



LEEDS
BECKETT
UNIVERSITY

Citation:

Shaw, K (2015) The Country and The City Redux: Mapping Contemporary Britain in Granta's 2013 "Best of Young British Novelists". *Journalism and Mass Communication*, 5 (11). pp. 584-592. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17265/2160-6579/2015.11.004>

Link to Leeds Beckett Repository record:

<https://eprints.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/id/eprint/3127/>

Document Version:

Article (Published Version)

Creative Commons: Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0

The aim of the Leeds Beckett Repository is to provide open access to our research, as required by funder policies and permitted by publishers and copyright law.

The Leeds Beckett repository holds a wide range of publications, each of which has been checked for copyright and the relevant embargo period has been applied by the Research Services team.

We operate on a standard take-down policy. If you are the author or publisher of an output and you would like it removed from the repository, please [contact us](#) and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.

Each thesis in the repository has been cleared where necessary by the author for third party copyright. If you would like a thesis to be removed from the repository or believe there is an issue with copyright, please contact us on openaccess@leedsbeckett.ac.uk and we will investigate on a case-by-case basis.



The Country and The City Redux: Mapping Contemporary Britain in *Granta*'s 2013 "Best of Young British Novelists"

Katy Shaw

Leeds Beckett University, Leeds, West Yorkshire, UK

Drawing upon the writings of British cultural critic Raymond Williams, this article examines a pervading concern with representations of the city and the countryside as political sites and wider symbols of contextual social and economic shifts in the *Granta* 2013 list of Best of Young British Novelists. The article argues that the 2013 *Granta* list examines Williams' legacy from a twenty-first century perspective, offering a range of fictions that represent the rapidly changing socio-political, cultural and economic landscapes of contemporary Britain. Through textual analysis and contextualized readings, it suggests that the novels featured on the 2013 list do not offer a purely pastoral view of Britain, but use the natural world as a platform to stage wider discussions regarding a range of present-day issues.

Keywords: *Granta*, contemporary literature, novel, writings, award, twenty-first century

The Country and The City

In 1973, British cultural critic Raymond Williams published a collection of essays called *The Country and The City* analysing images of the country and the city in British literature since the mid-sixteenth century. These writing unites to consider both the city and the countryside as both political sites and wider symbols of contextual social and economic shifts associated with capitalism in twentieth century Britain. Williams regards contrasts between the country and city as "one of the major forms in which we become conscious of a central part of our experience and of the crises of our society" (Williams, 1973, p. 289). As such, his essays mourn the passing of the pastoral and the perceived value of manual labour in the British countryside and suggest the need for a renewed focus on, and maintenance of, local landscapes, occupations and traditions, alongside the development of an urban metropolis.

Four decades on from the publication of Williams' seminal study, *Granta* magazine launched its 2013 list of the "Best of Young British Novelists". *Granta* is the world's leading new writing magazine, profiling some of the most recent fiction and authors from Britain. For more than 40 years, *Granta*'s "Best of Young British Novelists" special issues have produced lists featuring authors who, in the opinion of the magazine's editors, will go on to define contemporary British fiction. Appearing once each decade and featuring alumni including Martin Amis and Julian Barnes (1983), Jeanette Winterson and Kazuo Ishiguro (1993), David Mitchell and Sarah Waters (2003), the *Granta* lists have effectively functioned to foreshadow the development and direction of contemporary British fiction.

The 2013 *Granta* list examines Williams' legacy from a twenty-first century perspective, offering a range of fictions that represent the rapidly changing socio-political, cultural and economic landscapes of contemporary Britain. The novels featured on the 2013 list do not offer a purely pastoral view of Britain, but use the natural world as a platform to stage wider discussions regarding a range of present-day issues. Across these texts, the country and the city function as critical mirrors to contemporary British society, highlighting underlying tensions created by overarching drives for modernity and progress, socialisation and development.

