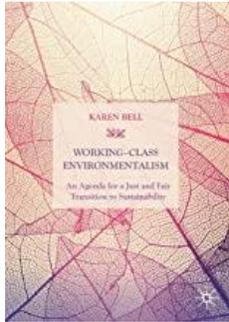


# WCSA BOOK NOTES

Spring 2020

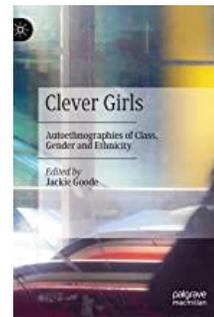
## ***Working-Class Environmentalism: An Agenda for a Just and Fair Transition to Sustainability* (Palgrave Macmillan), Karen Bell**



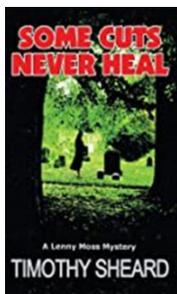
Karen Bell begins this book by explaining what “environmental classism” is – the toxic combination of policymakers ignoring both the environmental degradation working-class communities suffer and coming up with solutions that go easy on polluters while being reckless with working-class jobs. She formulates the problem as the paradox that even as the earth’s resources are being over-used, “millions of people around the world still do not have their social and environmental needs met,” including clean water and air, healthy food, and affordable energy. The publisher promises: “Bell explores various solutions to these social and ecological crises and lays out an agenda for simultaneously achieving greater well-being, equality and sustainability.”

## ***Clever Girls: Autoethnographies of Class, Gender and Ethnicity* (Palgrave Macmillan), ed. Jackie Goode**

A collection of 15 autoethnographies by three generations of women from working-class backgrounds who as girls were “clever” even as they often tried to hide that cleverness. Illustrating the huge potential of personal experience as research data, these essays explore the “production of classed, gendered and racialized subjects with powerful, engaging, funny and moving stories of transitions through family relationships, education, friendships and work.” Valerie Walkerdine praises the result: “these stories of intrepid cleverness amongst girlhoods positioned by the Othernesses of class, race and ethnicity, are hugely important for understanding the complex landscapes of today. A must-read that will inspire you to begin your own auto-ethnography.”



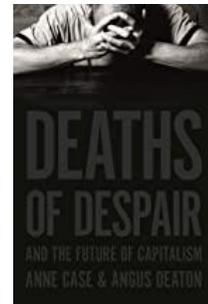
## ***Some Cuts Never Heal and All Bleeding Stops Eventually* (Hard Ball Press), Timothy Sheard**



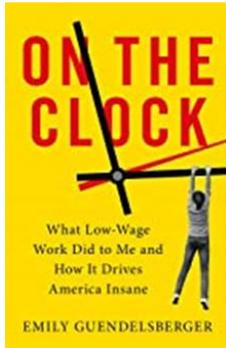
Two new Lenny Moss mysteries bring new adventures for Tim Sheard’s custodian shop steward at Madison University Hospital. In *Some Cuts* Lenny tracks down the killer of a pharmaceutical representative found dead in a hospital bed, while at the same time battling “the frenzied work pace and inhuman hours he and his co-workers are enduring.” *All Bleeding* finds Lenny helping a nurse who was fired when a patient under her care mysteriously disappears, while also reconciling an outdated union contract that does not require paid leave for two LGBTQ hospital workers even though state law has made gay marriage legal.

## ***Deaths of Despair and the Future of Capitalism* (Princeton U. Press), Anne Case and Angus Deaton**

Princeton economists Anne Case and Angus Deaton were the first to notice the astounding increase over the last two decades in what they call “deaths of despair” from suicides, drug overdoses, and alcoholism. Seeking to discover why the United States is alone among rich nations to experience a decline in life expectancy for three years in a row, Case and Deaton trace the roots of the crisis to: “the weakening position of labor, the growing power of corporations, and, above all, to a rapacious health-care sector that redistributes working-class wages into the pockets of the wealthy.” The *Financial Times* praises it for revealing “the cruelty of an American meritocracy that heaps lavish rewards on the winners while increasingly leaving others to rot.”



