

Culture

At The Coal Face



Absent voices

Barry Hines: Plans are being made to release more of his unpublished dramas and stories that are heavily critical of the ruling class.

Picture: SWpix.com

Chris Hockney introduces a selection of mining community writing, with some thoughts on class and culture

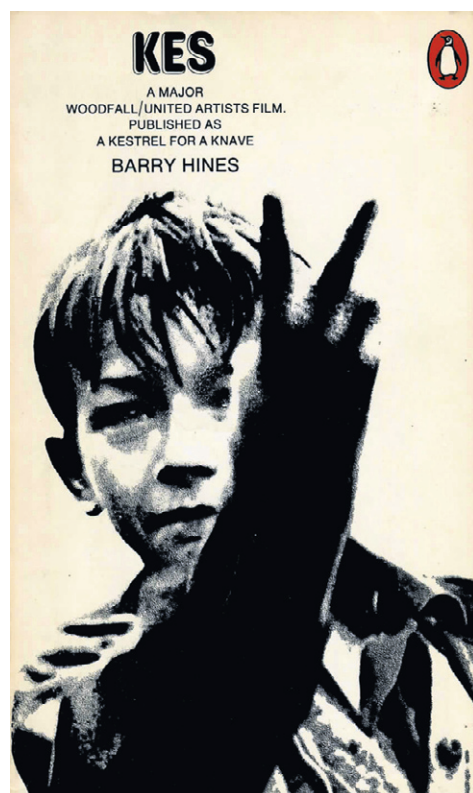
THE ruling class denigrates and puts down working class culture, suggesting that it is inferior to 'their' stuff. Ordinary people can't possibly produce good work, whether art, stories, poems, plays, or whatever medium.

This stereotype is always there, and was used heavily during the miners' strike to portray the miners as thick, ignorant, stupid, and violent. If they were hurt by police, brutalised and imprisoned, so what? They have no feelings or sensitivity, so it doesn't matter.

We saw the same message when the fans at Hillsborough were blamed for what happened, and the current attacks on low-paid workers and people claiming benefits. It's their fault, they are scroungers.

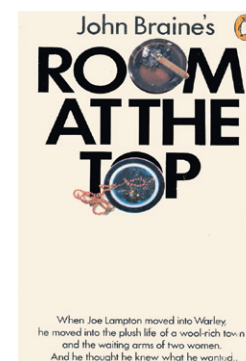
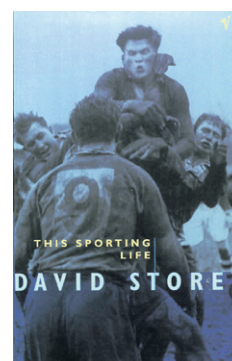
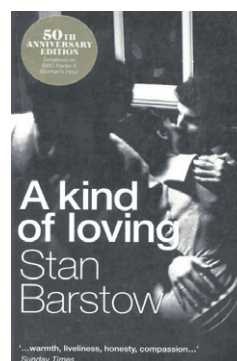
The ruling class get away with this through their control of the media and the various cultural organisations. Many of the outlets and opportunities that used to be there for working class writers and artists have disappeared.

Institutions play it safe by not commissioning programmes that are seen as a risk. *Days of Hope* and *The Monocled Mutineer* are examples that had senior Tories baying for blood when they were shown on the BBC, and they are unlikely to be shown again.



Anything by Jimmy McGovern is usually heavily criticised by the Tories and their allies.

Armchair Theatre and *Play for Today* have long gone. Commissioning editors with the autonomy to promote working



Northern classics (from left): *Kes*, *A Kind of Loving*, *This Sporting Life*, and *Room at the Top*.

class talent have had their powers removed.

Today's equivalents of Barry Hines, Shelagh Delaney and Andrea Dunbar would struggle to get their work commissioned, so who is there to tell the stories of ordinary men and women?

Art and music are seen as less important. Lee Hall's play *The Pitman Painters* brought to life the work of the Ashington miners in the North East who created wonderful art after their shifts at the pit, but otherwise how widely would their work have been known?

Actors like Julie Walters, Christopher Eccleston and David Morrissey have all said that they were lucky to get grants to be able to learn their craft, and that there just aren't the opportunities for working class actors today.

Privately-educated actors, with money behind them, are in favour today.

School students previously had a wealth of things to study – the kitchen sink playwrights, books like *A Taste of Honey*, *This Sporting Life*, *Kes*, *The Price of Coal*, *Room at the Top* and *A Kind of Loving*, were all on the curriculum. Not any more though.

During 2019, we hope to work with Barry Hines's family and Sheffield University to get some of his unpublished dramas and stories out for the public to see. Barry wrote *A Kestrel For a Knafe* which was later filmed as *Kes*.

His unpublished work is from the heart, raw, historically accurate and heavily critical of the ruling class. 2020 will also be the 50th anniversary of the release of *Kes*.