

Clever Girls

“*Clever Girls* is a powerful, intergenerational meditation on character formation and how it is shaped by class, race and gender. Its first-hand accounts are fascinating, sometimes shocking in the ways in which women have had to struggle, and always thought-provoking.”

—Bernadine Evaristo, *author of Girl, Woman, Other, shortlisted for the 2019 Booker Prize*

“In this book Dr Jackie Goode has provided a platform from which the reader witnesses the powerful voices of a group of women, identified at a young age as ‘Clever Girls’, telling stories of their intersecting experiences of class, gender, and race set against temporal and cultural contexts from the post-war period to the present. The book is a collective autoethnography which captures the complexities, ambiguities, paradoxes, joys, and celebrations that will engage and inform women of all ages and stages.”

—Kim Etherington, *University of Bristol, UK*

“By turns brilliant, moving, uplifting, harrowing, shocking—these stories of intrepid cleverness amongst girlhoods positioned by the Othernesses of class, gender and ethnicity, are hugely important for understanding the complex landscapes of today. A must-read that will inspire you to begin your own autoethnography.”

—Valerie Walkerdine, *Cardiff University, UK*

“An urgent and extraordinary book! The vibrancy of the autoethnographic accounts together with the methodological rigour and theoretical sophistication hold together that which is so often rendered apart in academic writings: ‘experience-near’ accounts of situated lives along with analytic nuance.”

—Gail Lewis, *Birkbeck, University of London, UK*

“These contributors’ accounts show the very best of what autoethnography can do: incisive, moving, and brave, they show the reader the complex ways in which relations of inequality are experienced and how history is lived on the ground.”

—Steph Lawler, *The University of York, UK*

Jackie Goode
Editor

Clever Girls

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and Ethnicity

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Editor

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Preface

Her mother's face lost something of its smile.

'Oh, my darling!' she exclaimed in sudden flattened tones, 'don't go and get a reputation for being *clever*, whatever you do. People do dislike that sort of thing so much in a girl'. (*Consequences*. E.M. Delafield)

All research contains the autobiographical. Even if we don't think of our own lives as the major impetus behind our academic enquiries, we inevitably bring all of our past, current and imagined future selves into our research encounters and activities. These take centre stage in autoethnography, a form of inquiry that mines personal experience for its potential to illuminate broader social, cultural and economic issues. Arising from those transitions in my own life—from my working-class girlhood and attendance at a primary school in one of the 'roughest' parts of town to acquiring a doctorate in sociology and a 'late' career as an academic researcher—the subject of social class formed the starting points for this diverse set of autoethnographies which collectively explore lived experiences of classed, gendered and racialised subjectivity.

Bringing up a young family in the immediate post-war period, my parents wanted 'better' for me and my older sisters than their own lives had brought. My sisters were 'war babies'. The eldest can remember hiding under the table when the air-raid sirens sounded. And when she started school, the maps on the classroom walls were coloured pink to

show the extent of the British Empire. I used to think I could remember the war too but that was probably due to Sunday afternoons spent watching black and white (but mostly white) television films full of the triumphs of stiff upper lip (male) derring-do, like *Bridge over the River Kwai* and *The Dambusters*, which were shown for years after the war ended, engendering what Marianne Hirsch calls ‘postmemory’. A common thread through biographical interviews I conducted recently with men in their sixties and early seventies was a description of life in the 1950s as constrained by post-war austerity and the stifling values of the previous generation, represented in their memories as a generalised ‘greyness’. I don’t remember my early life in the fifties that way.

As a young child, the boundaries of my life extended only as far as the newly built council flat I grew up in above my father’s newly built butcher’s shop (where I played ‘shop’ myself, equipping my dolls with newly obsolete ration-book coupons), my solo bus-ride to the newly built primary school and the classrooms and playgrounds where my official education began. None of this seemed grey. Or pink, for that matter. And by the time I was old enough to apprehend the quality of a more public and political life beyond those parameters, everything had changed again and the drabness my interviewees alluded to had given way to the bright colours of the ‘swinging sixties’ in a world that was expanding in all sorts of exciting and optimistic ways.