***On the Clock: What Low-Wage Work Did to Me and How it Drives America Insane* (Little Brown), Emily Guendelsberger**



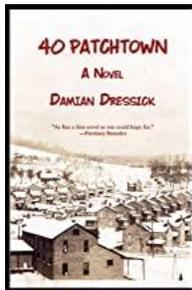
When the Philadelphia newspaper she worked for went out of business, Emily Guendelsberger went to work at an Amazon warehouse in Louisville, then a call center in North Carolina, and finally a McDonald's in San Francisco. *On the Clock* is her chronicle of what that work was like and how the workers who do it get by – or don't. With acerbic wit, thorough background research, and self-deprecating humor, Guendelsberger makes it somehow enjoyable, as well as enlightening, to inhabit her life in these totalitarian workplaces. *Salon* dubbed it the “*Nicked and Dimed* for the Amazon age.” Daniel Brook praises the book for uncovering “a Darwinian hellscape where the richest man on earth munificently bestows painkillers upon his warehouse serfs, telemarketers pitch products to the newly bereaved, and the customer is always right – even when she's lobbing McNugget sauce at your head. Filled with compassion, fury, and an invigorating dose of hope, *On The Clock* is the laugh-till-you-cry exposé our laugh-till-you-cry nation deserves.”

***Poor Queer Studies: Confronting Elitism in the University* (Duke U. Press), Matt Brim**

Matt Brim, who teaches at CUNY's College of Staten Island, places queer studies “away from its familiar sites of elite education [and] toward poor and working-class people, places, and pedagogies.” Informed by a robust literature on class stratification in higher education, Brim shows how queer studies in night schools and other working-class universities both suffers from grinding inequalities outside the classroom and shapes a knowledge that is different from the “aspirational model” prevalent in the mainstream field. Pointing to the “overrepresentation of affluence” in the academy, Donald Padgett calls the book a “damning critique of the impact of academic elitism on poor and working-class students” as it “lays bare the structural and disciplinary mechanism of inequality, from overcrowded classrooms and inadequate educational resources to more basic deficiencies of the underprivileged such as homelessness, lack of access to food, healthcare, and childcare.”



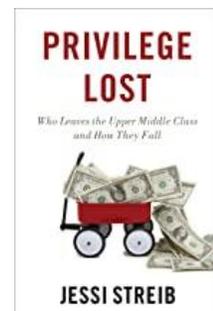
***40 Patchtown – Appalachian Writing Series* (Bottom Dog Press), Damian Dressick**



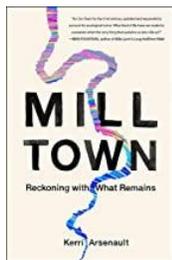
*40 Patchtown* follows teenage miner Chet Pistakowski and his struggle to provide for his family during the 1922 coal miners' strike in Pennsylvania. Through his interviews with retired miners and their wives, Damian Dressick immersed himself in coal heritage and spent months researching the rhythms of early coal town life in order to write this novel. Karen Spears Zacharias, author of *Mother of Rain*, praises it: “*40 Patchtown* is evocative, haunting, told with page-turning momentum, and reveals an insider's understanding of the societal complexities that keep miners returning to the earth's dark underbelly. Damian Dressick, a talented and thoughtful writer, is the freshest voice to come out of Appalachia since Wiley Cash arrived on the literary scene.”

***Privilege Lost: Who Leaves the Upper Middle Class and How They Fall* (Oxford U. Press), Jessi Streib**

This book is not about working-class life, but rather about the legitimate fears of falling in the upper middle class and an exploration of how, despite enormous advantages, about half experience some form of downward mobility. *Privilege Lost* traces patterns of how upper-middle-class young people identify their “inherited resources” with resulting levels of class reproduction or downward mobility. In doing so, Jessi Streib reveals both strengths and weaknesses in professional middle-class culture that often contrast with strengths in working-class life and culture. According to the publisher, the book reveals “the complicated choices youth make between staying true to themselves and staying in their class position. Engaging and eye-opening, *Privilege Lost* brings to life the stories of the downwardly mobile and highlights what they reveal about class, privilege, and American family life.”



