *Money*, I feel this makes it harder to claim it entirely belongs to this 'early Thatcherist' period; although Stevenson (significantly, based in Scotland) does not agree with this line of argument.

My own recollection is that the contours of Thatcherism were fairly quickly apparent, and her unpopularity and reasons for it well established by the time of the Falklands War. I'd have thought Gray at least wrote in fairly direct response to this.<sup>36</sup>

The nearest Jock gets to *contemporary* political commentary is on a page with the marginal title 'BUILDING WEALTH'. He notes again the cuts in public health expenditure, the rises in unemployment and crime and then talks about the impact on education.

Cuts in education have not benefited the teachers, but teaching has never been a highly regarded profession and rising illiteracy gets more people enjoying television, which has been made brighter and brisker by tax-cut boosts to big business and advertising. [...] A smart Tory does not believe this is, or can be, a pleasant world for most folk. (137).

All of which leads Jock to the realisation that: 'I am not a true Conservative. A true Conservative has faith in some established institution which he thinks will save him. [...] In essence I don't give a tuppenny damn for that lot either' (152). Perhaps, on balance, one could say that, given when it was written, the events of the early eighties clearly shape the mood and style of Gray's text and, to that limited extent, *Janine*, and likewise *Money*, are two of Thatcher's children.

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<sup>36</sup> Randall Stevenson, Personal Communication 22 July 2009.

In several instances, I feel Fernández Sánchez overstates the significance of his illustrations of Thatcherite hero-villains, as, for example, in *Decline* (1991) by Tom Stacey. He tears from its context the quotation, ““Money makes money, Jamie, [...] That’s the name of the game””.<sup>37</sup> Given that *Decline*, more closely read, is a story of the classic conflict between a benign, (small and big ‘c’) conservative father and a serious-minded son questioning his unearned privileges, and, furthermore, that it is written by a committed and active Christian author who wrestles in the book with problems of faith, to pluck the almost irrelevant character Rowley off the page like this seems unjustified. One might be more inclined to accept the illustration from Michael Moorcock’s *Mother London*. The delightfully ironic inversion here is that a first generation Jewish immigrant, from the great and ongoing succession of immigrant communities which have leavened the capital for centuries, is bemoaning, to another long-established Asian immigrant, the seemingly unstoppable flow of white, middle-class English incomers who are gentrifying his part of London, and driving out the natives like Josef Kiss and Dandy Banaji. Fernández Sánchez believes it is a deliberate rather than a casual remark that applies ‘the Prime Minister’s surname [to] the cosmetic surgery made on the houses’.<sup>38</sup>

“Those scoundrels from the Thatcher belt, Dandy! Thatching this and Thatching that. It’s rural blight, old lad. Arcadian spread. It’s hideous! They’ve no right to throw their weight about in London. Give them Westminster as a free zone, but draw the line there.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Tom Stacey, *Decline* (London: William Heinemann, 1991).

<sup>38</sup> Fernández Sánchez, p. 270.

<sup>39</sup> Michael Moorcock, *Mother London* (London: Pocket Books, 2004 [1988]), pp. 378-9.

Mr Kiss develops and personalises his theme. ““The Margaret Thatchers have moved, Dandy, to a private estate in *Dulwich* but they were born in some dreadful part of Kent or Surrey. Repatriate them to begin with”” (379). Repatriation to Kent! However, these illustrations come from a single chapter (‘The World’s End 1985’ pp. 377-389) in a book which is, if anything, a social history of London and its communities. This is only a passing reference to, scarcely more than a glancing blow at, Thatcherism.

While *Decline* is ‘serious’ and *Mother London* is ‘humorous’, no readable novels of either ‘genre’ are without elements of both levity and gravity. However, it is noticeable that, of the texts read and considered for this ‘early Thatcherist’ period, only five, at most, out of twenty-three could be categorised as ‘serious’. This brings up again the question of whether the novels in question *are* actually ‘denouncing’ Thatcherism, whether by blatant mockery or by ironic mimesis. Consideration of three other ‘serious’ novels may help to clarify this point.

Pat Barker conveys the gritty realities of working-class lives with little euphemism and no ambiguity. In *Liza’s England* (first published as *The Century’s Daughter* in 1986), Barker tells the story of the twentieth century through the medium of Liza Garrett, born as the century dawned and dying of old age and the impact of economic rundown in the de-industrialised North-East of England while being ‘cared for’ by her hard-pressed social worker. Liza’s concluding years in crippling poverty with its attendant lack of adequate food, clothing and shelter can be read as a clear indictment of Mrs Thatcher’s

chimera, 'society'. 'There were no windows in the stairwell, and all the light bulbs had been broken. [...] He came out into the lobby at the foot of the stairs. The usual smell of human and animal piss lingered'.<sup>40</sup> Just as 'serious', but rather less 'sentimental', would be *A Child in Time* by Ian McEwan, who effectively comments on the present by projecting forward from the trends he perceived in 1987 into an imagined third Thatcher term.<sup>41</sup> 'Stephen Lewis' is walking towards Parliament Square and encounters 'a group of licensed beggars' (2). These words alone shock readers' sensibilities but McEwan ratchets up the emotional impact still further.

To give money ensured the success of the Government programme. Not to give involved some determined facing away from private distress. There was no way out. The art of bad government was to sever the line between public policy and intimate feeling, the instinct for what was right' (3).

McEwan interweaves the perceived traits of Mrs Thatcher and the instinctive attitudes of those opposed to Thatcherism to build a picture, echoing Gray's 'Jock', of an elected dictatorship where

'[t]he idea that the more educated the population the more readily could its problems be solved had quietly faded away. [...] Now governmental responsibilities had been redefined in simpler, purer terms: to keep order, and to defend the State against its enemies' (25).

That there were politicians (Nicholas Ridley as only one example) and political advisers (Alfred Sherman, for instance) who had views approximating to those of the 'Government' in the novel adds powerfully to the impact of the writing and, for readers of sensibilities ranging from wet Tory to red-hot

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<sup>40</sup> Pat Barker, *Liza's England* (London: Virago, 1996), p. 259.

<sup>41</sup> Ian McEwan, *The Child in Time* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1987).

Socialist, encourages the belief that McEwan is making scarcely concealed political criticism.<sup>42</sup> Yet McEwan is also a gifted writer and he later depicts the fictional woman prime minister as ‘disconcertingly vulnerable’ (88). That vulnerability is made clear by the revelation that she is infatuated with Stephen’s friend Charles, a publisher-turned-politician who has developed a Peter Pan psychosis. ““The Prime Minister invited him [...] to write a shadow Childcare manual. Charles and the Prime Minister worked on it together. He was being fancied, I mean sexually fancied”” (223). The novel explores the ethical dilemmas arising from the conflict between manifestations of Hall’s ‘authoritarian populism’<sup>43</sup> made progressively more authoritarian, and the liberal humanist consciences of the protagonist, the engaged reader and, one must presume, the author. While I believe it might be an exaggeration to call this a ‘political’ novel, the label ‘polemical’ would not be unfair as long as this is viewed within the frame of an extended and finally rewarded love story.

*Under a Thin Moon* (1992) by Livi Michael was written towards the end of the Thatcher premiership and is almost unrelievedly bleak.<sup>44</sup> It is hard not to want to weep, physically weep, and share the pain, physical and mental, of the young women whose intertwined stories are unravelled in this novel. It starts and finishes with Wanda and her daughter Coral. The cycle seems about to repeat itself just as the trap sprung on the mother, which has caused Wanda to cut her wrists in the bath, seems to be closing on the daughter until, in a

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<sup>42</sup> See Mount (2009a), pp. 318-9 (Ridley); pp. 302-4 (Sherman)

<sup>43</sup> Stuart Hall, *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left* (London: Verso, 1988), p.7

<sup>44</sup> Livi Michael, *Under a Thin Moon* (London: Minerva, 1994).

defiant gesture, 'Coral sits in front of a typewriter and winds in a sheet' (229). The book (Coral's book, perhaps) is set in the depth of the 1980s recession as the retrenchments, and the rank inefficiencies stoked up for years previously, begin to work themselves through the economy like a pandemic, finding many victims and taking few hostages. In chronological terms, it depicts the period of 'Thatcherism' but to call the book, as does the front-cover quotation from the *Guardian*, an 'indictment of Thatcherism' is to point the finger, at too narrow a target. The 'welfare' bit of 'welfare-capitalism' had allowed itself to become over-bureaucratized, as when Laurie, who needs money simply to eat, and supplements her dole by shop-lifting, is being given the run-around by Social Security.

She begins to pay special attention to what is unsaid.  
I can't wait for back pay.  
(You'll manage somehow)  
There's not a penny in the house.  
(That's what they all say)  
Please, can't you just write out a giro to tide me over and then  
knock that amount off the back pay . . .  
(This isn't a charity)  
How can I manage a full week with no money and nothing in?  
(They always manage to buy fags and booze). (62-3).