Lacking the resources to imagine and plan for alternative futures and equipped only with what they have known and learnt, parents are fated to prepare the children who will leave them behind for a world that is already disappearing. For ‘upwardly mobile’ children of working-class parents, there is a double estrangement. By the time I became an independent young professional at the beginning of the 1970s, I had left so much behind. Olden days. Olden (working-class) ways. That being so, the quotation above from *Consequences*, written in 1919 by Edmée Elizabeth Monica de la Pasture, upper-class daughter of a Count and better known as author E.M. Delafield, couldn’t possibly have any resonance for me, could it?

A story: There was a boy in my class at grammar school called Keith Whittaker. He was often top of the class but he wasn’t one of ‘our’ boys—the Arts lot who sat around during breaks performing our emergent selves

to our own little group audience, trying to impress each other with witty conversation laced with literary allusions. For a period, one boy and I spent every lunch time doing this—sitting opposite each other on top of the desks, quoting Oscar Wilde, engaging in deep philosophical debates, creating a competitive and amusing mutual admiration society. And then we didn't anymore because he started going out with another girl who was way ahead of me in the dating game. Infatuated with my English teacher as I was at the time and thrilled when my contributions in class clearly delighted him, I guess I'd been unconsciously practising with a more attainable potential object of desire. Sadly, by the time I caught up with my peers, my verbal and intellectual skills didn't seem to work on any of the boys I actually desired. We might laugh and joke, these boys and I, but they never asked me out. Especially Phil. Phil especially never asked me out. Should I stop trying to be so 'clever'? Was that the problem? From an accretion of such mundane early experiences are gender regimes made and (heterosexual) subjectivities formed.

In *The Stuart Hall Project* by John Akomfrah, Hall refers to subjectivity as an endless unfinished conversation, one that touches upon unspeakable stories, narratives of culture and history and lives that might have been lived but weren't. No single thing, whether class or national position, geographic or grandparents' origins can any longer suffice as a definition of who one is, he says—which is what is behind the frequently posed question of where one is from. It is a question posed to some more than others, of course, as Afua Hirsch illustrates in *BRIT(ish), on Race, Identity and Belonging*, in which she embarks on what Deborah Levy describes as integral to a female writer's project: the task of 'unknotting the ways in which she has been put together by the Societal System'. In the first part of her autobiography, Levy writes, 'It's exhausting to learn how to become a subject'. She writes about her father being taken away when she was five and imprisoned for his anti-apartheid activism. She writes about his unexpected return three years later. Her mother tells her and her brother not to be shy, to just be themselves. 'We nodded gravely', she writes, 'and went off to practise being ourselves'. She writes that women are 'cursed with the desire not to be disappointing'.

In the early days of that ever-unfinished conversation of subjectivity, I learnt from boys that I was disappointing. But I also learnt from teachers

that I was clever enough to go to university. Once there, I practised being myself. I practised not being disappointing. After that, I did a post-graduate professional qualification and got a job. I met a man there. We married. We had children. Some years later I went to a school reunion. Phil was there. He did a double-take as we introduced ourselves. We chatted amiably about our respective young families. As I was leaving, he asked for my number. I disappointed him. Again. By the next reunion, with my children at school and having resumed my professional career, I wore the mantle of the middle-class subject with practised ease. I started a conversation with another man. I hadn't known him very well at school, but he remembered me. 'Oh yes', he said 'you were the sort of girl-version of Keith Whittaker'. What did that mean? One of the clever ones, he explained. Single again in later life, several men tell me they find 'bright' women like me desirable. I begin to see it coming. It's not hard to spot. They are not subtle. So, do you have a PhD then, they ask admiringly. 'I love your mind', one tells me. Now my mind seems to have become an object of desire. Desirable/undesirable. Attainable/unattainable. Success/failure. Wins. Losses. How complicated it can be for clever girls.

Via a Master's degree in Education followed by a one-day 'Women's History' workshop when my children were small, I 'met' other 'clever girls' like me, through the accounts they had written about their experiences of making similar transitions from working-class backgrounds into academic careers. As scholars like Carolyn Steedman, Valerie Walkerdine and Gail Lewis, all contributors to Liz Heron's *Truth, Dare or Promise: girls growing up in the Fifties*, entered the academy they began to change the canon and the curriculum to take account of what they knew, by recognising the importance of deconstructing monolithic notions like class and attending to the intersections of class, gender and race in the formation of subjectivities and in the constitution and reproduction of structural inequality. But this didn't all happen at once. Feminist scholars challenged notions of class that excluded women's experiences; queer theorists, women of colour and working-class women challenged straight, white middle-class feminists' exclusion of their experiences; the concept of intersectionality became a tool to examine how different forms of structural inequality co-exist and dynamically interact; and post-colonial and critical race theorists highlighted the need to bring crucial *historical*

perspectives to bear to recognise the ways in which the economic system itself which had formed the basis of traditional theorisations of class is not only gendered but has always been deeply racialized.