**Mill Town: Reckoning with What Remains (St. Martin's Press), Kerri Arsenault**



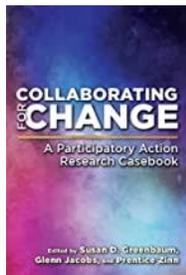
Though not due out until this September, Kerri Arsenault's exploratory return to her hometown of Mexico, Maine, is ginning up anticipation with an impressive list of endorsements. Mexico is a rural paper mill town, population about 5,000 when Arsenault was growing up there, now just over 2,000. What Emily Raboteau calls "a tender howl about the graveyard of industry," the publisher promises: "a portrait of a community that illuminates not only the ruin of her hometown and the collapse of the working-class of America, but also the hazards of both living in and leaving home, and the silences we are all afraid to violate. In exquisite prose, Arsenault explores . . . what it's like to come from a place you love but doesn't always love you back."

**Motherwell: a girlhood (Weidenfeld & Nicolson), Deborah Orr**

This memoir centers on the relationship between Deborah Orr and her mother Win, who Orr describes as "having very little agency in the world [as] every choice was determined by the men in her life" and "strangely, she wanted the same for her daughter." Attending university "wasn't for the likes of us," Win counseled, but worse, she saw Deborah's leaving to go as a betrayal of her, her family, and her community in Motherwell, Scotland. The publisher promises: "a sharp, candid and often humorous memoir about the long shadow that can be cast when the core relationship in your life compromises every effort you make to become an individual. It is about what we inherit - the good and the very bad - and how a deeper understanding of the place and people you have come from can bring you towards redemption."



**Collaborating for Change: A Participatory Action Research Casebook (Rutgers U. Press), edited by Susan Greenbaum, Glenn Jacobs, and Prentice Zinn**



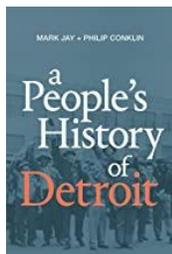
Chock full of stories about how collaborative research has played important roles in a variety of community-based struggles for social justice, *Collaborating for Change* shows how "democratizing research supports social change and heightens our understanding of complex social issues." It also reveals how participatory action research uncovers new knowledge and insight while also changing "the roles of researchers and those being researched." The collection includes a lead article by Betsy Leonard-Wright, "The Activist Class Cultures Project: Helping Activists Become More Class Inclusive."

**Invisible Americans: The Tragic Cost of Child Poverty (Knopf), Jeff Madrick**

Depending on how you measure it, one of four or one of five children in the U.S. lives in poverty versus one in ten in Germany or France and one in thirty in the Nordic countries. Economist Jeff Madrick argues: "Child poverty is lower in these nations not because the economy produces fewer poor people but because social policies are directed at supporting the poor more generously and efficiently than in the United States." And he shows how the U.S. could easily do the same. Janet Gornick praises not only Madrick's "devastating portrait of the nature and consequences of child poverty," but also how he "explains, with passion and precision, that the necessary policy instruments are known and tested. What is lacking in the United States, sadly, is the political will."



**A People's History of Detroit (Duke U. Press), Mark Jay and Philip Conklin**



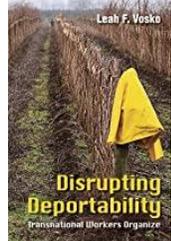
Recent gentrification and investment in downtown Detroit have some folks talking about Detroit's history as "a tale of two cities – one of wealth and development and another racked by poverty and racial violence." But Mark Jay and Philip Conklin tell a different story, one of "a single Detroit that operates according to capitalism's mandates." Using a class framework and putting Detroit's history in a global economic context, Jay and Conklin trace Motown's history from 1913 to the present – "from the rise of Fordism and the formation of labor unions, to deindustrialization and the city's recent bankruptcy."

