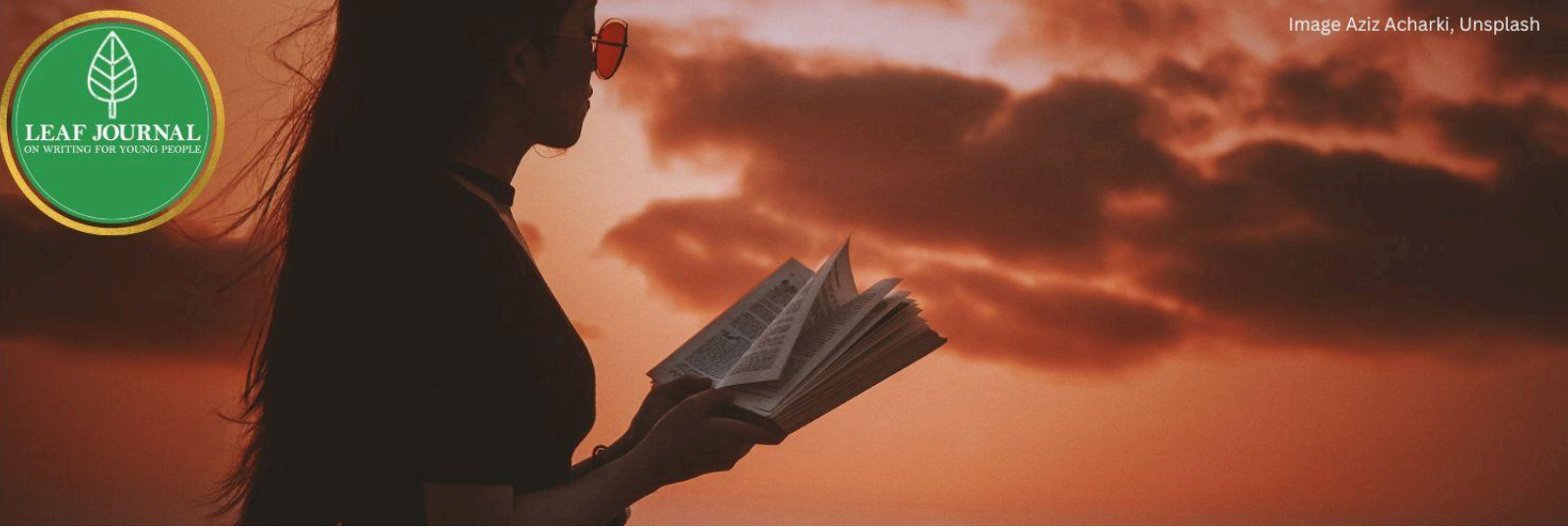

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Crossing the Class Divide

Joanna Nadin

Abstract
In an era of #OwnVoices, how can a writer for young people, whose own class identity is blurred at best, articulate class authentically and usefully? Dr Joanna Nadin examines shifting class structure in the UK today, her own identity as a writer from a lower-middle-class background, and how a lifetime of straddling the divide between working-class and middle-class Essex has shaped her MG and YA fiction.

Keywords: *Social Class*

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Introduction

'Each decade we shiftily declare we have buried class,' wrote Richard Hoggart, 'yet each decade the coffin stays empty.'[1] That was in 1989, but it holds true even now, more than three decades on. Class remains a British preoccupation; for some of us, an obsession. We are still, I believe, living in what George Orwell called 'the most class-ridden country under the sun'[2].

In this paper I'm going to look at my own relationship to class, how that manifests in my writing for young people, and why it matters.

'Common'

In the book *Noblesse Oblige*, Nancy Mitford ponders the concept of 'U and non-U' speech – that is, pertaining to the upper class – whereby 'toilet paper' is non-U for 'lavatory paper'; 'sweet' is non-U for 'pudding'; and 'greens' non-U for vegetables.[3]

My mother was as vigorous as Mitford in her policing of speech, and as baffling, dividing everything from hairstyles to desserts into categories of 'Common' and 'Not Common'.

- High ponytails? Common.
- Low ponytails: Not Common.
- A slice of Kelly's ice cream: Not Common.
- Wall's Viennetta: Common.
- Knickerbocker Glories: Common with knobs on, otherwise known as 'notions' i.e. they think they're fancy so are therefore worse than common.

These, what Ferdinand Mount calls 'shibboleths',[4] dogged my childhood, and kept me on a tightrope, or a high wall, below which lurked the working-class life into which my mother was terrified I might tumble or, worse, try to jump. A life she had, you see, managed to escape.

She came from rural poverty – a small village in Cornwall whence came tales of outside lavs and walking miles to school with the fronts of shoes chopped off to 'get another year out of them'. But she had elevated herself, marrying into my father's decidedly middle-class family, assuring a station in life above the one my mother was used to.

