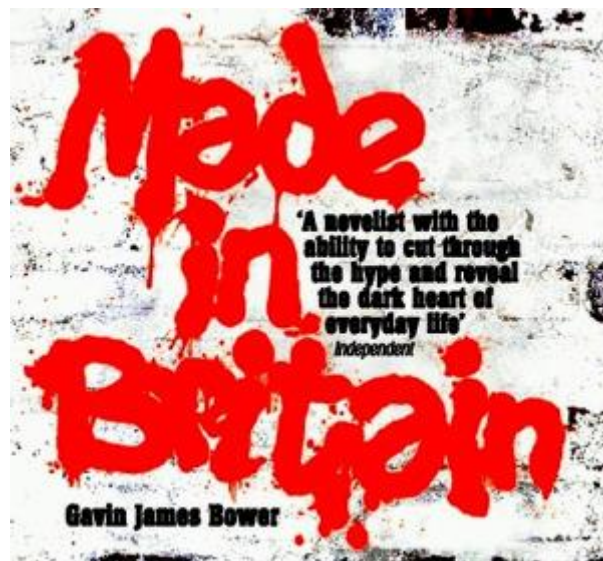


## Talking to Gavin James Bower

Gavin James Bower's latest novel *Made in Britain* follows the lives of three teenagers growing up in one of Britain's hard and deprived cities. All on the cusp of adulthood and the responsibilities it brings, the narrators are forced to confront their problems whether internally or in the town in which they live. Gavin, a former model, took some time out from being literary to chat to us.



**SP: The themes of MiB seem unstoppable popular at the moment: Shameless, This Is England '86, Richard Milward's Apples et al. What is it that attracts writers, and readers, to works about the working class, about urban deprivation?**

Richard's book also takes on multiple narrators, and I was very aware of it writing MiB – there's a particularly good scene involving an unwanted newborn baby – as I was Shane Meadows. The recent riots crystallised an already nascent discourse around the working class in the twenty-first century – what it means exactly, especially post-deindustrialisation. Evan Davis's book of the same name as mine's a good example of the Thatcherite economist's argument, while Owen Jones's CHAVS takes the opposite view. It's these questions of identity, of community, of the possibilities for solidarity and a movement based on it that suddenly become fashionable – and relevant – again.

I started the book in 2008, though, so my reasons go back a bit further (and dare I say deeper)...

**SP: The themes are sort of timeless (I'm thinking of Dickens). Do you think the popularity of Downton Abbey etc is similar i.e. we're attracted to extreme ends of the social scale. America has its fair share of writers who use the middle classes and suburbia as their inspiration. Are we less interested in this middle ground?**

I think we've got our fair share of petit-bourgeois literature, to be honest – and our political landscape's narrowed in the space of a generation to one-party politics; namely, that of the middle ground. Like I said above, class is only now becoming something we can talk about – it isn't something Britons are comfortable with. The harsh realities of post-crash Britain, however, render a bit of a chat about it all inevitable.

**SP: I enjoyed the only overt political message of the book when Brooker invokes Cameron's 'Hug a hoodie!' slogan. How do you feel about modern Britain, particularly in terms of the English riots? Would any of MiB's characters have made their way to JD Sports?**

I think Brooker and Digger would've been spoiling for a fight – after all they're opportunists, to paraphrase some of the commentators on the riots. That said, I've been asked before about whether MiB is, essentially, about 'rioters'. It's not. It's about young people outgrowing something – a place, a relationship, a set of circumstances – and struggling with it. That these young people happen to come from a post-industrial place – a place that's waiting for what comes next, to pinch from the blurb – gives it all a bit more relevance. Not so long ago nobody would've cared about these kids – and maybe they still don't but we're all talking about them now, and that's what matters to me.

**SP: You grew up in Lancashire and now live in London. Do you feel you'll be drawn back, artistically, to 'The North' and its connotations? I'm from Coventry and having moved South I find that where I grew up seems to take on greater importance, especially when people don't understand why I say 'buz' and not 'bus'.**

MiB's about being drawn back – physically and 'artistically' – to a place I thought I'd left behind. Turns out, everywhere's pretty much the same in the end – once you strip away the accoutrements. I can see myself going back, and I grow fonder of the place and the people the longer I'm away. It's this love-hate feeling that I disingenuously allow my characters to express, too – one way or another. When I was their age I couldn't see beyond my own longing to fit in elsewhere – anywhere but there. These three are a bit more on message.

**SP: The characters of MiB are, in some way, all looking for a way out whether from their environment of their own selves. The characters also compare themselves to the 'Pakis', the immigrants. It's strange that in British cities there are people dying, literally, to escape whilst others can't wait to take their places. Do you feel escape is still something young people in deprived towns aspire to? What happens when escape isn't an option?**

We all yearn to escape our circumstances – even more so those that are beyond our control. That tension's a very specific sort, between a disgruntled working class and a newly arrived immigrant population – and it's quite deliberately manifested by our peculiarly pernicious social relations. The race riots ten years ago in Burnley, Bradford and Oldham are still fresh in peoples' minds, but our politicians would rather wax lyrical over images of looters than accept that most people, no matter their colour or race, just want to get along. Because then they have to be proactive, rather than reactive.

**SP: Your first novel, *Dazed and Aroused*, dealt with the modelling world. Can you tell us about your experience as a model? Why did you stop modelling (have you stopped?)**

You'll have to buy the book. Not that it's almost entirely autobiographical...

**SP: I connected most with Russell in *MiB*, but I would have preferred to have been Charlie. Do you see yourself in any of the novel's characters? Are they based on people from your own life?**

All three characters are a version of my experience growing up: Russell dreams of being somewhere that'll allow him to just disappear, and I dreamed of London; Charlie's popular but precocious, and I played football but was in the 'top set'; Hayley struggles with her virginity, as if it's a commodity to be traded in the schoolyard – I felt that pressure right up until I left the town to go to uni.

They're all me.

**SP: You had a quirky guerrilla marketing campaign (posting photos of the phrase 'Made in Britain' on Twitter), do you enjoy making the book more than just the artefact itself? Do writers need to look past simply writing text these days?**

Writers need to focus on being good writers; those that don't, like me, need to go out and practically rep the book themselves. This is the paradox of the writer with a big fucking ego.

Thing is, you write because you want to – maybe, even, have to. You don't do it to sell books. Funny that...

**SP: Can you recommend (or warn against) a book you've read recently?**

I recommend anything by Claude Cahun – Google CC if you've never heard of her – and would warn against anything that *isn't* either about northerners or models.



*Made in Britain* by Gavin James Bower is out now in paperback (£10.00, Quartet).