Writing about the lived experiences of these developments continues a line in British scholarship on class and culture (and later on gender, race, sexuality and disability) that began with Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* and progressed through Liz Heron's collection, Heidi Safia Mirza's *Young, Female and Black*, Bev Skeggs' *Formations of Class and Gender* and Pat Mahony & Christine Zmroczek's *Class Matters* to Valerie Walkerdine and colleagues' *Growing Up Girl*. This collection builds on the tradition established by these writers. Class may have been its *starting point*, but through both its theorising and its autoethnographic contributions, it examines how the processes of production of classed, gendered and racialized subjectivities are mutually constitutive. It does not explicitly examine intersections with disability or sexualities, although experiences of embodiment, formations of sexuality and mental health issues do figure in contributors' stories. In its scope, it goes some way towards answering Valerie Walkerdine's call for an approach which brings together the historical and cultural work of understanding the specificities of classed, gendered and racialized subjectivities in a variety of locations, the legacies of that experience into the present, the governance and disciplining of these subjects and communities across a specific historical period and how this works in the present.

It features members of my own generation and that of the women who followed us. How did we all experience growing up as what Walkerdine refers to as the 'complex and contradictory' nature of being a 'clever girl' (or does the path to recognising our own abilities continue to be a winding one?); and how do we experience it now as older, middle-aged and young women? Is there something peculiarly problematic about being clever and female? Are working-class women in particular susceptible to either 'Tall Poppy' or 'Imposter' Syndrome? Is this magnified for women of colour and/or of mixed heritage? Are we, to revive that New Labour mantra, 'all middle class now?' Or are some 'clever' younger women what Valerie Hey and Rosalyn George call 'dissident daughters', engaged in 'down classing' or questioning the efficacy, value and costs of higher education as a route to 'success'?

Would we agree with what Lauren Berlant calls ‘cruel optimism’—the idea that the promise of social mobility through individually achieved ‘betterment’ is a fantasy with the potential to harm us while maintaining the status quo? Or are we of necessity learning to become appropriate subjects of a neoliberal democracy? Is the very notion of ‘self’ in fact, as Bev Skeggs suggests, a bourgeois conceptualisation that stands in opposition to the working-class subject; or one whose unacknowledged foundations lie in constructs of race and sexuality formed through colonial science and Enlightenment philosophy, as Sita Balani suggests? Do we eschew all notions of ‘dependency’? Or is there evidence of valuing connection, including with those we may have ‘left behind’—in the UK and elsewhere—when we moved away? Are there still the kinds of tensions between class origins, intellectual ability and educational advancement that Richard Hoggart documented in relation to clever working-class *boys* of the post-war era? If so, how, when and where do such tensions manifest themselves? And how do we manage those moments when such tensions surface, either privately or publicly? The collection incorporates a temporal component, then, tracing continuities and change across generations through stories from the children of the Welfare State/Butler’s 1944 Education Act; Thatcher/Blair’s children; and Cameron/May/Johnson’s post-EU referendum/Trump-era children—at another moment of radical change.

The fifteen writers appearing here range in age from late twenties to early seventies. The worlds most of them were born into were quite different to that of my childhood and youth. Over the course of their lives, globalisation has created a very different landscape to the one that surrounded me in my formative years. Those who followed me grew up familiarising themselves with increasingly diverse intimate partnership and family arrangements; successive waves of feminism; vastly changed labour-market conditions, industrial relations and patterns of workplace participation in the wake of de-industrialisation; the arrival of the internet; repercussions from our colonial past brought to prominence by, among other things, the fate of some members of the ‘Windrush generation’¹; Celebrity Culture that appears to offer new routes from

¹ British citizens who came to the UK from the Commonwealth as children, following the Second World War (some, from the Caribbean, on the British ship the ‘Empire Windrush’ in 1948). Their