Not just welfare seems to be in trouble but also healthcare, and yet:  
'All the time on television the Prime Minister says that the NHS has never had it so good; no other has done so much for it. But here in the hospital the nurses themselves are falling ill' (93). Michael's book, in the condition-of-England tradition, is as powerful an indictment of the consequences of 1980s Thatcherite policies as were Tressel's *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropist*

(completed in 1910), or Greenwood's *Love on the Dole* (1933), of those in power in previous times.

By contrast to these 'serious' novels, *Downriver* (1991) by Iain Sinclair looks like satire, although it is probably better defined as *Grand Guignol* with its deliberate combination of political comment with Punch-and-Judy style action. Sinclair uses the metaphor of his journey through London's East End and Docklands at a time in the novel's 'near future' when a lady resembling Mrs Thatcher is Prime Minister and a widow: 'The Widow' of *her* century as Victoria was of the one before. 'She was a couple of years into her fifth term in what was now effectively a one-party state and a one-woman party'.<sup>45</sup> Sinclair seems to use simile, metaphor and allusion in the manner of a painter using a palette knife, applying them boldly and sometimes wildly at the risk of slashing his canvas. The book is devised as a series of twelve essay-journeys, all centred on the same general Thames-side area and related by characters and themes. The one recurring theme, especially of Chapter 8, 'Art of the State (*The Silvertown Memorial*)' pp. 283-340, is an obvious loathing of the Widow: and yet, and yet; Sinclair seems, at the same time, to be in some awe of such a dominatrix.

She was a brand leader, she did not sleep. 'A' brand leader? *The* brand leader, the longest serving politico-spiritual Papa Boss not yet given the wax treatment, and planted in a glass box to receive the mercifully filtered kisses of a grateful populace. (285)

In this one paragraph Sinclair combines allusions to Haiti's hated 'Papa Doc' Duvalier and the Lenin Mausoleum. He also enjoys his running 'blue' jokes.

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<sup>45</sup> Iain Sinclair, *Downriver: (or, the Vessels of Wrath), a Narrative in Twelve Tales* (London: Vintage, 1995), p. 286.

The chapter begins with several shades of blue to depict the dawn of the Widow's day.

One morning . . . the newspapers loud with her praise, the *Sun* in its heaven, banked television monitors floating a cerulean image-wash, soothing and silent, streamlets of broken Wedgewood crockery, satellite bin lids flinging back some small reflection of the blue virtue she had copyrighted, filmy underwear of sky goddesses, clouds of unknowing . . . the Widow rose from her stiff pillows – bald as Mussolini – and felt the twitch start in her left eyelid. (285).

Her appearance, 'phosphorescent with concern, a Marian-blue manifestation' at any usefully 'photogenic disaster' is part of her image (286). However, 'Ambulance chasing was a thing of the past. (There were no ambulance men left to drive them.)' (287). As the chapter develops, allusions to Elizabeth I ('She was married to the nation now, divorce was out of the question' [287]) as well as Victoria join with that reference to Mussolini and the Widow is also compared to 'the robot-Maria from *Metropolis*; she looked like herself, but too much so. The "blend of Wagner and Krupp"'. She is sustained by medical science and cocooned from complaint. '[S]he censored the morning radio bulletins. Not a breath of criticism, nor a whisper of forbidden names' (286). Despite all of this, it seems,

the Widow's stock had dropped a couple of points in the wake of a Sophoclean chain of takeover scandals, buggers bursting from the closet, call girls with carrier bags of banknotes at railway terminals, episcopal suicides and low-level resignations – Defence Secretaries and the like. (287).

And in that mocking quotation, Sinclair pokes his finger at, or in the eye of, *inter alia*, Jeffrey Archer and Michael Heseltine, (both of whom, it seems certain, would have loved to have been Prime Minister.) By doing so, he also

makes clear where in time (1987-89) as well as in attitude his writing is positioned. He manages to have a dig at the Prince of Wales too. ‘Let the Prince have his Palladian toy town around St Paul’s. Let him bleat about planning, proportion, rustification [*sic*], the *piano nobile*’ (288) but she, we learn, will commission a memorial to her late husband that will outdo – and since she will have it taken down, actually replace – the Albert Memorial (see p. 292). ‘Dead meat, a Consort could still be pressed into service’ (289). Making sure it happens is the charge of ‘the Widow’s Press Secretary, wearing his other hat as (the entire) “Council for Arts and Recreation”’ (290).

And this still leaves us with the unanswered question whether ‘documentary’ writing actually moves readers and voters to reaction and action, or whether satire which, as Sinclair demonstrates here sometimes requires a level of literacy and awareness that narrows its target audience, is the more powerful political weapon. As Brooker (2005a) spelled out in his essay on Amis’s *Money*, satire (like irony, or the basic joke for that matter) is only satirical (ironic or funny) when set against a normative background; and, on the other side of that coin, documentary only shocks when it documents actions and attitudes which are far from the norm.<sup>46</sup>

At this point, then, a jury might well find, on the balance of probability, in favour of Beckett and his contention that, in general, novelists, other than Sinclair in my view, have not fully ‘engaged’ with the literary challenge of Thatcherism. However, defence Counsel might then call on Ferdinand Mount to repeat parts of his 2009 Roy Jenkins Memorial Lecture to the Royal Society

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<sup>46</sup> Brooker (2005a), pp. 321-2.

of Literature. Paraphrasing him, Mount's contention is that the better works about traumatic events such as World Wars and divisive periods like the Thatcher years are often written after a period for reflection when raw emotions have subsided and events have acquired perspective. *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *Farewell to Arms* would be examples, and the same might be true of books about WW2 and the Holocaust. This might not just be because they are written 'too soon' but rather because publishers and editors did not feel the market is ready. For example, it took until 1958 for Primo Levi's Holocaust memoir to be widely published. Perhaps it is for the children to write about the sins of their fathers.<sup>47</sup> With that thought in mind, we turn now to an examination of the novels of the 'later Thatcherist period'.

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<sup>47</sup> Ferdinand Mount, 'The Power of Now', *Guardian*, 4 July 2009, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/jul/04/politics-in-literature>> [accessed 6 August 2009] Hereafter referred to as 2009b.

**THE 'LATER THATCHERIST' PERIOD: c.1992-2009**

‘Caught in the twilight between journalism and history, Margaret Thatcher hovers, half-real, half-myth, in the imagination of writers.’<sup>48</sup>

Concluding his lecture, Mount remarked that, while it is as fit and proper a subject for novelists as any other, ‘politics in literature does its business best when we are least aware of its presence’.<sup>49</sup> Novelist Tim Lott believes, however, that political life, in the sense of history, ought to be caught on the wing. ‘The writer should be the first with rough drafts of history, and all too often it is a function that in Britain is ignored.’<sup>50</sup> Beckett, in his review cited earlier, seems to agree with Mount and to feel that the better novels in terms of engagement are those where ‘[r]eferences to the obvious landmarks of Thatcherism are kept reasonably sparing. [But] Tim Lott, by contrast, gives us all of them. [...] The page almost expires under the weight of symbolism’. Coincidentally, Lott’s novel is yet another account of an alcoholic driven to attempt suicide (as in *Money* and *1982, Janine*), but this time the attempt succeeds.<sup>51</sup> In defence of his own novel, Lott writes:

[T]o my knowledge I am the only writer to have written *a book that was not purely critical of Thatcherism* ... rather it spelt out some of the ways people won and lost. [...] I suppose what I mean is that most writers operate within a narrow liberal-left mindset that does tend to see the universe in Manichean terms somewhat... Thatcher was 'bad', Clem Attlee was a saint etc... life is more complex than that and writers should point up complexities not reinforce them.<sup>52</sup>

These differing perspectives can be discussed in the conclusion but, meantime, *Rumours of a Hurricane*, originally published in 2002, – which

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<sup>48</sup> Julian Glover, 'The Iron Lady of Letters', *Guardian* 11 April 2009, Review p. 3.

<sup>49</sup> Mount (2009b).

<sup>50</sup> Tim Lott, Personal Communications, 28 May and 7 July 2009.

<sup>51</sup> Tim Lott, *Rumours of a Hurricane*. (London: Penguin, 2003).

<sup>52</sup> Lott (2009), added emphasis.

Jonathan Coe describes as ‘a chronological overview of the Thatcher years’<sup>53</sup> – is a very useful case study of the sort of retrospective literary consideration flagged up by Mount. Lott can fairly claim that his novel is a ‘rough draft of history’ and he does convey the struggles of Charlie Buck as he contends with his working-class, small ‘c’ conservatism in a Thatcherite world that wants everyone to aspire to be middle-class. Some are constitutionally blind to the possibilities but, on Election Day, 3 May 1979, ‘[t]he secret truth is this: that things change’ (15), even if Charlie, on strike that day, cannot imagine any alternative universe.

