

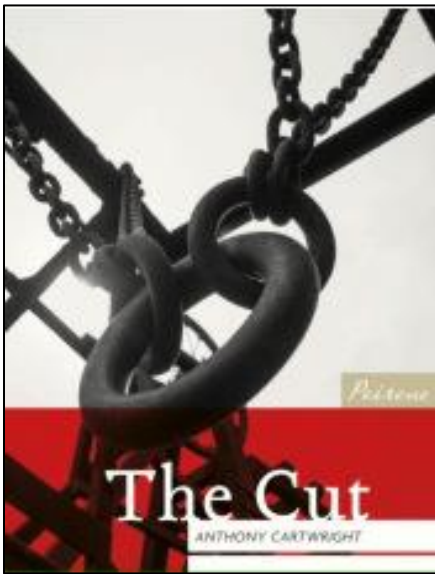
The Cut by Anthony Cartwright

Peirene Press, 2017

Divided We Fall

Just over a year ago, the UK awoke to the cataclysmic news that by a very narrow margin, the nation had voted to leave the EU. Released on the first anniversary of the Brexit referendum, *The Cut* by Anthony Cartwright was specially commissioned to tackle the deep divisions at the heart of British society today.

'He spoke of the weight of the past on the present, a sense of betrayal, of something undone, of retribution on some grand, futile scale.'



The town of Dudley in the Black Country forms the backdrop of the story. A former powerhouse of the industrial revolution, it is painted bleakly, with a depressing sense of lost identity amidst relentless modernisation. The ruins of a castle and engine house are the only reminders of its proud history, when people worked for the steel and coal industries with a sense of purpose that has gradually been erased.

Documentary maker Grace Trevithick, an academic's daughter from Hampstead, visits Dudley shortly before the referendum. She wants to interview ordinary people, 'conscious of saying ordinary people and all that might mean,' to find out why they are considering voting Leave. The reality, she discovers, is complex. She tries to be open-minded but her innate condescension proves difficult to shake off.

'She saw them as a bobbing, swaggering whole. She was struck by the state of their work clothes, ragged and dirty like something from an engraving of Victorian squalor.'

Grace's confidence and sense of entitlement sharply contrast with local man Cairo Jukes, an ageing boxer struggling to make ends meet. He works clearing old industrial sites to be replaced by new entertainment complexes, facing financial uncertainty on a zero-hours contract. Cairo is a deep thinker who doesn't easily fit into any convenient box. Grace is surprised by his eloquence and the two attempt to communicate without prejudice, forming an unexpected romantic bond.

The Cut highlights the different experiences of British citizens, offering a unique insight into alienated communities. There is a claustrophobic sense of being in the thick of the action, a tense immediacy heightened by the close third person narrative. The focus shifts frequently between different points of view, providing a glimpse inside the minds of the main characters.

Although they have things in common, the relationship between Cairo and Grace feels a little contrived. Brexit is too complex an issue to condense into a love story between two white English people on opposite sides. The referendum created a distorted sense of polarisation but how people voted was not simply dependent on privilege.

However, as a comment on the British class system, it is an insightful and revealing novel, exposing prejudice so ingrained it is rarely confronted or discussed. Class is the elephant in the room in the UK. People are casually judged based on their accent or the way they dress. Carefully laid out definitions aiming to protect people from discrimination do not extend to class. Victims are effectively silenced and powerless to defend themselves without the necessary vocabulary.

'All you people want to say is that it's about immigration. That we'm all racist. That we'm all stupid. You doh wanna hear that it's more complicated than that. It lets all of you lot off the hook. Never considered the problem might be you.'

Cairo is a particularly well drawn character, his intelligence and sensitivity proving attractive to Grace. He is deeply insulted when his interview on the news is subtitled, translating his accent into his own language, as if he is somehow 'foreign' in the country of his birth. Cairo fears that despite his keen insight, his opinion somehow doesn't really matter. He and his family are looked down upon, but worse is the sense that they may simply be ignored. 'If they talked about them at all' is a phrase that appears frequently in this story.

'And this is how it began, she supposed, prejudice on a scale of a whole country.'

At this year's National Writers' Conference, poet and academic Andrew McMillan of Liverpool John Moores University emphasised the need to focus more positively on the underrepresented in society.

'There must be an urgency, now, to help disenfranchised communities of all different types express their identity, to celebrate their history, to see themselves as belonging to part of a bigger picture, and this must include a refocusing on the working classes.'

The narrative of *The Cut* is sympathetic without being patronising. It is a book advocating dialogue with a message to look beyond the stereotypes and actually listen to people. This is a timely, challenging story exploring not just how Brexit came about but the social gulf it represents. Like the canal system referred to in the title that links Dudley to the rest of the UK, 'we are all connected', a theme of hope on which to build. This compelling and thought-provoking novel is essential reading for anyone wishing to better understand modern Britain.

About the publisher

Peirene Press is an award-winning boutique publishing house based in London. Great care is taken when choosing unique new works with the focus firmly on the merit of each publication and the talent of the writer.

About the reviewer

Becky Danks is a creative writer, book reviewer and dog lover. She recently won the City Writes competition for her short story *The Anniversary*. She is a judge of flash fiction for the Hysteria Writing Competition. She voted Remain. Follow her on Twitter: @BeckyD123. Website: www.beckydanks.com