‘rags’ to ‘riches’; the uncovering of widespread sexual abuse; the #MeToo movement; the breakdown of the post-war settlement; government policies and reality television programmes that portray certain groups in ways that contribute to their ongoing vilification; gender fluidity and debates about identification and recognition; challenges to white people to check our privilege; the widespread use of social media, bringing new pressures with it, especially perhaps for young girls; and threats to the very survival of the planet. It’s unlikely that they’ll look back from their sixties and seventies and describe these times as grey in quite the same way as some of my male contemporaries did. It’s unlikely that their grandmothers were/are living in a tiny ‘two-up/two-down’ terraced cottage with a fireplace that needs black-leading, no bathroom and a shared toilet across the yard where torn-up squares of newspaper hang on a string. Indeed, their grandparents may not be resident in the UK.

So how did they fare, this diverse group of women whose beginnings in life were not privileged, but who *did* have the capacity to ‘succeed’ through the possession of the kind of capital that is supposedly highly valued within the education system. How did these clever younger women from relatively modest backgrounds experience finding their way in the world, finding love, ‘making it’ to middle-classdom? In telling their stories in a variety of creative but accessible ways, these UK-based contributors may have a distinctively ‘British’ accent (not inflected by the upper-class tones sometimes inferred from that epithet, but perhaps expressing grief, sadness, joy or other powerful emotions through irony or understatement or else by ‘speaking back’ to racist constructions of the justifiable anger Black subjects express). In relation to narrative theory, Ivor Goodson wonders whether ‘stories’ are too egalitarian, too inclusive, for an educational system that seeks to select and foster certain groups but not others. In response to this question, and in seeking to be inclusive of marginalised voices, this collection aims to appeal to *all* academic staff and students (including those from families which don’t have a long his-

right to stay was guaranteed by the Immigration Act of 1971, but they were forced under changes to immigration laws in 2012 to prove continuous residence in the UK since 1973, something that was almost impossible for many who had not kept detailed records. As a result, some were denied access to state healthcare and to housing, were made redundant from their jobs, threatened with deportation, detained, and in some cases wrongly deported and then refused re-entry to the UK.

tory of higher education), as well as to those not necessarily in higher education at all, whatever their nationality and wherever they currently reside. At the same time, as autoethnographies rather than other forms of ‘storying the self’, lived experience is viewed through an analytical lens, making clear at a time of increasing societal fragmentation, polarisation and inequality, the connections between what C. Wright Mills termed ‘personal troubles’ and ‘public issues’.

Through negotiating the changing terrain of the second half of the twentieth century and graduating to our current places in the ‘Brave New World’ of the twenty-first, we clever girls could be said in one sense to have fulfilled our parents’ aspirations. What was lost in the process and what found? Contributors’ stories focus on what is most salient for each of us at this time in relation to the formation of classed, gendered and racialized subjectivities. For all of us, getting to where we are involved ‘leaving home’ in more significant ways than those integral to simply reaching adulthood. My father never talked about ‘his war’ but there were phrases whose origins could be traced to that experience. ‘Forward my men, I’m behind you!’ he’d sometimes quip at cowardly or incompetent political leaders.² Or ‘Three steps forward, two steps back!’ when frustrations hit. Hints that life was characterised by struggling to achieve something against the odds. Particularly for ‘ordinary’ folk, subject to forces beyond their control, to the whims of the ‘powers that be’, to set-backs to what had seemed like achievable goals. As I was writing the proposal for this book, commemorations to mark a hundred years since the end of the first world ‘war to end all wars’ were taking place. At the same time, post-Second-World-War alliances aimed at establishing a lasting peace were under threat from the rise of far-right groups in the UK, Europe and the USA—events that would have been unimaginable to my parents as they looked forward to a world made safer for their daughters’ generation.

All parents want ‘better’ for their children as they find their own ways in life. I suspect that while we didn’t necessarily appreciate at the time the costs involved in the various transitions and transformations we were

²A cultural reference that lives on: on 27 March 2019, Guy Verhofstadt, the European Parliament’s representative in the Brexit negotiations, tweeted of Nigel Farage’s minimal participation in the ‘Leave’ march: ‘You remind me more & more of Field Marshal Haig in *Blackadder*, sitting safely in his office, while his people are walking in the cold & the rain’.

undertaking, we set off with some trepidation but also with hope for a brighter future. In these dangerous and uncertain times, in addition to the resources we have accumulated and deployed so effectively to get us this far, we all need more hope. Especially perhaps, my ‘younger sisters’ here who are still making their own ways in the world. I hope contributing to this collection gives them a boost on their travels. I hope the collection offers readers a greater understanding of the complex ways in which relations of classed, gendered and racialised inequalities are re/produced and experienced.