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[1] Hoggart, R. (1989), introduction to Orwell G. *The Road to Wigan Pier*, London: Penguin (p. vii)
[2] Orwell, G. (2004), 'The Lion and the Unicorn' in *Why I Write*, London: Penguin (p. 29)
[3] Mitford, N. (1960), *Noblesse Oblige*, Harmondsworth: Penguin (p. 39)
[4] Mount, F. (2005) *Mind the Gap*, London: Short Books

And yet, still she could not shake class off. It was, as I have written since, as if it were 'dirt, or, worse, nits: it rubbed off, was catching.'[5] Perhaps because, despite moving away from that particular working-class community, we ended up living right next to another. So close to it in fact, that it was all too easy to mistake us for one of 'them'. So that, as Lynsey Hanley puts it, while she'd 'rescind[ed her] old passport and learn[ed] a new language',[6] she'd emigrated to the wrong place.

Border

We lived in a small town in North Essex. Not in the pretty Georgian and Edwardian centre, but on the very edge – on a sixties sprawl of semis that spanned the gap between the monied 'old town' and the council estate. Our road was, effectively, the frontier: on our side – privately owned three-beds, on the other, council-owned three-beds and two-bed flats. They all had gardens. We, most of us, had cars. To my childish eye we lived the same lives, going to the same schools, and all shopping at Budgens, the Co-op, International.

And yet that line in the road, down the centre of Harvey Way, was mirrored by one my mother drew for me, which told me who I was to be friends with, and who not. Who I might emulate, and who not.

I was not, for example, allowed to play with Dean Foster whose dad went banger racing, which in 1978 seemed to me the peak of glamour but to my mother was peak 'common'. Nor was I to get any ideas about Cheryl Gresham's Farrah Fawcett haircut, which had decided 'notions'.

I was, however, allowed to visit a boy called Richard Corbett, whose dad had a company car and whose mother was, like mine, a housewife. This despite the fact he showed me his willy on several occasions and once did a poo in his own back garden, which he presented to me with pride. But no matter, he was middle-class. He lived in a detached new build. His father had barbecues.

Our next-door neighbours, Ron and Hilda Liversage, were also to be tolerated on grounds of proximity but I was not to get any ideas about their accents (Northern and therefore common), their fibreglass goldfish pond (common), or their colour-changing frond lamp (notions).

This sense of being pulled between two places, of walking a dividing line, has defined my life and dictated a tract of my career as well – the awareness that there is a game to be played, but that the rules are being constantly rewritten, and nuances added. Because of course it wasn't just about money. Nor was it, I found when I hit sixth form, merely something my mother had invented.

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[5] Nadin, J. (2021) *The Talk of Pram Town*, London: Mantle (p. 128)
[6] Hanley, L. (2016) *Respectable: Crossing the Class Divide*, London: Penguin (p. x)

Cultural capital

As the whole shibboleth obsession suggests, moving up a class wasn't just about owning our home rather than renting. Nor was it solely about who you knew – not even avoiding Dean could save me at sixth form. Because, to press Pierre Bourdieu[7] into service, economic and social capital are only two sides of the class triangle; the third is cultural capital. And, oh boy, did I lack that.

Yes, I grew up with a few books, and a strict list of prohibitions on TV – no soaps, no ITV, nothing American. But my mother and father, lacking higher education themselves, perhaps, hadn't thought to expand my cultural capital in other ways. I found this out to my detriment and public humiliation.

Karl Marx, it turns out, is not one of the Marx Brothers. An easy mistake to make when you're studying both Brecht and *Duck Soup* for drama A level, I can tell myself now. But at sixteen I wanted the floor of the theatre to swallow me.

At university the gaps in my knowledge were revealed as chasms. Worse, in a whole new game, in my left-leaning drama department, the forfeit wasn't being working-class. In fact, the opposite. One had to be either working-class and preferably Northern, or from a whole new category that, given my lack of cultural capital, I wasn't aware existed: bohemian. The kind of people who ate lentils and put up CND posters and knew, without checking, who Emily Davison was.

The worst of all results was to be revealed as middle-class, specifically lower middle-class and southern. Even more specifically: an Essex Girl.

This 'insult' should be no more than what novelist and Essex girl Sarah Perry describes as a 'glancing blow'.[8] I know that. And yet it dogs me. Taunts me. Along with that tightrope my mother set up, perhaps because of that tightrope my mother set up, it has affected my life at every stage.

I am one of Hoggart's 'uprooted and anxious'.[9] Anxious both that I might, underneath the veneer of respectability, be 'common', and, conversely (and somehow worse) that I am actually nothing but middle-class – one of the new bland masses, and as such, mockable all over again.

A worry that is borne out by the most recent class 'census'.