Reframing our relationship with the environment in the new millennium, the 2013 *Granta* "Best of Young British Novelists" use the novel form to call for a reshaping of environmental practices, offering historical tensions between the country and the city as a paradigm for contemporary cultures of knowledge. Raising questions that weigh beyond the limits of the natural world—about humanity, modern assumptions about what nature means and nature itself as a form of community—the 2013 *Granta* "Best of Young British Novelists" question the relation of humanity to the contemporary natural world. Nature is represented by these fictions as a form of refuge from city life but, significantly, not as an opportunity to shy away from political, social or economic debates. Instead, through a return to nature, or encounters with cityscapes, characters are forced to engage and grapple with contemporary "state of the nation" questions, as the country and the city of Britain become spaces in which to enter into dialogue about pressing post-millennial concerns.

Literature plays an important role in shaping our collective image of cities. The city has always enjoyed a pervasive influence on literature and the development of writing. As Raban argues:

Cities [...] are plastic by nature. We mould them in our images: they, in their turn, shape us by the resistance they offer when we try and impose a personal form on them [...] The city as we might imagine it, the soft city of illusion, myth, aspiration, nightmare, is as real, maybe more real, than the hard city one can locate in maps and statistics, in monographs on urban sociology and demography and architecture. (Raban, 1974, p. 10)

London has historically led the rest of Britain. As Warnes suggests, "London has dominated the settlement hierarchy of England and Wales for more than a thousand years and now accounts for between 25% and 40% of the population of these two countries" (Warnes, 1991, p. 156). Textual representations of London have become defining elements in the atlas of twenty-first century British literature. Since "the literature of London [...] to a large extent [...] also represents the literature of England", literary representations of the city offer a distinct combination of the geography of the real and the imaginative world that they are generated from (Ackroyd, 2003, p. 763). As such, many of the 2013 "Best of Young British Novelists" use contemporary fiction to stage interactions with the country's capital, positioning London as an apposite site in which to debate issues key to twenty-first century Britain".

The City: Contemporary London

Hoggart argues that "the idea of London is central to the self-image of the British people", and just as the idea of London "deeply penetrates the rest of the world's view of British life", so literature about London has shaped not only British literature but also world literature written in English (Hoggart, 1991, p. 1). Throughout the novels of the 2013 *Granta* "Best of Young British Novelists" list, London is not stable, fixed or static, simple, transparent or readable, but contested, fluid and in conflict, a space as defined by cultural and physical practices and subjective experiences. The selection offers a dynamic consideration of space and place, examining London as both a twenty-first century city and an epicentre for issues pertaining to contemporary British society.

Szalay's *Spring* (2011) tells the London love story of James and Katherine, two people living in a busy city but feeling alone and isolated, dislocated from both one other and their environment. Concentrating on the interior life of London and Londoners, the novel explores the friendships, failures and fortunes, both economic and personal, of James and Katherine, a one-time internet billionaire and a hotel manager currently separated from her husband. The personal failures of the pair highlight an underlying absence that comes to define the landscape of the novel. Reminiscent of a Patrick Marber play in its use of London not as a backdrop to their love story, but a subtle part of it, *Spring* details the lives of individuals fractured by London zones, separated by the divisions of flats and houses, and isolated in empty parks and art galleries.

The protagonist lovers even go on a "city break" in an attempt to escape their own city, but upon their return they reach an emotional impasse, one which is resolved only by Katherine moving to another city, in an alternative country. Their short-lived romance is framed by contemporary London, with the title *Spring* underlining the fleeting nature of their encounter with each other and the city. The city forces characters to confront their own lack of ambition or sense of direction in their professional and personal lives. As evidence mounts of their inability to communicate with one another, their pervasive isolation and lack of commitment, readers are encouraged to note the transient nature of the city and its inhabitants, as this romantic encounter ultimately ends in pain, against a cityscape in constant and indifferent motion.

For Walter Benjamin, "reading the urban text" is "not a matter of intellectually scrutinizing the landscape: rather it is a matter of exploring the fantasy, wish-processes and dreams locked up in our perception of cities" (Benjamin, 1968, pp. 236-7). In Zadie Smith's fourth novel *NW* (2012), London is presented through the eyes of four local, but very different inhabitants. Centred on the North West region of its title, the novel is largely set in Willesden and the Caldwell housing project on which protagonists Natalie, Leah, Felix and Nathan were raised. *NW* is a novel firmly attached to a map of twentieth and twenty-first century London, using the city as a marker of changes in race, class and gender across the new millennium. The first section is narrated by Leah, who expresses a Modernist anxiety with time and the passing of time in the city; the next by Felix Cooper, a recovering addict with a tragic past, who is finally happy but is about to meet an awful end; then by Keisha—renamed "Natalie" in her new, alternative life as a barrister—who offers 185 numbered sections which, like her apparently highly successful (but unhappy) life, are deeply fractured. In a final section, all four plots and narrators meet on the weekend of the annual Notting Hill Carnival.