Charlie quite routinely finds himself on strike. It is a matter of no great alarm or surprise. [...] This fondness for industrial action will never change, just as prices will not stop rising, just as beer will remain warm and dark brown and tasting of the industrial processes that produce it. . . . Victory was certain here too. The management would cave in. They always did, they always had, they always would. Then Charlie and the rest would get back-pay, and things would be the same as they were before. (16)

But the very next day, a lady with a beacon *and* a blowtorch would take charge of government and very little would be left uncharred.

Lott’s book charts Charlie’s initial attempts to resist. ‘Stasis is what he understands, what he expects, what, on a deeper level, he is in love with’. The novel records the political see-saw in motion and, at the end of 1980, ‘[t]he revenge of stasis is mighty; Mrs Thatcher is hated, plummeting in the polls’ (91). Following the post-Falklands upswing in her popularity, however, we learn of Charlie’s conversion to property ownership. Lott puts into Charlie’s mind the thoughts of many of his class and condition as, wearing ‘a plastic

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<sup>53</sup> Jonathan Coe, 'The Thatcher Years: Author, Author', *Guardian* 14 April 2009, Review, p. 15.

Union Jack bowler hat' (154), he paints his very own front door, having bought his council flat. 'He feels a guilty gratitude towards Mrs Thatcher' (155). He is becoming a '*petty barge wire zee*' (178) without realising it and, by 1984,

Charlie has a secret. He voted for Margaret Thatcher in the last election, following her triumph over the Argie menace. [...] Not a soul knows of his conversion [but he] is part of a large secret community: the Labour supporting Tory voters (210)

and part of Charlie's motivation is very basic.

Envy: there is such energy there; if you could package it, you could light the country. [...] Money was there for the taking. You just had to have the courage, the nous, to reach out and take it. And you had to get ahead, or the lives of those around would mock you. (211-2)

But envy is really a mask for the greed which, allied to Charlie's commercial incompetence, inevitably leads to disaster. The rising tide of property prices and share values lifts all the punters on the blue river but it is Charlie's previously unassuming wife who has learned to paddle her own canoe whereas, when the hurricane occurs, it is Charlie who is left wrecked and beached. Divorced, having set up in business selling model railways, he is far out of his depth and borrowed to the gunwales. When the storm breaks, the bank takes back its umbrella. As Mr Butterfield from the 'National and North' puts it:

*It's sad for all of us. Particularly for us, as a matter of fact. You are just a man. A man, Charlie. But we are an institution, and an important one at that. Institutions like ours make this country what it is. (360)*

And that latter point is, regrettably, still true today.

My critical judgement, however, is that, despite the realism of the evocative picture of the 1980s that Lott has researched, recollected and lovingly recreated on the page, the degree of actual engagement with the dominant political philosophy of the decade tends to be somewhat variable and, too often, is simply used as a convenient peg on which to hang plot points. When, for example, Maureen decides to run her own business, she breaks the news to her lover.

*If she can do it then I can. She was a housewife, wasn't she?  
Who?  
Her. Mrs Thatcher.  
What's she got to do with anything?  
Everything. Maybe nothing. I'm just saying. They snap to  
attention when she comes into a room. All these shiny men. When  
I come into a room, people ask me if I've got any digestive biscuits.  
(281)*

At a human level, the police behaviour towards the striking print workers is grimly reminiscent of events during the miners' strike of 1984-5 as recorded in Peace's *GB84* (discussed below). 'They wave their wage packets at the strikers from their buses' (252). On balance, then, even if it passes the Beckett test of 'engagement', at the level of literature, *Hurricane* seems a little too much of a consumer goods catalogue and less of a canonical contender. I am left wondering if, rather like Amis, Lott in effect praises Thatcherism by the very faintness of his damns. By contrast, Jonathan Coe is a damn sight more certain.

We stand badly in need of novels which show an understanding of the ideological hijack which has taken place so recently in this country, which can see its consequences in human terms and show

that the appropriate response lies not merely in sorrow and anger but in mad incredulous laughter.<sup>54</sup>

These words, chosen by Coe himself as an epigraph for his *Guardian* article explaining his personal approach to engaging with the Thatcher years, are actually taken from a fictional review written by ‘Michael Owen’, the narrator of *What a Carve Up!* Coe suggests that ‘it’s hard not to hear that lofty pronouncement [...] as a clear statement of the author’s personal ambitions’.<sup>55</sup> Assuming *that* author is Coe, his ‘confession’ is both helpful and frustrating. He sets out, with clarity and authority his sources of inspiration and his personal attitude to the novel in such a way as to leave little room for an alternative reading, making it tempting to quote from the article *in extenso* rather than to read the novel closely. When Coe began work on the novel in 1990, the last year of Mrs Thatcher’s premiership,<sup>56</sup> he was

flushed with political and literary certainties. The most fixed of these certainties was my anti-Thatcherism. Not only was this *the default position for probably 90% of writers in Britain* in those days, it seemed to be shared by pretty well everyone else I knew.<sup>57</sup>

Coe describes his literary dilemma as how to convey the *zeitgeist* ‘of unease and betrayal, while somehow writing a novel that consisted of more than just liberal hand-wringing’.

His inspiration came from viewing the 1961 British comedy film *What a Carve Up!* (dir: Pat Jackson). He used its Gothic horror comedy to spark off his style, and its plot as a template for Part II of his novel. This, he says,

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<sup>54</sup> Jonathan Coe, *What a Carve Up!* (London: Viking, 1994), p. 277

<sup>55</sup> Coe (2009), p. 15.

<sup>56</sup> In terms of Mount’s suggested need of a pause for mature reflection, was this too soon?

<sup>57</sup> Coe (2009), p. 15, added emphasis.

allowed him to write ‘the kind of dark, panoramic, over-the-top social comedy that the subject of Thatcherite Britain seemed to call for’. However, he insists that his ‘target [...] was always meant to be that complex many-headed beast called “Thatcherism”, rather than the woman herself.’ Coe explains he selected ‘six areas of public life I wanted to examine: finance, culture, politics, arms dealing, the media and food production. Each was to be assigned an individual member of my venal family’. Fortunately for readers, the novel is much more than a six-part morality play.

The 500-page ‘family’ saga targets the NHS through one winner and one loser: first through its characterisation of Henry Winshaw, opportunist socialist turned neo-liberal free-marketeer, intent on privatising the Health Service, and, secondly, in the poignant story of the decline and death of Fiona, a victim of the state of that Service, giving Owen someone to blame for her tragedy as well as his own. Henry keeps a diary that has a deep blue resemblance to stranger-than-fiction Alan Clark’s. ‘November 12th 1946. . . The President of the Association is a girl from Somerville called Margaret Roberts and I have to say she is an absolute pip. An utterly gorgeous head of nut-brown hair’ (122). Henry records that in 1948 his Uncle Lawrence said that ‘healthcare was like prostitution, it was something for which the demand could never dry up’ and so ‘if someone could get himself appointed manager of a privatised Health Service, he would soon be just about the richest and most powerful man in the country’ (123). After a spell as a Labour MP, Henry finds his true vocation as chair of an NHS Policy Review Board for the Tories

and his diary for October 6th 1987, after Mrs Thatcher's third election victory, records work in progress towards second and third White Papers on reform. 'I have also decided to take a strong line with the word "hospital". This word is no longer permitted at discussions: from now on, we call them "provider units"' (139). The outcome of this Thatcherite policy, an internal market in the NHS with its producer/provider split, allied to an ongoing lack of front-line investment in the Service, has dire consequences for the loser, Fiona. 'The casualty unit, while not quite as run-down as the outpatients' clinic, none the less managed to feel both crowded and desolate' (362). The clinical error which probably contributed to Fiona's subsequent death is depicted as a direct consequence of NHS staff being grossly overworked and under-resourced.

Owen asks:

'And whose bright idea was that?'  
'Who knows? Some cabinet minister, some civil servant, some academic guru sitting on a policy-making committee.'  
A name immediately flashed through my mind: Henry.<sup>58</sup> (411)

Another equally lethal area of Thatcherite venality pilloried by Coe is the secretive arms trade that was, on all the subsequent evidence, of dubious legality yet enormous profitability for those involved: not least the middlemen like 'Mark'. (Was there any subliminal reason for Coe's choice of name for this particular Winshaw?) The issue in real life went right to the top. '[S]he only became concerned when she thought the Iraqis were obtaining nuclear materials, not just conventional equipment, which she had been happy to

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<sup>58</sup> Henry is eventually stabbed in the back. 'How appropriate. Does this mean Mrs Thatcher is somewhere in the house?' (446)

supply for years' (Campbell, p. 653). In the novel, Mark is a member of AESOP (a fable of course, but its real-life equivalent surely existed):

It was an informal cartel of European arms dealers set up to tackle one of the biggest problems posed by Iraq's military requirements: how – given the demand was so enormous – could the munitions companies meet it without raising their production quotas to the point where governments suspicions were aroused? (395-6)

In the case of the UK government, one wonders what they were worried about. Mark, perhaps, did have occasion to worry lest there was a repeat of an unfortunate incident that occurred on his honeymoon, for which, in fairness, the Iraqi authorities later apologised and made partial restitution. His beautiful new wife had

borrowed one of Mark's cars to drive into the nearest village to buy some cigarettes. She had only driven a few hundred yards when there was a huge explosion and the car burst into flames, careering off the road and into the stony mountainside. She was killed instantly.