**Shuggie Bain (Grove Press), Douglas Stuart**

*Shuggie Bain* follows the childhood of Hugh “Shuggie” Bain as he grows up in run-down public housing in 1990s Glasgow, Scotland. The story is positioned on the cusp of Glasgow’s notorious drug epidemic and during a time where Thatcher’s policies have left husbands and sons out of work. According to the publisher, a “heartbreaking story of addiction, sexuality, and love, *Shuggie Bain* is an epic portrayal of a working-class family that is rarely seen in fiction. Recalling the work of Édouard Louis, Alan Hollinghurst, Frank McCourt, and Hanya Yanagihara, it is a blistering debut by a brilliant novelist who has a powerful and important story to tell.”



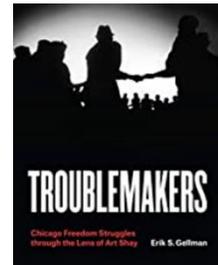
**Disrupting Deportability: Transnational Workers Organize (ILR Press), Leah Vosko**



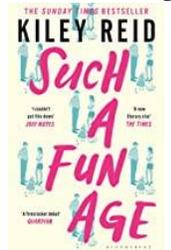
This case study of legally authorized temporary migrant farm workers in Canada reveals what is sometimes seen as a model program for migrant farmworkers is anything but. It tracks a decades-long legal and political battle by a group of Mexican migrants in British Columbia to establish a union for meaningful collective representation. Though not without successes, this battle was constantly disrupted and undermined by “modalities of deportability” like terminations without cause, blacklisting, and attrition. The ever-present threat of being deported, even when not often used, acts directly and indirectly to frustrate workers’ ability to engage in effective collective action that could improve their conditions.

**Troublemakers: Chicago Freedom Struggles through the Lens of Art Shay (U. of Chicago Press), Erik Gellman**

Historian Erik Gellman uses the photos of free-lance photographer Art Shay to weave a story of the immediate post-World War II decades in Chicago. Following Shay’s development as a photographer after 1948, the story crisscrosses labor union fights and black freedom movement struggles with political party machinations and anti-war protestors. Davarian Baldwin praises the book for introducing us to a “man and his lifelong mission to sidestep the polite halls of governance and focus his lens on the back rooms, honky-tonks, picket lines, and storefronts where democracy was made in the streets.” Alex Kotlowitz calls it “an exhilarating lens through which to view one city’s struggle for justice.”



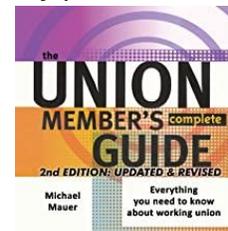
**Such a Fun Age (G.P. Putnam's Sons), Kiley Reid**



Kiley Reid’s debut novel is a story about race, class, and transactional relationships that follows the 25-year-old Emira Tucker, a young black woman working two part-time jobs in Philadelphia, and her white employer, Alix Chamberlain. Emira is accused of kidnapping the child whom she babysits. “Reid constructs a plot so beautifully intricate and real and fascinating that readers will forget it’s also full of tough questions about race, class and identity....With this entertaining novel, Reid subverts our notions of what it means to write about race and class in America, not to mention what it means to write about love. In short, it’s a great way to kick off 2020.” —*Washington Post*

**Welcome to the Union by Michael Mauer; The Union Member’s Complete Guide, 2nd edition by Michael Mauer; and I Just Got Elected – Now What? A New Union Officer’s Handbook, 3rd edition by Bill Barry (Hard Ball Press)**

Whether you are a union member or a new union leader, there’s help available from Hardball Press’ “Power Tools for Union Building” series. Hardball authors have recently updated classic labor education materials to reflect current circumstances and to encourage “organizing model” unions and social movement unionism. From the role of the steward to the legal and financial obligations of the union, and to union members’ rights as workers and as members, these power tools are valuable guides to organizing better unions.