Drawing upon Modernist perspectives on place profiled in texts such as Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, the city is experienced through the eyes of one woman for the first section of Smith's novel. Leah is a child of the NW zones of London, "as faithful in her allegiance to this two-mile square of the city as other people are to their families, or their countries" (p. 5). Yet, while her neighbour Ned demonstrates a "migrant enthusiasm for the city [...] Leah, born and bred, never goes anywhere" (p. 44). Instead, she observes the passing of time and its impact on the landscapes of her youth. She notes that the "church of her childhood [...] has been converted into luxury apartments" (p. 49), while, in this new "multiverse" (p. 53). Her vision of the city promotes the need for more connected communities and events and considers whether it is better to view the carnival that concludes the text from the street or the privileged balcony of an expensive town house. Presenting London as a space for class and identity transformations, Smith uses the city to stage debates about what it means, and costs, to be "modern", setting guests against inhabitants to question who can be a native of a city in continual flux.

In a novel of visits and visitations and the haunting of the present by the past, London is presented not as a static spatio-temporal site but as a means of mapping changes in space and people over time. *NW* is assembled

freely across the printed page, articulating the context and content of exchanges and the changing forms these can take. Readers follow Leah and Natalie as their narrative moves across visual presentations of emails, texts and electronic communication. With sections entitled “visitation”, “guest”, “host” and “visitation”, the third section of the novel even breaks down into numbered sections, with each section titles reflecting its content and popular culture references from the period. Across *NW*, Smith freely incorporates lyrics from popular music, grave stone inscriptions, menus, Internet chat room conversations, satellite navigation directions (and culturally experienced alternatives) in an attempt to capture the forms and sensibilities of late twentieth and early twenty-first century London.

As a form of “heterotopia”, a space in which many different spaces, and many different times within these spaces, meet and interact, the London of *NW* is offered as a threshold, a space for differentiation, a mixing ground where status and identity are destabilised (Foucault, 1986, pp. 25-6). In a satirical engagement with the city—a satire that comes from a deep love of and connection to the capital—Smith’s fond criticisms centre on the spaces and places forged by individuals in an urban world. Representing both the white host community and the guests who arrive in London, Smith’s use of overlapping and competing narratives voices and mix of genders, races and ages encourage her reader to consider the parallel experiences of the characters from differing viewpoints to create a communal, but not concordant, overarching narrative on twenty-first century city life.

Representations of London in contemporary British fiction have an intrinsic role in promoting and making sense of encounters with the urban, reminding readers of their own role in engaging with the reality and future of cityscapes. Across the 2013 *Granta* “Best of Young British Novelists” list, the city environment is presented as deeply influenced by characters’ individual experiences of, and interactions, with city space. As a site for transformative social and cultural encounters, London becomes a diasphoric urban melting pot of polycultural narratives and interactions between old and new. Featuring alternative mappings of the city environment by the marginalised and alienated, London functions as an enabling space in these novels, allowing characters to shred the traditions and routines of old and to celebrate and explore individual freedoms. Through a sustained examination of physical places in the city and the individuals who experience them, the 2013 “Best of Young British Novelists” show how and why place effects the development of individuals and communities. Presenting global problems through the microcosm of the city, fictional representations of London combine a celebratory pride and a revelatory frankness about the composition, nature and function of the city in the new millennium and offer the capital as a marker for the development of Britain in the twenty-first century.

The Countryside: Re-writing Nature

The “Best of Young British Novelists” featured on the 2013 *Granta* list interrogate the concept of a contemporary countryside, exploring the corruption of the natural world by humans and the effects of the city on the country. Foregrounding ecological values, these novels ask readers to question understandings of “nature” in the twenty-first century. They interrogate the notion of place as a stable category and consider how contemporary interactions with nature are represented in literature, how we interact with the natural world and engage with the concept of wilderness. Focussing of marginalised natural topographies and under-represented regions of Britain, several *Granta*’s 2013 “Best of Young British Novelists” take the fate of the natural world, and our engagement with it, as their central narrative concern.