Mark was devastated by the loss. The car was a 1962 Morgan Plus 8 Drop Head Coupé in midnight blue, one of about three or four left in the world, and it would be impossible to replace.(383)

It would be just as impossible to do full justice here to Coe's literary craftsmanship. 'By regularly discussing narrative tactics, Coe's narrator also sustain[s] a satirical, postmodernist scrutiny of the representative capacities of the novel itself'.<sup>59</sup> Of special effectiveness is the way in which the novel's unexpected (for the first-time reader) final words oblige one to turn back to the first page again and even re-read the entire book, but now with the added pleasures of hindsight.

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<sup>59</sup> Stevenson (2003), p. 459.

*What a Carve Up!* was published in 1994, while there was still a Conservative prime minister but clearly qualifies as a retrospective examination of, indeed engagement with, Thatcherism. *GB84* by David Peace, which came out in 2004, by then twenty years after the ‘terminal’ miners’ strike, and well into a second New Labour administration, could probably claim the status of a historical novel.<sup>60</sup> ‘In an important and unusual sense the novel, like a work of history, is checkable, contestable – historically accountable, potentially open to cross-referencing with cognate non-fictional texts’.<sup>61</sup> Not only verifiable and historical, the year-long strike, a defining moment in Thatcher’s premiership and the political creed of Thatcherism, was real-life drama with powerful literary undertones: a Yorkshire Greek tragedy with a few, real, short-term winners, and many, equally real, long-term losers. The novel even suggests it was an actual war. ‘He has never seen anything like this before: *The Third English Civil War*’ (137). Surveying the often-styled ‘Battle of Orgreave’, through Fontaine’s eyes, one can see, clearly depicted, an authoritarian, royalist Executive; a new, elected Monarchy now with unchallenged use of the Royal Prerogative; battling ‘the enemy within’ as Mrs Thatcher defined them only, this time round, the Royalists are winning.<sup>62</sup> ‘Still more importantly, the apocalyptic intensities of [Peace’s] haunted history

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<sup>60</sup> David Peace, *GB84* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004).

<sup>61</sup> Joseph Brooker, 'Orgreave Revisited: David Peace's "GB84" and the Return to the 1980s', *Radical Philosophy* (2005b), 39-51; p. 41.

<sup>62</sup> Peace quotes *The Times* 20 July 1984 account of her speech to the 1922 Committee: ‘but the enemy within, much more difficult to fight, is just as dangerous to liberty’ (p. 170).

suggest how the strike metastasized from a political agonism based in a disagreement about industrial policy into a realm of hatred'.<sup>63</sup>

As Brooker, revisiting Orgreave, continues, while 'the history of art is not crowded with major works devoted to industrial stoppages' it is not in any way surprising that two of them deal with strikes by miners. He adds that Zola's *Germinal* (1885) was also based on historical events and 'a favourite of Arthur Scargill. . . . Reviewing *GB84* itself, Terry Eagleton [*Guardian*, 6 March 2004] likewise considers that "the strike lends itself well to fiction, in which specific situations accrue a more general resonance". David Peace's own reactions and inspirations were, he claims, anger and guilt. 'Anger at myself for not doing enough [and] guilt [for my] failure at 17 and 18 to understand the enormity and importance of events on my own doorstep, in my own country [Marqusee, *Independent*, 5 March 2004]'.<sup>64</sup> There can be no ambiguity about the novel's engagement with Thatcherism, nor, on his own admission, any doubt of Peace's antipathy towards Mrs Thatcher. 'I am waiting for her to cough her last, but not for artistic reasons'.<sup>65</sup> Such visceral feelings seem to grow the further one travels north.

Peace did not create his anaphoric and paratactic, yet often powerfully poetic, literary style specifically for this novel: rather it is a refinement of the staccato and repetitive, 100 per cent phatic-free discourse found in his earlier

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<sup>63</sup> Matthew Hart, 'The Third English Civil War: David Peace's "Occult History" Of Thatcherism', *Contemporary Literature*, 49 (2008), 573-96; p. 587. Cited by Peace as one of his sources (465).

<sup>64</sup> Brooker (2005b), pp. 40-41 for the quotations to this point in this paragraph.

<sup>65</sup> Stoop, 'Interview with David Peace', 11 April 2004, <<http://www.bookmunch.co.uk/view.php?id=1341>> [accessed 6 July 2009].

*Red Riding Quartet* and now continued into his Tokyo-based crime novels.

‘His novels are always claustrophobic places; they put you in the heads of characters [...] visited by nightmares, undone by doubt and despair. He works by repetition and obsession, hammering home fears.’<sup>66</sup>

‘Lads won’t have it.’

‘Lads won’t have a job then.’

[...]

‘Lads won’t go for it.’

‘Lads always listen to you. Lads will hear you now. Lads will see sense.’

[...]

‘Terry threw the equipment onto the ground. Terry stamped on it. *Repeatedly.*

Clive Cook looked up at Terry Winters. Clive Cook said, ‘I’m sorry, Comrade.’

Terry grabbed him by his hair. Terry spun him across the car park. Clive Cook fell on the floor. Clive Cook lay on the ground. Clive Cook smiled –

‘I’m the one you were meant to find,’ he laughed.

Terry spat on him once. Terry got into his car –

Terry went back to work. (164, 165, 167)

In the literary equivalent of the processes that created coal, Peace takes oral histories of actual miners and their families, then compresses and transforms them into a running diary that intercalate the chapters for each week of the strike: providing what Hart, using an astute post-colonial allusion, calls ‘the subaltern experience missing from the political drama of the main chapters’ (580). In that diary, ‘Martin’ records his wife’s comments in the first week of the strike. ‘Cath wipes her face. Cath dries her eyes. Cath looks at television. Cath says, She hates us’ (10). ‘She’ can only be one person. ‘She’ and the ‘President’ seem to be present on every page. ‘She’ uses not only

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<sup>66</sup> Tim Adams, ‘The Interview: David Peace’, *The Observer*, 22 February 2009, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/feb/22/fiction-david-peace-the-damned-utd>> [accessed 23 July 2009].

every organ of the state but informal fixers like Stephen Sweet, often referred to by Fontaine as ‘the Jew’. ‘The Jew can’t sit still. He looks out of the left window, he looks out of the right - / “I am her eyes and her ears,” he tells Neil again’ (11). Sweet talks

About cutting the strikers off. He talks about the banks and the building societies. Talks about mortgages –  
*About repossession –*  
The Jew wants to turn the screw. To turn it again and again –  
*Week by week, little by little, day by day, piece by piece –*  
‘To roll back the frontiers of Socialism for ever, Neil!’ (26)

and in that last line he is quoting ‘She’ whom he worships and must obey. At this stage of the year-long class war, however, the President sees a different outcome. ““We will bring the government to its knees. We will make her beg”” (36). Why should he not believe this when miners are chanting ‘Arthur Scargill, Arthur Scargill, we’ll support you ever more. We’ll – support – you – ever – more’ (50).

By alternating, almost line by line – or what Brooker might accept as ‘cross-referencing with cognate non-fictional texts’ but Beckett might say was a heavy ‘weight of symbolism’ – Peace can mention on a single page the death in March 1984 of WPC Yvonne Fletcher, ‘[f]elled by a single shot from the Libyan People’s Bureau’ and the statement of the solicitor for a convicted MI6 spy that ‘*the government relies on the aid of the security service which cynically manipulates the definition of subversion [...] to investigate and interfere in [...] the trades union movement, and other progressive organisations*’ (61). This sustains the pace and tension of the narrative and leads, on the same page, to Her reaction.

She has given him new orders –  
*New orders from the New Order* –  
New Orders to follow. New orders to give.  
Neil Fontaine has his own orders –  
*Old orders.* (61)

Allegedly, Sweet is a fictionalised David Hart and ‘[i]t seems that Mrs Thatcher gained a vicarious thrill from hearing of his dashing exploits behind enemy lines – Ronnie Millar calls him “a kind of Blue Pimpernel”’.<sup>67</sup> It probably helps to be slightly paranoid but the inference is there to be drawn that there is a State within the State of those who would wish to strengthen the authoritarian part of Hall’s ‘authoritarian populism’ that was one indisputable trait of Thatcherism.

Mary, wife of the alternate diarist Peter, is keeping a scrapbook:

*True History of Great Strike for Jobs*, that was what she called it.  
Filled three books now. Most of it were lies, said so herself.  
Bloody lies, she’d say as she cut stuff out. Tory bloody lies. But  
what she’d do was, under all lies she cut out, she’d then write truth  
of matter. (350)

Whether there ever can be anything as simple as the ‘truth of the matter’, red or blue, is doubtful since whoever writes an account, however objective their intentions, will soon find their version subtly tinted with the colour of their own political spectacles. Peace does not conceal his own point of view but his account is, notwithstanding, a significant engagement with Thatcherism and convincing evidence of the impact of the Lady on contemporary fiction. However, it also has echoes from earlier eras, the whole work rich with frequent literary allusions. These begin with the prologue which is an

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<sup>67</sup> Campbell, *Iron Lady*, p. 367, quoting Millar, *A View from the Wings*, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1993), p. 299.