Class

There have been several attempts to delineate class, with varying and occasionally terrifying strata. But the largest and most recent is the version developed for the 2013 Great British Class Survey,[10] which extends to seven.

This system is, in theory, fairly accurate because, building on Bourdieu, it takes into account social and cultural capital. It asks who we hang out with – solicitors or call

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[7] Bourdieu, P. (1986) 'The Forms of Capital' in Richardson, J. *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, Westport, CT: Greenwood (pp. 241-58)
[8] Perry, S. (2020) *Essex Girls*, London: Serpent's Tail (p.15)
[9] Hoggart, R. (1998), *The Uses of Literacy*, New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers. (p. 224)
[10] (ibid)

centre workers – and what we do for leisure – museums and galleries, sports, Facebook – as well as how much we earn, how much our house is worth, and whether or not we have a pension. And it literally asks all of this via the handy BBC Class Calculator.[11]

So how do I come out?

Big sigh of relief from my mother: I am middle-class. If only technically rather than established.

Interestingly, when I used my pre-pandemic earnings, I went up a rung to established middle-class. When I ignored the pension I can't actually access and will likely be worth pittance, I went down to 'new affluent worker'. But no amount of fiddling the figures, or the fact that I number several posties among my friends, can make me working class. Not even losing my job and putting universal credit in the income box can do that. And certainly not eating a knickerbocker glory.

So how, as a writer, do I write about class, if I'm middle-class? Can I only write stories set in Islington or leafy suburbs? Does everyone have to eat sourdough? Wear Boden? Shop at Waitrose?

Of course I could avoid all this by ignoring the question of class entirely.

But wouldn't I be doing readers a disservice? Pretending that class doesn't exist or doesn't matter when it clearly does. Whatever we might wish, it affects how children and teenagers see themselves. Worse, it affects how others see them, and thus it affects their life chances.

And, on top of that, don't we write about what obsesses us? Don't we write about what confuses us to help us make sense of it?

Writing Class

For almost everything I publish, from Middle Grade through YA to adult, class is at its heart.

My first YA series, the *Rachel Riley* diaries[12], is a seven-book epistolary retelling of my own childhood in Essex, complete with a mother who obsessed over what was and wasn't common. The same mother who makes an appearance in two forthcoming YA novels, *My Teeth in Your Heart*,[13] and *Birdy Arbuthnot's Year of 'Yes'*.[14]

In *Eden*,[15] working-class Seamus masquerades as middle-class James in order to seduce private-school-educated Beatrice.

In *Undertow*,[16] Peckham girl Billie inherits her estranged grandmother's estate in Cornwall – estranged because her mother turned her back on her own class and ran off with a fairground worker.

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[11] BBC (2013) *The Great British class Calculator*. Accessed September 2023. Accessible at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/special/2013/newsspec_5093/index.stm
[12] Nadin, J. (2007-2012) *The Rachel Riley Diaries*, Oxford: OUP
[13] Nadin, J. (2024a), *My Teeth in Your Heart*, Lancaster, UCLan
[14] Nadin, J. (2025), *Birdy Arbuthnot's Year of 'Yes'* (working title), Lancaster, UCLan
[15] Nadin, J. (2014a), *Eden*, London: Walker Books
[16] Nadin, J. (2014b), *Undertow*, London: Walker Books

In *Wonderland*,[17] it's Jude's mother who has married beneath her – to a farmer – leaving Jude to teeter between classes.

Everybody Hurts[18] portrays the star-crossed relationship between middle-class Sophia and working-class Matt. This was written jointly with another writer who bridges the class divide: Anthony McGowan, raised in working-class Leeds, but now living in Hampstead, and married, in his words, 'up'.

In my middle-grade books, snobbish grandmothers are a theme. *No Man's Land*[19] features 'Horrible Nan' – whom protagonists Alan and Sam fear they may be sent to when war arrives, while *The Incredible Billy Wild*'s[20] demon is 'Other Nan', obsessed with bowels and the Bible. In *White Lies, Black Dare*,[21] Asha's mother has moved to Essex to escape the taint of class from Peckham, a 'taint' Asha revels in.

A Calamity of Mannerings[22] views class through a feminist lens and a historical one, investigating the effects of the law of entail on young women in the 1920s, albeit comically. Sharing a premise with Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* – the disinheritance of three sisters – it adds the ogre-like Grandmother, whose own 'common' and 'not common' lists baffle and torment the girls.