In *Haweswater* (2009), Sarah Hall tells the unwritten human history of the flooding of the Mardale Valley to create a dam in rural Westmorland, UK. The novel is based on real life events in Mardale during the

twentieth century when the British government gave permission for their valley to be flooded in order to ensure a safe water supply for the growing conurbation of Manchester in the North West of England. Rather than foregrounding official, historical accounts that stress the necessity of the scheme for the development of the industrialisation of the North West England, Hall's novel re-writes the past from the perspective of the people in this "drowned village", offering a frontier example of an encroachment of the modern on the natural environment.

Exploring the flooding of a "Westmoorland valley" (p. 4) to construct a dam for neighbouring conurbation Manchester, the novel represents the intrusion of the national on the regional, underscoring the unseen human impact of drives for progress and profit. The development is approved without consultation or consideration of the heritage and perceived value of what is being wiped out. Instead, this distant area about which the British government knows and cares little is sanctioned as a dam. The scheme is "all fact, done and dusted" (p. 50) by a "parliament [...] a long way south, remote from the valleys of the north of England" (p. 53). The dam technology authorised by the government literally drowns the people and traditions of the area in the spread of the city of "Manchester [...] a city leading the way of modernity in the north [...] The city would be a defender of this country. Its growth was beneficial to the country entire. It should be nurtured with pride, with sacrifice, hard though that may be" (p. 53). Detailing the transformation of history and human life by technology and placing the good of the many against the suffering of the few, the novel sets a "village. Not insignificant, but [...] a small place", against "a scheme to benefit the whole nation" (p. 50).

The novel takes pains to illustrate that apparently simple communities can have valuable histories, heritages and cultures. The country children have "ruddy complexions, the absence of city reflections in their eyes" (p. 46) and, compared with their city counterparts, "were template from an entirely different press" (p. 46). Language functions as an important expression of their regional identity. The Mardale accent is "set and roughened and deepened by the wind and the rain" (p. 5). Although the people appear "insular, as silent and self-sufficient as monks, closing ranks to off-comers, and uncommunicative and silent" (p. 6) they are linked by silent bonds that are "strong and necessary and abundantly understood" (p. 6). This local dialect and assumed comprehension is not initially shared by dam representative Jack Liggett, who reflects on "old bitten-at language of the area, with its sluggish, ugly vowels, there were words which he did not understand, which sounded brutal, and he could not guess their English equivalent" (p. 91). As a spokesperson of the water company driving the development, Jack Liggett represents modern progress and the intrusion of the city on the countryside. At the beginning of the novel, his car functions a symbol of dislocation from the "small place" (p. 50) he enters. Locals note "the mechanical purr of a smooth engine" as the sports car is set against "the ancient-wheeled tractor struggling up the incline to High Bowdethwaite Farm" (p. 42). They observe "the automobile was very new and very fine. And utterly incongruous with the environment in which it now found itself" (p. 42).

Haweswater suggests that the people of an area are inherently connected to the land they work and considers why, in the wake of the industrial revolution and the growth of the cities, water becomes a commodity as valuable as land itself. Encouraging a generation of people to question and learn, the novel follows the lives of those who live off the land and their individual experience of a wider project. In a novel about change, physical and emotional, social and economic, through a distinct blend of the documentary and the imaginary the true tragedy lies at the heart of an onset of modernity, as the city is seen to slowly shadow over the countryside valley of Mardale. The end of the novel makes a wider statement on the role of the novel

in re-voicing marginalised perspectives on regional events. Its closing pages remind the reader that:

In secure, rural places, small villages and insular hamlets where grand events and theatrical schemes rarely take place, enormous human episodes, when they finally do rip apart the fabric of normal life, sometimes come away lacking clarity [...] the borders between fact and myth have a tendency to blur in these regions. History fogs, or becomes loose and watery. Bizarre mythologies arise. Half-lives. Half-truths. Events are built up or deconstructed. Leaps of faith are made, often for the strangest of sakes. The past becomes indistinct and subplots continue. (p. 253)

The flooding of the valley becomes an event of biblical proportions and significance, as modernity encroaches like a plague on the village suggesting the valley as a symbol for the many wider casualties of progress in the natural world. Taking the “largely unrecorded” event in the history of the reservoir (p. 253), Hall makes a marginalised perspective on a regional historical event very real and immediate. Using the flooding of this valley as a microcosm for much wider conflicts and social, political and global changes in inter-war Britain.