‘Argument’ such as prefaces Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and which, in turn, frames within it quotations from Blake’s ‘Auguries of Innocence’. It continues later, when ‘Terry chose Verloc’ the name of Conrad’s secret agent as his very apposite, false name; and, finally, in the closing sentences (pp. 460-1), there is a sideways glance at T S Eliot’s ‘The Hollow Men’ remarked on by Matthew Hart. ‘[Peace] combines the language of *Realpolitik* with a sense of apocalyptic knowledge – Eliot’s famous incantation, “This is the way the world ends,” being rewritten as a futile justification of the deeds Neil has done in the interest of the state’ (585).

In the fourth novel under detailed consideration in this chapter, the working class plays only a minor role. However, the book, in its individual way, is just as much a reflection of Thatcherism as the other three. As Brooker says, Alan Hollinghurst’s 2004 Booker Prize winning novel, *The Line of Beauty*, is ‘[m]uch preoccupied with Thatcherism [...] spending its time unashamedly amid the wealth and complacent consumption which are indeed among the central popular images of the 1980s’.<sup>68</sup> ‘Whole conversations are devoted to admiration of Margaret Thatcher herself (318-9)’, notes Brooker, and ‘[t]he limits of the book’s world are, for the most part, the limits of a certain Tory imagination: Hollinghurst stages the self-congratulatory myopia which made Thatcherism all the easier to implement’ (2). By contrast with *Hurricane* and *GB84*, the social milieu is not, in Brooker’s neat phrase, ‘the dispossessed and repossessed’ (1), nor, by reason of its episodic structure and

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<sup>68</sup> Joseph Brooker, ‘Neo Lines: Alan Hollinghurst and the Apogee of the Eighties’, (London: Birkbeck ePrints, 2005c), p. 1. <<http://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/archive/00000470>> [accessed 4 May 2009].

time frame, can it even mention the miners (except *en passant*), the printers, or the financial crash of October 1987. It begins in the aftermath of Margaret Thatcher's 'Falklands' election of 1983, and concludes with events immediately preceding and flowing from her third consecutive election victory in 1987. Some despaired, some were joyful, but many, like Catherine, felt indifference. "What? Oh, the election, yes." Catherine stared out into the drizzle. "The 80s are going on forever".<sup>69</sup> These perceptions of the 1980s were reflected in a magazine established at the time, *The World of Interiors*, where Style was the entire Content, and the glossy medium was the whole, glitzy message. It suggests itself as the model for the fictional *Ogee* set up by Nick's rich lover (206). Simon Jenkins might well see the fact *Interiors* is still being published as further evidence of the post-1990 persistence of Thatcherism.

The narrative of the novel, all in the third person, is seen from the single perspective of Nick; it is his *Bildungsroman*: a gay, Oxford graduate from a provincial bourgeois background, taken up and taken in by a rising Conservative MP and his family, living comfortably in their Notting Hill home in the eighties. Conservatism, one might argue, was then called Thatcherism; 'complacent' consumption seen as the fruit of entrepreneurship and free enterprise; and self-seeking philanthropy took the form of 'a significant donation to the party funds' (222). They were all part of the way of life of those who were the beneficiaries of Thatcherism, and as necessary to the plot of *this* novelist as the angsts and neuroses of that same 'class' of people in the

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<sup>69</sup> Alan Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty* (London: Picador, 2004), p. 393.

pre-Thatcher years were to, for example, Margaret Drabble and Julian Fane. But why should any commentator seek to apply the term ‘Thatcherism’ *pejoratively* to the 1980s? What, after all, is typically 1980s about selfishness and venality? What seems exceptional about the suggestion, from someone who had once called him ‘a Levantine grocer’ that the supermarket owner who had made that significant donation might become ‘Lord Ouradi’ (261)? One answer might be ‘nothing, as these may be perennial human attributes, except that in the 1980s they became matters of government policy and direct legislative encouragement’.<sup>70</sup>

Nick does briefly encounter the less privileged, like the antique dealer Pete, and Leo, the black council worker, with whom he experiences his first coitus. In 1983, Pete comments on trade. “‘It’s at a fucking standstill here. It’s going backwards. Another four years of Madam and we’ll all be on the street’” (108). Similarly, the rough trade whom playboy Wani and Nick pick up at the Hampstead Ponds reflects a different, by one or two orders of magnitude, quality of and attitude to life. ‘Ricky had no views on any current topic [...]. He’d given up his job at a warehouse in favour of doing nothing, and so obviously he couldn’t find a job even if he wanted to, with three and a quarter million out of work’ (196-7).

There is a further parallel, in Thatcher terms, in the book’s title, *The Line of Beauty*. Hogarth’s ogee could also be said to trace the sinusoidal path of her popularity: on a rising curve in 1979 but, by the early eighties, the most unpopular contemporary Prime Minister (so far), before going off to win a

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<sup>70</sup> Randall Stevenson, Personal Communication, 14 July 2009.

colonial war followed by a landslide election victory in 1983. Between that election and the next, her popularity again sagged, only to recover in time for 1987 when Nick, comparing this election to the previous one, comments, “‘I mean the land did slide once, as we all know. And it looks very much as though it’s going to stay slidden’” (419). Brooker also suggests an ironic parallel between Nick, ‘a parvenu from the provincial bourgeoisie’ (2) and the Lady who rose from humble origins, only to shed her humility and creatively reinvent her origins on assuming office. Nick, high on champagne and cocaine, will have the Dutch courage to ask Mrs Thatcher to dance with him at the MP’s silver wedding ball (384).

The ‘impact’ of Mrs Thatcher on literature is certainly very evident during that evening at Gerald and Rachel Fedden’s celebrations. Gerald, in a last-minute panic, has had his front door painted ‘conference-blue gloss’ (366). It may not have been necessary. In one of the best passages in any of the Thatcherist novels, Hollinghurst describes the Lady’s arrival that evening in perfectly nuanced and inflected prose.

She came in at her gracious scuttle, with its hint of a long-suppressed embarrassment, of clumsiness transmuted into power. She looked ahead, into the unknown house, and everything she saw was a confirmation. The high hall mirror welcomed her, and in it the faces of the welcomers, some of whom, grand though they were, had a look beyond pride, a kind of rapture, that was bold and shy at once. She seemed pleased by the attention, and countered it cheerfully and practically, like modern royalty. She gave no sign of noticing the colour of the front door. (376)

In a book which would certainly have been excluded from all school libraries by the terms of the Conservative Government’s ‘Clause 28’, a

window onto gay culture is opened wide and a sad truth is brought home to Nick in the conclusion. As with the death penalty, where the mere fact of abolition does not alter entrenched attitudes, the legalisation of homosexuality does not protect him from his erstwhile friends once he is, inadvertently, implicated in Gerald's fall from grace. Brooker links politics and sexuality.

Homophobia is unleashed, as if from nowhere, as the Tory establishment ejects the scapegoat and closes ranks. Perhaps the break with the Feddens marks a more general political disjuncture, as Nick belatedly learns the ultimate incompatibility of his sexual identity with their politics. (3-4)

I might see it slightly differently. As Brooker says, 'sexuality, money and class all intersect' (4) but the connecting link is not so much homophobia *per se* as hypocrisy. Especially in any time of zealots like Mrs Thatcher, almost anything is permitted between consenting adults as long as it is never discussed and Nick's social crime has been to expose the facts to public gaze. That public gaze has been studiously averted from homosexuality and from AIDS but the amoral sub-editors of the 'free' press seize on the chance to write the headline 'Gay Sex Link to Minister's House' (468), forcing Gerald to expel Nick. Within the context of this dissertation, however, it is interesting to learn how Hollinghurst regarded his own Booker Prize winning book.

My instinctive feeling has always been that conservatism offers very little imaginative purchase to the novelist and very scant promise of aesthetic pleasure. In *The Line of Beauty* I felt I could only make Tory life usable by writing about a kind of Tory politician who was actually going out of favour through the 80s - a public-school-Oxbridge-educated figure married into a plutocratic family, with all those historic trappings which precisely appealed to my protagonist. Of course there was mischievous pleasure in writing about that world from the point of view of someone for a while seduced by it; but [...] [i]t was simply the ironist's game to

have everyone speak glowingly of her, to show them under her spell. At the same time, of course, I remained interested in people rather than types, and portraiture rather than satire; so the Thatcherites are shown as human beings. But a novel written from their point of view and vindicating their acts is to me almost unimaginable. If it were to exist it would be seen as so supremely ironic that it would necessarily have failed.<sup>71</sup>

This could be the point, then, at which to begin to ask if others can imagine the ‘almost imaginable’ and to develop a conclusion.