Its sequel[23] is set in Soho at the turn of the sixties, just a year after Harold Macmillan declared class 'dead'. The novel explicitly rails against the concept of class, while acknowledging its ubiquity. Through the eyes and voice of middle-class narrator Birdy, it asks whether the alleged meritocracy of art and theatre might actually offer a classless nirvana, even if the rest of England works against it:

> Here, in this pocket of promise, class, inheritance, wealth seems not to exist. Or rather not to matter, as long as you are different and interesting. 'Class is dead, haven't you heard?' I told him. 'Macmillan said so.'
>
> 'Macmillan's an idiot,' Harry replied.
>
> [Nadin, 2025]

Birdy's paramour, Harry – himself a working-class evacuee adopted by the aristocratic Mannerings – explicitly rails against this concept:

> 'Listen to me for once, little brother.'
>
> Jack began to unbuckle his belt – I didn't know where to look, so just carried on staring.
>
> 'It doesn't stop you fighting the war. Use your privilege. Do something good with it.'

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[17] Nadin, J. (2014c), *Wonderland*, London: Walker Books
[18] Nadin, J. and McGowan, A. (2017), *Everybody Hurts*, London: Atom
[19] Nadin, J. (2020), *No Man's Land* (Lancaster: UCLan)
[20] Nadin, J. (2017), *The Incredible Billy Wild*, London: Little, Brown
[21] Nadin, J. (2016), *White Lies, Black Dare*, London: Little, Brown
[22] Nadin, J. (2023), *A Calamity of Mannerings*, Lancaster: UCLan
[23] Nadin, J. (2025), *Birdy Arbuthnot's Year of Yes* (working title), Lancaster: UCLan

[Nadin, 2025]

Unsure where he belongs anymore, Harry tries to 'pass' as working-class, and fails. It's his brother, Jack, fully assimilated, who offers a solution. And what does Harry do? He writes about it.

As do I. I write about the divide – about teetering between sides or shifting across them and how possible that is. In all these books I also write in first person, present tense.

Previously, I hadn't thought of this as significant in any other way than I write mainly adolescents, for whom the world is limited to the now, and to them at the centre of it.[24] But Lynsey Hanley, ploughing a similar furrow to mine in her examination of the class divide, *Respectable*, conjures up the 1950s socio-linguist, Basil Bernstein, who observed that working-class speech tends to focus on acts happening now, or describes acts in the past as if they are happening now.[25]

It also, she reports, tends to the fragmentary – jumps around, fails to see the bigger picture. Middle-class speech, in contrast, uses past tense, and tends to contextualise events in a larger narrative. In other words, it assumes authority. Bernstein attributed this to the contrast between formal and informal language. Hanley takes it further – the middle-class, she says, are able to translate events into a 'security of the self'.[26] A security that, as I've described, I tend to lack.

Now that I know this, I'm even more thrilled that I've often given this 'insecure' diction to all my characters, regardless of class. They retell as much as possible in present tense, and veer off at myriad tangents – reflecting my own speaking patterns and habits. I like to think of it as my own act of rebellion. And a bit of a two-finger salute to Philip Pullman.

In his essay, 'The Classical Tone' in *Daemon Voices*, Pullman laments the 'hectic style of the incessant present tense'[27], and suggests its recent ubiquity in children's books may be down to the influence of television.[28]

I wonder if it isn't more that more authors (though not yet enough) are lower-middle or working-class, or at least consume more working-class culture and narratives. And that Pullman, though he might not admit or even realise it, is dismissing us as 'common'.

Conclusion

The fact is, I am common, or at least partially so. But I now embrace that class divide rather than deny it; I accept and acknowledge that I am lower middle-class, though less precariously than my mother worried she might be.

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[24] Nadin, J. (2024b), *The Future of the Self*, London: Melville House
[25] Hanley, L. (2016) *Respectable: Crossing the Class Divide*, London: Penguin (p. 39)
[26] (ibid)
[27] Pullman, P. (2017) *Daemon Voices*, Oxford: David Fickling Books (p242)
[28] ibid

I will still have to look up what on earth a 'gaudy' is when an author friend who went to Oxford mentioned she's returning to hers. I will still have to use YouTube to learn how to pronounce Bourdieu.

But I am finding it interesting rather than embarrassing now to live in the 'middle'. To teeter between sides of the road, sides of my family. I have still not plucked up the courage to walk into a seaside café and order a knickerbocker glory. My excuse, though, is firmly middle-class: I'm lactose intolerant rather than merely, like my mother, snobbishly intolerant.

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Author Biography

Prof Joanna Nadin is an Associate Professor in Creative Writing at the University of Bristol, where her research focuses on fiction exploring issues of self and identity, particularly relating to class. She is the *Sunday Times* bestselling author of more than 90 books for children and young people, including the *Worst Class in the World* series (Bloomsbury), *A Calamity of Mannerings* (UCLan, 2023), and *Joe All Alone* (Little Brown, 2014), which is now a BAFTA-winning BBC drama. She has been a World Book Day author, an Empathy Lab pick, nominated for the Carnegie medal four times, and

shortlisted for the Roald Dahl Funny Prize and the Lollies amongst many others.