

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Paul Hertneky. *Rust Belt Boy: Stories of an American Childhood*. Peterborough: Bauhan, 2016. 224 pp. \$21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-87233-222-5.

Gabriella Kessler, Jean-Loïc Portron. *Braddock America*. First Run Features, 2014. Documentary, 100 min.

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The 2016 election has sparked widespread public attention to issues of class in the United States. One argument claims that billionaire Donald Trump won battleground states such as Pennsylvania by responding to economic anxieties among working-class whites. To add weight to this version of events, commentators have pointed to Arlie Russell Hochschild's *Strangers in Their Own Land: Anger and Mourning on the American Right* (2016), Nancy Isenberg's *White Trash: The 400-Year Untold History of Class in America* (2016), and J. D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* (2016). Witnessing recent economic and social realities in western Pennsylvania, the memoir *Rust Belt Boy: Stories of an American Childhood* and the documentary film *Braddock America* deploy irony and juxtaposition in their contributions to national conversations about the meaning of work and class in America.

In his well-crafted collection of twenty-six essays, Paul Hertneky uses rust, in both metaphorical and material forms, to express loss and hope as he explores immigration, deindustrialization, and daily life in western Pennsylvania, from 1960 to today. Although signaling the "ravages of the past," rust can be removed to reveal an object anew (p. 29). In writing about his home region, Hertneky comes "to see rust as a weathered narrative, blistered by time and neglect, shedding tales of Vulcan's men, calling upon the restless to apply a durable sheen" (p. 31). Deserving of more than one careful reading, *Rust Belt Boy* shines.

Hertneky grew up in Ambridge, near Pittsburgh. A company town, Ambridge was named for the American Bridge Company, which employed many of Hertneky's neighbors, friends, and family, including his father, who worked there as a draftsman. Raised in a Czech-Hungarian home, Hertneky attended Catholic schools before enrolling at the University of Pittsburgh. After college, he established himself as a writer for newspaper, TV, and radio outlets. Addressing *Rust Belt Boy* to casual and serious readers of literary nonfiction, he wonders: how do personal, local, and national histories overlay one another? How might a writer mimic how this layering happens? What does one learn by reflecting on one's life within multiple historical contexts?

In addition to recounting his early ambitions and the push-pull of home, Hertneky writes to recover a larger narrative. His school teachers "ignored the stories" of the region; he was "taught to look ahead, not back" (pp. 12-13). His grandparents told few tales of their home countries, and his parents "had only a passing, textbook knowledge of history, despite being surrounded by storied artifacts" (p. 47). To tell the stories, Hertneky dispenses with the strict chronologies of textbooks and interweaves scenes from his childhood and young adulthood with moments from regional and national history. In hearing him, readers absorb his realization that our lives unfold across the contours of the past. He asks us, "Would life have been different if we had known the stories?" (p. 50).

Yes. Hertneky embeds the answer in a lesson in how to read his work. During his years at the University of Pittsburgh, he frequents jazz clubs and works as the night clerk at the Cathedral of Learning, where he keeps company with Montaigne, who “matched the music and noise of [his] own thoughts, improvising melodies and philosophical riffs” (p. 150). Hertneky soon finds within himself the “ambler ... who discovers where he is going by where he has gone” (p. 150). Accompanying him, readers tune in to how he makes his discoveries meaningful.

To create a lived sense of Ambridge, Hertneky skillfully uses irony and juxtaposition to encourage readers to make connections across the text. Early on, for example, he remembers that in the 1950s he and his friends played Cowboys and Indians at the site where Anthony Wayne trained troops to protect the Pennsylvania frontier in the 1790s. In the essay “Life as They Found It,” he remembers learning that his paternal grandfather had worked for the American Bridge Company for only one day because he “saw a girder cut a man in half” (p. 94). Several essays later, Hertneky describes his own coping with witnessing a coworker at a local steel mill come close to being cut in half by a length of pipe. In making the connections, readers form a complex narrative of the place.