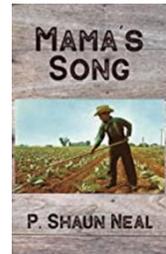
**Recollections of My Nonexistence: A Memoir (Granta), Rebecca Solnit**



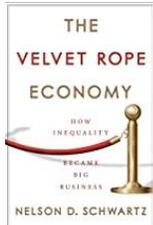
The author of *Men Explain Things to Me*, Rebecca Solnit’s memoir centers on her life as a young writer in San Francisco in the 1980s and how “she began to come to terms with the epidemic of violence against women around her, the street harassment that unsettled her, and the authority figures that routinely disbelieved her.” In the current Me Too moment, the publisher promises “an electric account of the pauses and gains of feminism in the past forty years.” Barbara Ehrenreich says, “There’s a new feminist revolution - open to people of all genders - and Rebecca Solnit is one of its most powerful voices.”

**Mama's Song (Bottom Dog Press), P. Shawn Neal**

P. Shaun Neal's story follows Colby Grayson as he comes of age in his rural community in eastern Kentucky. After the death of his father, a 13-year-old Colby is tasked with supporting his family in a place where "hardship was more than tolerated, where it was expected and accepted." Joe Anthony, author of *A Wounded Snake*, calls *Mama's Song* a "finely written epic coming-of-age story [where] young Colby learns the difference between self-reliance and isolation, between his father's solitary strength and his mother's collapsing stoicism. P. Shaun Neal's story, labored on for years and dedicated to revelation of a people and a land, builds to a dramatic and unforgettable climax."



**The Velvet Rope Economy: How Inequality Became Big Business (Doubleday), Nelson Schwartz**



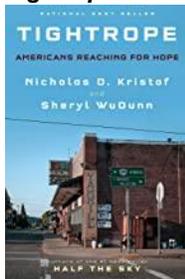
It will not surprise Working-Class Studies scholars that in "every realm of daily life--from health care to education, highways to home security--there is an invisible velvet rope that divides how Americans live." But this book hopes to surprise us by revealing just how innovative businesses have become in exploiting that divide by "shifting services away from the masses and finding new ways to profit by serving the privileged." The author, Nelson Schwartz, has been a business reporter for *The New York Times* since 2007.

**Quilt Life (Bottom Dog Press), Cindy Bosley**

"The poems in Cindy Bosley's *Quilt Life* are constructed from the fabric of woman—body and soul and heart. Sensual and lush, the language ranges from the everyday—"I fell in love with Father Paul at Sunday mass when I was nine" to the surreal—"My breasts are fat, lipsticked ladies from / the opera: year after year they sing each other//their most famous arias." *Quilt Life* takes you into a dry, dusty Middle America and verdant tropics in poems of mystery and longing, desertion and death, poverty and grief. But these are also poems of fortitude, resilience, courage, and faith in love and the things that matter." – Diane K. Martin, author of *Cry and Hue: Poems*



**Tightrope: Americans Reaching for Hope (Knopf), Nicholas Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn**



These well-known authors anchor their nationwide investigation of the rural American working class in the lives of children with whom Nicholas Kristof shared a school bus growing up in Yamhill, Oregon – "an area that prospered for much of the twentieth century but has been devastated in the last few decades as blue-collar jobs disappeared." They discover that one out of four kids on that bus died as adults from drugs, alcohol, suicide, and reckless accidents, and that this is not unrepresentative of other places they visited in Oklahoma and New York, Virginia and the Dakotas. Along with photographs by Lynsey Addario, *Tightrope*, in the words of Sarah Smarsh, is an "exaltation of the common person's voice, bearing expert witness to troubles that selfish power has wrought."

**Family Portrait with Scythe: Poems (Bottom Dog Press), James Owens**

"James Owens' stunning valediction, both for and forbidding mourning, slices with steely memory to the 'wet bone.' Stumbling with a boy's 'ignorant gravity,' Owens cannot right the 'unbalanced accounts' of his miner father's sooty lungs, his parents' exhausted marriage—nor his own professed failings. Yet his keen eye in and of the natural world does lead to the scales balanced, if precariously—in belonging 'on the brief earth,' in parsing spring from grief, in 'the good story of the body' whose light becomes 'the shine of spirit.' A master poet works this crescent blade, a master who embraces life's whole catastrophe as equally as he farewells it past." – Linda Parsons, author of *This Shaky Earth*