Loughborough, UK
July 2019

Jackie Goode

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Emily Green is a writer and English lecturer living in Cardiff and currently teaching at Weston College, Weston super Mare in the South West of England. She has an MA in Creative Writing and was shortlisted for both the Terry Hetherington and Robin Reeves Prize for Young Writers. Her fiction has appeared in anthologies and literary magazines.

Tracey Loughran is Reader in History at the University of Essex. She is a historian of twentieth-century Britain with particular interests in the interaction of ideas and experiences of body, mind and self. Her publications include *Shell Shock and Medical Culture in First World War Britain* (2017). In the pages of history books, she learnt that difference is a source of strength; that knowledge and creativity are the foundations of resilience; and that if you know where you come from, it's easier to see all the different places you might go and all the many ways you might get there.

Claire Mitchell is a Scotswoman who graduated from the University of Stirling with a BSc in Psychology and from the University of Strathclyde with an MSc in Clinical Health Psychology. Currently based in Glasgow, she works for the Brain Injury Rehabilitation Trust (BIRT) as a rehabilitation support worker. Her research interests are focused on neuropsychology and psychological wellbeing.

Kristin O'Donnell Her work focuses on the intersections of history, memory and art with a particular focus on the performativity of memory, embodiment, representation, identity and the politics of war commemoration. Previous research has explored the creation of early heritage sites and their role in identity formation in the nineteenth century, and the cultural memory of the 1984 Miners' Strike. She is working towards a PhD through an AHRC TECHNE NPIF funded studentship entitled 'Participatory Practices of Memory: Memorialising the Great War in Britain during the Centenary Moment' at the University of Brighton, in collaboration with Dover Arts Development. Kristin is passionate about social justice and has been appointed as a Cumberland Lodge scholar to support the work they do in relation to public engagement.

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Melanie Reynolds is a historian and an associate lecturer at Oxford Brookes University, specialising in women's working-class history. She has authored a number of articles on women's working-class history and these have appeared in many journals as well as the book *Infant Mortality and Working-Class Child Care, 1850–1899* with Palgrave Macmillan.

Motsabi Rooper was born in Brixton and raised there and in Camden. She studied International Development and Latin American studies at the University of Leeds before going on to work in Guatemala for four

years in the field of justice and human rights. Living there, she was struck by the similarities between its society and the stories her family had shared with her of South Africa under apartheid. She recently explored this in an MA at SOAS,¹ where she focussed on critical perspectives to International Relations and found her voice. Her research interests include the role of discourse in the repression of civic freedoms. Black feminism is one of the frameworks that helps her to make sense of the world.

Liz Thomas has now retired from a career in education in the UK and Kenya which included being a primary, secondary and tertiary teacher and completing an MA in Applied Linguistics before becoming a staff development officer and then assistant principal of an FE College. Later she set up a training business offering courses in educational management before spending the last twenty-five years of her career as a teacher educator at Nottingham Trent and Bedford universities. She is writing a memoir.

Sarah Ward is a counsellor and psychotherapist in private practice in the north of England. Prior to qualifying as a therapist, she worked as a qualitative social science researcher and in the voluntary sector in management and policy roles. Her writing takes the form of both poetry and prose, particularly focussing on memoir.

Christa Welsh is a MBACP accredited consultant psychotherapist, in private practice for over twenty years, specialising in presenting issues of Attachment and Intergenerational trauma. She has a background in researching and leading family development and psychosocial-education projects in the voluntary and charity sectors. She was awarded a Winston Churchill Research Fellowship for her educational activism in developing preventative and supportive models for teen parents in Europe and the USA. Her psychosocial performative research and writing is centred on the embodied experience of Black women of African ancestry, informed by Autoethnographic practice, Intersectionality and Womanism.

¹ The School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

Through her research, she examines the interwoven strands of racialised embodiment and the tension of otherness, in order to reveal other ways of knowing and knowledge production that challenge normative discourses.