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<sup>71</sup> Alan Hollinghurst, Personal Communication, 30 June 2009.

## **BEYOND THE BLUE HORIZON**

Three issues have been raised in the course of this essay. First, are there *any* 'true blue' novels? Second, did novelists rise creatively to the challenge of Thatcherism and, third, are there any signs, thirty years on, of a change of literary mood?

There is a point of view that 'any novel which indicates moral vacuity, greed, authoritarianism or intellectual vacuity as endemic features of society is routinely treated as left-wing and therefore anti-Thatcher'.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, the prejudice goes further. 'Thatcher, in the eyes of many writers, just did not deserve to be taken seriously.'<sup>73</sup> The bluest tinge that some novels of the period reveal, or rather fail to conceal, is a certain vicarious pleasure in having their protagonists deeply involved in so-called Thatcherite pursuits. A few might just be read as empathetic, as far as their characters are concerned, towards Mrs Thatcher and some of the consequences of Thatcherism. They put a human face on their hero-villains, which helps to engage the reader. These 'faces' range from social climber Charlie Bosham in Rathbone's *Nasty, Very* (1984) via the incestuous Home Secretary, Michael Parsons, in Caute's *Veronica: or the Two Nations* (1989) to the bed-hopping George Crawley, the egotistical computer software expert in Park's *Goodness* (1991). But it is essential to note, in all three cases, that their characters were 'fixed' in early, pre-Thatcher youth and, it could well be argued, simply had greater scope to flourish in what was the prevailing economic climate of self-reliant

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<sup>72</sup> Richard Bradford, Personal Communication, 21 May 2009.

<sup>73</sup> Eric J Evans, Personal Communication, 14 May 2009.

entrepreneurship and ‘devil take the hindmost’. Furthermore, the quality immanent in *Goodness* lies elsewhere than in Thatcherism; in the fact that, in the end, both Crawley and his wife Shirley *do* change – not a great deal in economic outlook perhaps, but by a quantum leap in terms of humanity – as he risks his life to save the handicapped baby he had previously wanted to kill and, in a final twist, she kills it.<sup>74</sup> “‘For what it’s worth, I was praying as I did it’” (184). If this had been a book by Piers Paul Read (or Muriel Spark, perhaps) it would surely have become, in the eyes of critics, a meditation on the workings of Divine Providence through the medium, no doubt, of his saintly mother.

Novels as outwardly different as Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses* (1988) and Hensher’s *The Northern Clemency* (2008) can still use similar literary devices as unique identifiers of the period in question. Rushdie describes the symbolic meltdown of a wax dummy: ‘the night’s sacrificial offering [...] Her permawaved coiffure, her pearls, her suit of blue. *Maggie-maggie-maggie*, bays the crowd. *Burn-burn-burn*.’<sup>75</sup> Hensher uses the same chanting as the choric counterpoint to a completely unrelated conversation.

‘Who the fuck was that?’ Trudy said, sidling up to Stig. ‘Maggie Maggie Maggie.’  
‘Out out out,’ Stig shouted. ‘Tory scum with a briefcase. Don’t ask me.’  
‘Seemed to know you,’ Trudy said. She had a scowl, a pair of Doc Martens, black 501s, and granny glasses. ‘Maggie!’  
‘Out!’  
‘Maggie!’  
‘Out!’ Stig said. ‘He’s Tim’s dad. You know T.’<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Tim Parks, *Goodness* (London: Vintage, 1998).

<sup>75</sup> Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (London: Viking, 1988), p. 292.

<sup>76</sup> Philip Hensher, *The Northern Clemency* (London: Fourth Estate, 2008), p. 391.

However, despite the fact that Rushdie's antipathy towards Mrs Thatcher is well known and Hensher's book contains a graphic description of the 'Battle of Orgreave' from a pro-strike perspective (pp. 472-476) – which is worth comparing with that in *Peace* (pp. 110-143) – few, I will go further and say none, of the books mentioned in this essay was intended by their authors to be read only on one level as a critical portrayal of Thatcherism which the engaged reader is expected to condemn. For example, Michael Bracewell says, 'When I wrote it, I didn't think of *The Conclave* as remotely political – in any sense'.<sup>77</sup> So, if Jonathan Coe (2009), as cited above, could claim that anti-Thatcherism was 'the default position for probably 90% of writers' why were the other ten per cent silent?

To some extent, the explanation for this might be relatively straightforward. Theatres were unlikely to produce plays of a pro-Thatcherite disposition, given the cuts to theatre subsidies by successive Conservative governments. In many ways, Thatcher set herself up as anti-intellectual, and blamed intellectuals and universities for some of the social and economic ills of the Britain she inherited, so intellectuals, whether inside or outside the universities, were unlikely to see her in a positive light.<sup>78</sup>

And what holds for the theatre also applies to book publishing, as Brannigan adds his suspicions that any that 'did show Thatcher or Thatcherites in a positive fictional light found it difficult to find favour with a liberal media and publishing world.' Even from sources not noticeably left-wing, research has drawn a blank. Charles Moore, Mrs Thatcher's official biographer wrote, 'I do not know of any characterisation of her in fiction which is by a "right-wing"

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<sup>77</sup> Michael Bracewell, Personal Communication, 8 June 2009.

<sup>78</sup> John Brannigan, Personal Communication, 15 June 2009.

author, or which is favourable.’<sup>79</sup> Author and critic David Caute suggests, however, that as far as ‘right-wing’ novelists are concerned they are starting from a different place,

much less inspired by admiration for Conservative politicians and governments than by a general distaste for, and suspicion of, politics. [...] You may spot inherent conservatism in fiction by what it is against rather than what it is for. By its grumbles.<sup>80</sup>

The second issue is whether novelists of the Thatcherist period responded adequately to the challenge and the opportunity of the dramatic potential of Thatcherism: ‘a time of crisis – political, social, economic, ecological’.<sup>81</sup> We seem, over the course of this essay, to have found only three further books that could pass Beckett’s test: McEwan’s *The Child in Time*, Hollinghurst’s *The Line of Beauty* and Peace’s *GB84*. I remain unconvinced that Welsh’s *Trainspotting* – a significant event as well as an excellent novel – can be read as ‘engagement’ with Thatcherism, which reduces the running total to only five. Given the scale and scope of the period’s conflicts, and even if there is a large blue-grey penumbra of texts which there is no space here to discuss, this does not seem an altogether adequate ‘return on investment’. My overall impression is that the canon has *seemed* larger because we have allowed our critical faculties to lapse in the way Richard Bradford criticised above, routinely categorising too many contemporary novels as left-wing and therefore anti-Thatcher.

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<sup>79</sup> Charles Moore, Personal Communication, 21 May 2009.

<sup>80</sup> David Caute, Personal Communication, 19 August 2009.

<sup>81</sup> Nicolas Tredell, *The Critical Decade: Culture in Crisis* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1993), p. vii.

This leaves the final issue of whether, by 2009, we are reaching the end of an era. By now, any novel set in the 1980s can legitimately be regarded as ‘historical’. We need to ask if anyone can detect anything as obvious, yet as complex, as a clear change of literary mood and colour. Are there noteworthy, twenty-first century novels of the New Labour epoch being written? I suggest there could be at least three examples.

Maggie Gee, in *The Flood*, manages to move out of the shadow of Mrs Thatcher.<sup>82</sup> In an alternative but curiously similar world to our own, Mr Bliss and Mr Bare are the Presidents of their two countries. They are already bombing distant Loya, a Muslim country. In Mr Bliss’s country, there is a clear and growing division between ‘the haves’ and those who have naught. And it is raining so much of the city is flooded, creating physical islands of separation symbolic of the societal gap. In prose with a hint of the magical, the lives of very recognisable early twenty-first century characters are as interconnected, but just as detached from each other, as those in, for example, *Mrs Dalloway*. One can read into the text implicit criticism of a detached-from-reality and very presidential premiership in too close association with Hesperica (America), and clear condemnation of the second Iraq War. But, in the end, the flood – a tsunami caused by the impact of a small comet – destroys them all. While this, on its own, could not be read as recurrence of incipient ‘bourgeois hysteria’, such as characterised the late 1970s, the novel has the merit of *not* being about Thatcherism and, more positively, of taking a view on the present and the future rather than dwelling on the past.

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<sup>82</sup> Maggie Gee, *The Flood* (London: Saqi, 2004).