Gods Own Country (Raisin 2009) extends this contemporary concern with the perceived impact of the city on the countryside via the gentrification of UK country villages by “out of towners”. Narrator Sam Marsdyke, a farmer’s son on the North Yorkshire Moors, holds a deep seated dislike of city dwellers, torments walkers visiting from the towns and scares away urban intruders on what he perceives to be “his” moorlands. The novel opens with Sam’s analysis of ramblers as “daft sods [...] like a line of drunks, addled with the air” who are “crapping up Nature’s balance” (p. 1). He watches one group “moving on like a line of chickens, their heads twitching side to side. What a lovely molehill. Look, Bob, a cuckoo, behind the dry-stone wall. Only it wasn’t a cuckoo, I knew, it was a bloody pigeon” (p. 1). Satirising a lack of urban awareness about the natural world, Sam presents himself by contrast as the authentic countryside, a “real, living, farting Nature to their brain of things” (p. 1). Angry at the way urban dwellers use and abuse the countryside, Sam argues that they “couldn’t give a stuff for the Moors, all they wanted was a postcard view out the bedroom window” (p. 9). He reflects that, the “country was a Sunday garden to them, wellingtons and four-by-fours and glishy magazines of horse arses jumping over a fence” (p. 10). These concerns are actualised when an urban family purchases the farm house opposite his family home. Sam is highly suspicious of “their sort”, their priorities (“the sun hadn’t done a lap round their house yet, but the cookbooks were fettled up”, p. 13) and the impact of an urban drift on the community.

When the local pub is taken over and turned into a base for these new urban drifters, Sam concedes that the “shadows of the cities were sneaking in both sides of the valley, and there was nothing any of them could do about it” (p. 29). The pub, as “the heart and soul of the town” (p. 29), becomes a symbol for the wider diluting of the local community and soon even the local butcher is transformed into “The Green Pepper Deli”. Sam reflects that “last time I’d been here, there were rabbits strung up and bloody hunks of beef dripping on to the counter, but now it was all shiny jars on shelves and a tray of olives pricked with little sticks” (p. 100). The final straw appears in the form of a new housing development which Sam nick-names “Off-comed hole [...] Twenty or thirty red houses, all bright and glishy like a piece of flesh with the skin torn off. Probably that’s what the town used to look like, way back, before it started to snarl up and scab over” (p. 100). This raw, organic image underscores the perceived destruction of the local by new inhabitants from the cities, their immediate impact on the composition of the town, and the shift in dynamics created by twenty-first century population change and land use in Britain.

The first person narrative of protagonist Sam Marsdyke grants intimate access to his thoughts and feelings on the country and the city, which quickly reveal him to be capable of cruelty, balanced with acts of affection

and emotion. Accused of rape against a fellow pupil in his countryside school at the age of sixteen, Sam submits to psychological profiling treatment after the allegations (p. 88). There are undertones of Tennyson's "Maud" in his relationship with this girl, who comes from the urban family who buy the farm house next door to Sam's country home. As a sustainable exploration of the power of unreliable narration, the novel makes readers doubt Sam's increasingly instable vision which culminates in nightmares that build towards the conclusion of the text.

The narrator's slow descent into madness and loss of control is initially marked by his fascination with natural objects, both animate and inanimate, and his practice of talking to them. Shunned by the people of the village and enduring a cold and uncomfortable relationship with his family, like Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*, Sam takes refuge in nature and seems to identify more with animals than people. Always on the margins, looking in as a voyeur onto other people's lives, the sublime isolation of the moors encourages imaginative freedom but also enables him to cross the line between imaginary violence and real, as he confesses to killing, beheading and burying a chicken and succumbing to humorous but increasingly paranoid fantasies. When he runs away with Jo from the neighbouring farmhouse, his subjective first person narrative increasingly makes readers aware that the reality he communicates may not be the actual situation on the ground. Jo seems less and less willing to be part of the plan to escape and his own mental stability clearly weakens as he starts to engage in conversations with animals that encourage him to consider "breeding her" (p. 191). When he is eventually caught by the police, Jo is revealed to be tied up and in distress. The novel concludes with Sam leaving prison after serving four years for abduction, casting doubt on the claims offered by his narrative in the previous pages and making readers reassess the narrative as a highly subjective and instable account.