The more links one makes, the deeper the narrative’s complexity becomes. When he hears an entrepreneur in Ambridge order “steamed milk, with honey,” Hertneky cannot help but recall those who had come to Ambridge “seeking a land of milk and honey” (p. 12). This thought leads him to remember moments in history prior to his ancestors’ arrival. The reader who follows the connections remembers that the milk-and-honey metaphor appears in Exodus, which chronicles the Israelites’ migration to the Promised Land; exodus also describes, however, the out-migration of people during the collapse of the US steel industry in the 1970s and ‘80s, a diaspora that “equaled the largest internal migration in US history,” the migration of African Americans north in the 1910s through the 1960s to work in steel and other industries (p. 13).

The collection ends with a nod to the milk-and-honey metaphor. On the site of the abandoned plant where Hertneky’s grandfather lost two fingers, the developer builds a grocery store. Knowing that similar ruins are also temporary, Hertneky sees “promise flickering over [his] hometown” and hears “echoes of the past and lively conversations about the future” (p. 221). Witnessing the US steel industry’s decline, Hertneky reminds us that in the Pittsburgh area alone 153,000 workers lost their

jobs and that almost half a million faced unemployment within a five-hundred-mile radius of the city (p. 216).

The documentary film *Braddock America* brings before viewers the long-lasting effects of this stunning loss of work. Like *Rust Belt Boy*, the film uses irony and juxtaposition to good effect to lead viewers to experience the town’s plight. The directors open with a color shot of an empty, present-day street; the narrative then cuts to a man reading a poem about work loss in a declining steel town. As his voice rises and falls, viewers witness black-and-white scenes of mills belching smoke, working full tilt. We hear that the “Age of Metal” began in Braddock, but then watch the implosion of rusted steel stacks.

Like Ambridge, Braddock, also near Pittsburgh, claims key moments in American history. During the Seven Years’ War, French and Indian forces defeated British general Edward Braddock nearby; Andrew Carnegie later established on the site the Homestead Steel Works. This steel helped to win world wars and to sustain peace. An interviewee then poses a question that haunts the film: “What price did Braddock pay for being an integral part of this country?” With the collapse of the steel industry, townspeople were left with few job opportunities, little money, and too many ruins. Unable to sell their property, people walked away from their homes; empty mills rusted and work sites grew to brush. By 2010, University of Pittsburgh Medical Center chose to close the local hospital, despite protests from the largely African American community that it served. Recalling the implosion of steel structures at the film’s opening, the implosion of the hospital implies that these razings signaled no renaissance of rebuilding.

The film suggests that people in Braddock feel forgotten and betrayed. Expressing emotional ties to the place and its history, townspeople speak directly to us about their pride in their former work; they remind us that such labor built the nation. This pride was hard-won; people not only toiled long hours in demanding jobs, but also had to fight to improve their work lives.

Viewers unfamiliar with the US steel industry, its decline, and the effects of deindustrialization should see this film. *Braddock America* expresses the sadness and disbelief of abandonment. Viewers see vacant storefronts, abandoned homes, and empty church pews. More pessimistic than *Rust Belt Boy*, the film confronts head-on the stresses and pains of deindustrialization; viewers witness the cumulative effects of individual and community trauma. All is not lost, however. Answering the manufactured optimism of a Levi’s commercial set in Brad-

dock, the documentary filmmakers depict the real, quiet hope of local lawmakers struggling to do their best and local citizens pitching in to clean up the town's streets.

Expressions of lived experience, *Rust Belt Boy* and *Braddock America* would be important additions to

courses focused on the history of Pennsylvania, the Pittsburgh area, and/or the steel industry. *Rust Belt Boy* would also make an excellent choice for courses in literary non-fiction. *Braddock America* would make a significant contribution to courses in documentary film. For their honesty and artistry, I recommend both to all.

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