By contrast, Blake Morrison's *South of the River* does look back, but over five days in the lives of five interconnected characters during the first five years of New Labour.<sup>83</sup> It can be compared favourably, in quality, quantity and literary craft, to Hollinghurst and *The Line of Beauty*. While still relatively recent, it manages, with our hindsight, to take on a period flavour but, ironically, for the unflattering reason that the newly-elected Prime Minister over-promised then under-delivered. "“Amazing night,” Nat said. “The right party got in at last.” “Only by modelling itself on the wrong party. I wish I knew what Blair believed in”” (38). Nat is talking to black journalist, Harry, and reports back to his wife, Libby, that

‘[h]e kept moaning on about New Labour being no better than the Tories. How many black MPs had been elected. How many ethnics would be in the Cabinet. Blah, blah. He can’t get excited about Blair at all.’(86)

A year or so later, advertising executive Libby is setting up her own business and drafting her launch party speech. ‘Because we are living in a new country, the Cool Britannia of Tony Blair and the Spice Girls’ (190). While not Beckett’s Thatcherite ‘new country’, it is another place, and yet, as Simon Jenkins is not alone in saying, so little different. Another year on, on the very eve of the Millennium, Nat’s Tory uncle, Harry, comments that ‘Blair was saying in that insincerely sincere voice of his, [that Britain] must be a *beacon* to the world. Stupid bloody image. [...] Who wrote these speeches?’(231, original emphasis). Certainly not Ferdinand Mount: and nor

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<sup>83</sup> Blake Morrison, *South of the River* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2007).

did Blair-Brown use the blowtorch for which they too had seemed to win a mandate.

By February 2001, the situation at Equitable Life is another commentary on the continuity of Thatcherism under Blair, with the pursuit of personal gain for financial manipulators themselves instead of those they were in business to serve. Some had, indeed, read the warning signals that what seemed too good to be true was, inevitably, just that.

And the Equitable, everyone knew, was safe as houses – as dependable as death itself. [...] If I were you, I'd get your money out while you can. Harris had told him over a year ago. Good advice. But Jack had hung on, in the hope his nest egg would somehow be restored. More fool him. (466)

The concluding section, set on 4 May 2002, the day after local elections, reinforces for many readers that sinking feeling that *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. Britain, following 9/11, is fighting another colonial war.

'I'll say one thing for Blair,' Jack said, breaking the silence. 'He's tough on terrorism. Striking back in Afghanistan was right, after the Twin Towers. I hope we do the same thing in Iraq.'  
'I never knew you supported Blair,' Nat said.  
'On terrorism, yes.'  
'I'm amazed – my Labour-voting uncle.'  
'Don't be ridiculous – I'll never vote Labour. But at least Blair has guts. He says what he thinks. Stands up for what he believes. Doesn't mind being unpopular.' (496)

Finally, Fay Weldon, whose latest novel *Chalcot Crescent* was published in September 2009, does look forward.<sup>84</sup> Set in the year 2013, this allows the narrator, Frances, to refer to contemporary events and trends with the appearance of hindsight. Though told with wry humour, the underlying

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<sup>84</sup> Fay Weldon, *Chalcot Crescent*, (London: Corvus, 2009)

theme is bleak and dystopic, such as we found in the pre-Thatcherist novels of Burgess and Fane.

The country is run by ‘NUG – the National Unity Government, composed not of politicians but sociologists and therapists’ (7). Times are bleak. There is rationing; there are frequent interruptions to water and electricity; and the staple food is the National Meat Loaf which is described, curiously, as suitable for vegetarians. Dire, cannibalistic suspicions about its animal protein fraction are a recurring part of the story. ‘[D]ebt runs the world. They have made sure of that. Mrs Thatcher started it when she got rid of public housing’ (57). However, debt continued to rule during

the Labour Government of 1997 and the Consumer Decade – as it is now called [...] Then came the Shock of 2008, the Crunch of 2009-11 – when house prices plummeted and still no-one was buying; then the brief Recovery of 2012, when at least properties began to change hands again, though our friendly European neighbours became less friendly, the US embraced protectionism and the rest of the world had no choice but to follow. And then came the Bite, which is now, and with it a coalition and thoroughly *dirigiste* government which keeps its motives and its actions very much to itself. (94)

It is Weldon’s smooth, very well-managed transition from the reader’s present day experience of the past two years through the already promised harder times of the next two that makes her ‘alternative universe’, under near-universal CCTV surveillance, so credible. In the last year of this decade, such a world and national outcome does not seem too far-fetched.

The European Community is in disarray and, though not formally disbanded, might as well be: it can no longer enforce its rulings through financial penalties, and has no other means of doing so. [...] Consensus is fine in time of plenty, but collapses under stress. (170)

Clearly, *Chalcot Crescent* could be read as a contemporary equivalent of Fane's *Revolution Island* and as a straw in the wind that is blowing the disillusioned middle classes away from the hopes, raised by Blair in the latter nineties, of a more socially cohesive capitalism towards the chimera of a caring Cameron conservatism to cushion the impact of inevitable austerity, and the hangover after the excesses of 'the Consumer Decade – as it is now called'. Weldon pictures the scene.

The recession showed no sign of bottoming out – why should it? The public was not, as had first been claimed, “sensibly putting off buying until price dropped”, they had just gone off buying forever: consumerism was suddenly out of fashion. Sparse was in, lavish was out. (114)

Why does it all sound so depressingly familiar? Is it because the once-admired welfare consensus died in 1979 but a new and enduring Thatcherite consensus has now been forged in life and in literature. If so, we have, it seems, come full circle to a vantage point where we can still see that same blue river of *her* truth carving its way inexorably through the firm ground of fiction. Different fiction of course but, alas, it would seem to be the same river. After all this, I begin to feel, rather like Mallarmé, that, '*Le chair est triste, hélas ! et j'ai lu tous les livres.*'<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Brise Marine', in *Twelve French Poets (1820-1900)*, ed. by Douglas Parmée (London: Longmans, 1957), p. 224.

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APPENDIX A: LIST OF WORKS READ FOR THIS DISSERTATION

**‘Pre-Thatcherist’ texts**

Amis, K, *The Alteration* (1976)  
Drabble, *The Ice Age* (1977)  
Burgess, *1985* (1978)  
Read, *A Married Man* (1979)  
Fane, *Happy Endings* (1979)  
Fane, *Revolution Island* (1979)

**‘Early-Thatcherist’ works**

Plays:

Caryl Churchill, *Top Girls* (1982)  
Brenton and Hare, *Pravda* (1985)  
Caryl Churchill, *Serious Money* (1987)  
Elton, *Gasp* (1990)

and the following novels:

Amis, M, *Money* (1984)  
Rathbone, *Nasty, Very* (1984)  
Gray, *1982, Janine* (1984),  
Barker, *Liza’s England* (1986) [published then under the title *The Century’s Daughter*]  
Drabble, *The Radiant Way* (1987)  
McEwan, *A Child in Time* (1987)  
Bradbury, *Cuts* (1987)  
Moorcock, *Mother London* (1988)  
Rushdie, *Satanic Verses* (1988),  
Read, *A Season in the West* (1988)  
Bracewell, *Missing Margate* (1988)  
Blacker, *Fixx* (1989)  
Caute, *Veronica, or the Two Nations* (1989)  
Lodge, *Nice Work* (1989)  
Dyer, *The Colour of Memory* (1989)  
Cartwright, *Look at it This Way* (1990)  
Dibdin, *Dirty Tricks* (1991)  
Lawson *Bloody Margaret* (1991)  
Sinclair, *Downriver* (1991)  
Stacey, *Decline* (1991)  
Parks, *Goodness* (1991)  
Michael, *Under a Thin Moon* (1992)  
Bracewell, *The Conclave* (1992)

**‘Later Thatcherist’ works**

Welsh, *Trainspotting* (1993)  
Coe, *What a Carve Up!* (1994)  
Hensher, *Kitchen Venom* (1996)  
Taylor, *Trespass* (1998)

Warner, *The Sopranos* (1998)  
Lott, *Rumours of a Hurricane* (2002)  
Hollinghurst, *The Line of Beauty* (2004)  
Peace, *GB84* (2004)  
Gee, *The Flood* (2004)  
Morrison, *South of the River* (2007)  
Hensher, *The Northern Clemency* (2008)  
Weldon, *Chalcot Crescent* (2009)

APPENDIX B: PERSONAL COMMUNICATIONS RECEIVED

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From Michael Bracewell, 8 June 2009

When I wrote it, I didn't think of 'The Conclave' as remotely political - in any sense. I just wrote about fairly typical middle class young people of the time, who saw consumerism as the compensatory pleasure for work, plus enjoyed the basic pleasure of shopping/consumer lifestyle. Martin and Marilyn were not meant to be like Brett Easton Ellis or Jay McInnerey's depraved luxury fiends, living a life of labels and excess. They were not supposed to be Warhol's children. In fact, given the consumer mono-environment of lifestyle culture which we now find all around us, the book has been proved oddly accurate. When I wrote it, lifestyle shopping was still a minority occupation. I really wanted the book to be about domestic biographies, which read like a thriller. Someone once told me that the section describing Marilyn's make-over of the flat in Bristol read like great pornography, which I chose to take as a compliment.