The impact of the urban on the rural community is taken to its logical conclusion in Kavenna's *Come To The Edge* (2012). The novel begins at its end, in a scene of rural apocalypse as houses burn and people run. Whether this is a revenge attack or a mutiny is initially unclear, but it is clear that the novel immediately establishes conflict between the city and the country as its key concern. Set in the remote Duddon valley in Cumbria, the novel follows its narrator as she leaves the city to live in the countryside with revolutionary organic warrior Cassandra White. The narrator confesses that "Suburbia was my chosen idyll, and I was a devout worshipped of my personal pile of bricks, bricks my husband and I were paying off one by one, until the glorious day we would own them all" (p. 7). But in the wake of a failed marriage, she shuns her "flat-pack totems" (p. 7) and "twilight suburban half-life" (10) and decides to "head for the hills" (p. 36), viewing her life with Cassandra as punishment for the many consumer evils of her past.

Cassandra's self-sustaining way of life and opinions on the use of the countryside by the inhabitants of the cities becomes an education for the narrator as she experiences life on the "edge" of England, sanity and a wider national problem. The text concentrates on the purchase of rural houses as second homes, or holiday homes, by wealthy city inhabitants. Like Sam Marsdyke in *God's Own Country*, Cassandra argues that the "countryside is just a fantasy for people like this, a place where you roam through the so-called scenery by day, allowing the elements occasionally to ruffle the folds of your expensive outdoor wear, where you can always retreat to your roaring fire, your pristine house" (p. 121). Cassandra calls these second home owners "perverts" because, in her opinion, they are going against the natural order of local homes for local people. Cassandra believes the fact that city dwellers use a country house once a year while local people suffer in substandard dwellings is simply "a waste of a house" (p. 91). She argues that these "people are committing a terrible crime

by never using these houses. I have devised a solution, whereby we can save them and others from the terrible consequences of their criminal behaviour” (p. 111). Dubbing these buildings “pervert dwellings” (p. 114), Cassandra works out that thirty two out of forty percent of such dwellings are never used and sets about organising a system called “Resettlement”—moving local people, who are in need of new homes, into the deserted or under-employed second houses owned by city dwellers. Her scheme not only highlights the power of the individual but also raises issues of justice, property and ownership rights, morality and ethical behaviour, as well as ecology.

Using “Resettlement” as system through which to examine the growing gap between rich and poor in twenty-first century Britain, Kavenna’s novel encourages an examination of the relationship between humans and the natural world via a proposed utopian scheme. Using humour to flavour a very serious debate about the growing divide between the haves and have nots in twenty-first century Britain, the novel offers a critique of worshipping wealth through the eyes of a reformed capitalist addict who, via a reconnection with the natural world under the guidance of Cassandra, learns the value and liberation of physical labour and the ability to self-sustain through the beauty of free pleasures.

Told by a suburban house wife narrator, who starts and ends the novel with a Thelma and Louise-style scene of defiant glory, the novel asks whether revolution will always fail and shows the possibility and viability of an alternative to twenty-first century capitalism and city life. Condemning the bourgeois lifestyle formerly occupied by its narrator, the novel offers Cassandra White as a leader and a revolutionary, a liberator, freedom-fighter and law breaker. Cassandra White’s refusal to comply with social norms and commitment to live an alternative life, enables the narrator, “a nice girl from the suburbs”, to turn into a “gun-toting maniac” (p. 2). Cassandra, “like a happy ogress” (p. 128), sees conforming to social norms as a form of “mental illness” (p. 27) and through her innovative “Resettlement” scheme—which quickly spreads from the valley to Wales, Cornwall and even France—soon “has disciples at her feet” (p. 225). In the final moments of the novel, one such disciple asks simply: “What would Cassandra White tell us to do?” (p. 265). By this point, Cassandra as revolutionary leader has led an international movement to its logical, if doomed, conclusion. Resettlement ends in the burning of the resettlement houses, the denial of the resources to the city dwellers, and Cassandra is finally killed in combat by the police. Although the novel concludes with the narrator returning to her suburban half-life, “chipboard desk” and “view of the car park” (p. 292) the exciting message of the novel lies in the glimpse of a possibility of an alternative. In her satire on modern life, Kavenna offers readers an example of a character that rejects the city for the country, capitalist systems for self-sufficiency and individualism for community. Cassandra’s note to the narrator whilst giving directions to her country home—“Carry on along this road. DON’T lose heart! It seems endless, when you don’t know where you’re going. But you will arrive!” (p. 18)—finally stands as a message for the novel and the personal journey of the individual who chooses a different path through twenty-first century life.

The Country and The City Redux

Representing the natural world and engagements between humans and the countryside, 2013 “Best of Young British Novelists” use the environment to stage broader debates about social structures and ideologies, culture-nature interactions and ideas about war and peace. In these texts, the natural world is shown to empower the marginalised individual, reconnect communities and enable personal transformation. Challenging prevailing economic and political discourses that put the city before the countryside, the economic before the

social, progress before heritage and the collective over the individual, these novels instead call for a re-engagement between humans and the natural world in the twenty-first century.

In the first decades of the twenty-first century the novel form has continued to dominate as an appropriate form in which to articulate contemporary experiences of, and concerns about, social, political and economic topographies of the country and the city in Britain. The 2013 *Granta* list contains timely examples of experiments in literary form, voice, language and thematic concerns that are pushing the boundaries of what British fiction can offer the contemporary period. As an area of academic and popular cultural study that is still in formation, contemporary literature is resistant to definitive boundaries, categories or labels. Instead, as the 2013 *Granta* “Best of Young British Novelists” list suggests, it is characterised by a tendency to develop concerns extended from the old century, and map them onto twenty-first century landscapes to reframe issues central to the new millennium.

Not only representing, but entering into critical dialogue with, some of the more pressing issues and directions of the twenty-first century world, as well as the many and varied pasts that produced the present, the 2013 “Best of Young British Novelists” selection stand as a testament to the vitality and significance of the novel form in the twenty-first century. As Bentley suggests, the “novelist at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century appears to be standing not at a crossroads but at a far more complicated intersection that offers routes in several directions” (Bentley, 2008, p. 196). Carving into old landscapes to offer new representations and historical reverberations that echo across the twenty-first century world, the 2013 *Granta* “Best of Young British Novelists” re-write a past that continues to assert its role in the present, disrupting narratives and engaging readers in a multiplicity of perspectives on the country and the city.

The novels on *Granta*’s 2013 “Best of Young British Novelists” listen courage readers to consider how contemporary British fiction represents the contemporary relationship between the country and the city, what defines the country from the city and how literature can, or should, respond to a perceived destruction of the natural environment in the twenty-first century. These texts are concerned with the complex relationships all Western societies have with the natural environments and explore ways in which these relationships are increasingly enacted and contested in a new age of environmental crisis. Interrogating ways in which nature and a perceived “crisis of the natural” are imagined in contemporary fiction, the novels draws upon environmental ethics, profile newthinking about climate change and consider potential apocalyptic outcomes. Taking readers to the edge-lands of the countryside and the heartlands of the city, the 2013 *Granta* “Best of Young British Novelists” mobilise fiction to develop the contrasts spotlighted forty years earlier by Raymond William, to offer an updated, critical perspective on Britain today.

References

- Ackroyd, P. (2003). *London: The biography*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Benjamin, W. (1968). The work of art in the mechanical age of reproduction. In H. Arendt (Ed.), *Illuminations: Essays and reflections*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Bentley, N. (2008). *Contemporary British fiction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Foucault, M. (1986). Of other spaces. *Diacritics*, 16, 22(7), 21.
- Hoggart, K. (1991). London as an object of study. In K. Hoggart, & D. Green (Eds.), *London: A new metropolitan geography*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Raban, J. (1974). *Soft city*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Warnes, A. M. (1991). *London’s population trends: Metropolitan area of megalopolis*. London: Edward Arnold.
- Williams, R. (1973). *The country and the city*. London: Chatto and Windus.