From Prof. Richard Bradford 21 May 2009

You raise an intriguing point. To state that no novelists, post late 1970s, are demonstrably right wing in their presentations of society – and by implication pro-Thatcher – begs a number of questions about political affiliation and literary representation. True, it is difficult to find even a tiny hint of sympathy for Toryism in recent writing but even among the earlier generation [...] no-one went quite so far as to use their fiction as a vehicle for political dogma. In my view their work became associated with Conservatism because of connections made – frequently by hostile academics – between their public personae and their largely traditional stylistic manner. On the other hand any novel which indicates moral vacuity, greed, authoritarianism or intellectual vacuity as endemic features of society is routinely treated as left-wing and therefore anti-Thatcher – as are books which favour *avant garde* modes of representing the contemporary. Personally, I think such judgements are fed by the insidious influence of Theory in academia – and yes I am prejudiced here.

From Dr. John Brannigan 15 June 2009

[T]he search for 'sympathetically portrayed Thatcherites' in contemporary fiction is a challenge indeed. It is probably an equally difficult challenge in any sphere of the arts. To some extent, the explanation for this might be relatively straightforward. Theatres were unlikely to produce plays of a pro-Thatcherite disposition, given the cuts to theatre subsidies by successive Conservative governments. In many ways, Thatcher set herself up as anti-intellectual, and blamed intellectuals and universities for some of the social

and economic ills of the Britain she inherited, so intellectuals, whether inside or outside the universities, were unlikely to see her in a positive light. I can't think of any writers beyond Mount and Hurd (both rather obvious candidates) who could be argued to have reflected that conservative cultural outlook in their writings. Even Michael Dobbs hardly depicts his own party in a positive light. You may find them, of course, and there might be equally good reasons why writers who did show Thatcher or Thatcherites in a positive fictional light found it difficult to find favour with a liberal media and publishing world. Just as interesting to me, however, is the model of the relationship between literature and politics here. As you'll probably notice in *Orwell to the Present*, I have frequently been drawn to the argument that literature is as much constitutive as reflective of its cultural contexts, and in this regard I think it can be argued that Thatcherism was partly formed by the conservatism of the earlier generation of 'right-wing' writers that you mentioned.

From David Caute 19 August 2009

The only general comment I can offer is that our 'right-wing' novelists have been much less inspired by admiration for Conservative politicians and governments than by a general distaste for, and suspicion of, politics. The key motif is resistance to social intervention in private life, which is one reason why our best conservative writers have been anti-fascist as well as anti-socialist. The conservative novel elevates personal sensibilities, talents, failings and relationships, often in a privileged milieu, while probably taking for granted wider patriotic concerns and courageous service under the flag as being 'above politics'. You may spot inherent conservatism in fiction by what it is against rather than what it is for. By its grumbles rather than its declarations.

From Prof. Eric J Evans 14 May 2009

[M]y take on why writers were *especially* opposed to the Thatcher regime is as follows:

[...]

d) She was personally strident, self-assured and, on issues which mattered to the literati, monumentally ignorant. She did not deserve to be taken seriously - as someone like Enoch Powell (whose political views were similarly excoriated) certainly did. He was from the academic elite; she was not. Thatcher, in the eyes of many writers, just did not deserve to be taken seriously.

e) In Denis Healey's famous phrase, she had no 'hinterland' - politics dominated her life. What chance, then, of appealing to her finer feelings? The

examples I use from Baroness Warnock and Jonathan Miller - nice examples themselves of the intellectual aristocracy - are apposite here. She was not a rounded individual and certainly not one of us creative types. The Millers and the Warnocks liked to think that they were speaking for civilisation when they attacked her!

From Alan Hollinghurst 30 June 2009

My instinctive feeling has always been that conservatism offers very little imaginative purchase to the novelist and very scant promise of aesthetic pleasure. In *The Line of Beauty* I felt I could only make Tory life usable by writing about a kind of Tory politician who was actually going out of favour through the 80s - a public-school-Oxbridge-educated figure married into a plutocratic family, with all those historic trappings which precisely appealed to my protagonist. Of course there was mischievous pleasure in writing about that world from the point of view of someone for a while seduced by it; but I certainly don't think I "flattered away" the flaws of Mrs Thatcher - did Julian Glover really say I said that? It was simply the ironist's game to have everyone speak glowingly of her, to show them under her spell. At the same time, of course, I remained interested in people rather than types, and portraiture rather than satire; so the Thatcherites are shown as human beings. But a novel written from their point of view and vindicating their acts is to me almost unimaginable. If it were to exist it would be seen as so supremely ironic that it would necessarily have failed.

From Tim Lott 28 May 2009

You are right, to my knowledge I am the only writer to have written a book that was not purely critical of Thatcherism...rather it spelt out some of the ways people won and lost. In *Rumours of a Hurricane*, Charlie Buck is liberated from his job as a print worker at Wapping to set up his own business, but finally can't survive in the Thatcherite can do world .. his wife, though, Maureen, is positively liberated by the Thatcher role model and makes a success of it, she goes from being a housewife to a successful businesswoman. [...] The reason other writers haven't written about the positive aspects of Thatcherism is that most writers are sheep.

Also from Tim Lott 7 July 2009

I suppose what I mean is that most writers operate within a narrow liberal-left mindset that does tend to see the universe in Manichean terms somewhat...Thatcher was 'bad', Clem Attlee was a saint etc...life is more complex than that and writers should point up complexities not reinforce them.

Distance does lend detachment and an element of understanding...as Mao Tse Tung said when asked what he thought of the French revolution , 'its too soon to say'...but the writer should be the first with rough drafts of history, and all too often it is a function that in Britain is ignored...writers tend to focus too much on the past, or on the exotic...

I'm not quite sure what the 'rising tide of bourgeois hysteria' is...is it different from any other kind of collective hysteria?

From Charles Moore 21 May 2009

Yours is an interesting subject. In writing the authorised biography of Lady Thatcher, I shall discuss how she was treated and depicted in literature, song etc, but I am afraid that I have not yet done any work on this area, and so have nothing to add. I do not know of any characterisation of her in fiction which is by a "right-wing" author, or which is favourable. But there may be some.

From Randall Stevenson 14 July 2009

I don't think I've ever encountered a *popular* view, in Britain (though occasionally abroad) that "Thatcher and Thatcherism were some sort of necessary, even essential, curative for the country's ills" – until the Falklands War, after all, Thatcher was the most unpopular Prime Minister in British history. . . . On the contrary, one might have expected a sense not of the curative but merely the opportunist, perhaps especially in the (generally) more affluent South of England – a possibility of immense, though (if anyone had thought about it) short-term, profit and profiteering through quick exploitation of unregulated financial markets, sale of public assets, etc. An answer to the question [you posed] – "what, one asks, is typically 1980s about selfishness and venality" – might therefore be "nothing, as these may be perennial human attributes, except that in the 1980s they became matters of government policy and direct legislative encouragement. Strangely, a minor alternative to the conclusion mentioned above – there were no affirmative treatments of Thatcherism in contemporary literature – might be found by reading some of its apparently severest critics against the grain. Martin Amis's *Money* generates some considerable sympathy, as well as more obvious revulsion, for the glitzy predilections of a central figure and their enhancement of the pacity of his narrative. There is likewise a real if guilty excitement to be found in the sheer unfetteredness of greed in Caryl Churchill's *Serious Money* 00 witness the famous, or infamous glee with which parties of city stockbrokers apparently attended the original performances.

Also from Randall Stevenson 22 July 2009

I don't know that I would entirely agree [that Amis's *Money* and Gray's *1982, Janine* are too early to be critically classifiable as reflections or refractions of Thatcherism *per se*]. My own recollection is that the contours of Thatcherism were fairly quickly apparent, and her unpopularity and reasons for it well established by the time of the Falklands War. I'd have thought Gray at least wrote in fairly direct response to this -- also to the wider decline of the post-war consensus I mentioned.

No question about McEwan, Sinclair, Coe or Peace, all of whom are much more explicitly anti-Thatcherism, rather than perhaps, as in the cases above, against conditions her policies were creating, though I wonder at least in Peace's case what kind of distinction might need to be drawn between near-contemporary novels and ones that might almost be seen, like GB84, as historical, or at least more retrospective, appraisive, etc...

From D J Taylor 17 June 2009

There *were* a few writers who were more sympathetic to Thatcher and they fell into three broad categories. First, there were novelists who were sympathetic to Conservatism: such as Ferdinand Mount, and Tom Stacey in *Decline* (1991). Second, there were some novelists who tried to write satirically about Thatcherism but whose shots fell rather wide of the mark, who suffered from an uncertainty of tone, in that what starts out as a satirical assault sometimes ends up closer to an unwitting celebration: examples might include Julian Rathbone, Tim Parks and Terence Blacker. They wrote at a time of uncertainty as to where Thatcherism was leading. Thirdly, there were novels where Thatcherism was a subliminal theme, part of the environment, used as a tool, and these were generally in commercial as opposed to literary fiction: examples might include Barbara Taylor Bradford and Jilly Cooper. [...] I agree there was probably a shift around 1992, as the impact of Thatcher's political departure worked through to the bookshelf, and coincidentally the year when my survey "After the War" reaches its conclusion.