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| Institution: Canterbury Christ Church University (CCCU) | | |
| Unit of Assessment: UoA 27 (English Language and Literature) | | |
| Title of case study: ICS27.02_FAN - A Novel: Impact on football writing, readership and bringing new insights into the Hillsborough disaster benefitting those directly affected by the tragedy | | |
| Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2012-2014 | | |
| Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit: | | |
| Name(s): | Role(s) (e.g. job title): | Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: |
| Mr Danny Rhodes | Lecturer | 2010-2016 (Sessional Lecturer) 2016-to date (Lecturer) |
| Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2014-2020 | | |
| Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N | | |
| 1. Summary of the impact | | |
| <p>Danny Rhodes' creative writing research produced the semi-autobiographical novel <i>FAN - A Novel</i> (2014), which examines the Hillsborough disaster from the perspective of a supporter of Nottingham Forest Football Club. It has:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Brought new insights into the Hillsborough disaster and the repercussions of the events of April 15th 1989 and impacted on those directly affected by the tragedy. 2) Affected its readership, evidenced by media coverage, blog posts and online reviews, which articulate the novel's ability to move, provoke reflection, and resonate with personal experience of time, culture and place. 3) Documented a lost culture and experience, represented through a distinct approach to football writing focused on the era before Hillsborough and the birth of the Premier League. | | |
| 2. Underpinning research | | |
| <p>Rhodes' novel <i>FAN</i> brings new perspectives on the Hillsborough disaster and its repercussions, and the relationship between identity, community and football in the late 80s and 90s. A central motivation in writing <i>FAN</i> for Rhodes was to contribute an eyewitness account of the Hillsborough disaster and its repercussions and injustices, in circumstances where narratives have so often been twisted and 'the truth' appropriated by others. Rhodes was supporting Nottingham Forest at the FA Cup Semi-Final between Nottingham Forest and Liverpool at Hillsborough on 15th April 1989. He witnessed the worst sporting disaster in British history, when 96 Liverpool supporters were crushed to death in the Leppings Lane end of the ground, and a further 766 injured. The repercussions of the experience on Forest fans have largely been forgotten and undiscussed. Against a background of no-nonsense working-class attitudes to trauma, and the focus rightly on the bereaved families and survivors from the Leppings Lane end, discussing the impact of the tragedy on the Forest supporters felt (and continues to feel) difficult and uncomfortable. Writing his experience as a novel enabled Rhodes to give an account not previously heard and contribute to wider understandings of Hillsborough.</p> <p>In 1989 <i>FAN</i>'s 18-year-old protagonist John Finch (Finchy) follows Nottingham Forest, week in week out. In 2004 he is a secondary school teacher in Southern England. Moving between time periods, the novel highlights the continuing presence of events at Hillsborough in Finchy's life as he battles with the repercussions of his experience. Alongside this runs a documentary-style presentation of facts, relating to the socio-political state of football in the 1980s. These were derived from extensive research into personal accounts (from the Hillsborough Independent Panel documentation and football blogs, forums and writing); government reports and inquiries into footballing disasters including the 'Popplewell Inquiry into Crowd Safety at Sports Grounds' (1985); 'The Hillsborough Stadium Disaster Inquiry' (Taylor Report, 1990); 'The Report of the Hillsborough Independent Panel' (2012); and live footage of the build-up to the disaster and the disaster itself. They counteract misrepresentations of drunk and unruly fans inflicting the tragedy upon themselves, a narrative which only began to unravel with the Hillsborough Independent Panel in 2012, resulting in the second inquest and verdict in 2016 that the 96 victims were unlawfully killed. The novel opens with a list of reports and inquiries undertaken between 1924 and 1986 relating</p> | | |

to safety at sports grounds, highlighting findings ‘forgotten’ or ignored by those who continue to foster misunderstandings and misrepresentations. This hybrid approach enables *FAN* to operate as a gateway text, prompting readers to delve further, challenging preconceptions, and creating new perspectives on this past.

FAN also examines working-class life in the East Midlands during the late 80s and early 90s. In contrast to a focus on hooliganism and violence which often characterises football writing on this era, *FAN* reflects on the relationship between cultural identity and place, and the key role football plays (or played) in local communities and youth culture. It also illuminates shifts in our understanding of mental health, trauma, and attitudes to perceived justice. One of the first texts to contrast the sanitised, gentrified modern game with the working-class game of the 1980s, it highlights significant changes since the Taylor report, and how emphasis on greater safety (and resulting rise in ticket prices) has taken the game away from grass roots support. *FAN* uses confessional mode – more often associated with a liberal elite – in a decisively working-class narrative. Beyond the story of a working-class boy made middle-class professional, it argues strongly that the protagonist’s experience is mediated by, and can only be told through, narratives of class and geographical alienation. It appropriates almost Romantic ideologies of individual suffering and isolation and uses them to complicate the reader’s idea of what it means to be ‘educated’ or on the margins.

3. References to the research

Rhodes, D. (2014) *FAN – A Novel*. London: Arcadia Books. ISBN: 9781909807808. [Authored book]. Submitted REF2.

Rhodes was interviewed by BBC World Service on the 25th Anniversary of Hillsborough (15.04.2014) about *FAN*, football culture, and his experience at Hillsborough, and was an invited panel member discussing Hillsborough Voices (07.02.2017) alongside the author Kevin Sampson, Hillsborough justice campaigner Andy Burnham, and Shelia Coleman (Hillsborough Justice Campaign). The contribution of *FAN* to football fiction is considered in McGowan, L. (2019) *Football in Fiction: A History*. London: Routledge (Pages 60, 81, 110, 126, 129, 152) and *FAN* was included in The Guardian article ‘Top 10 books about football’ (03.02.2021)

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/feb/03/top-10-books-about-football-david-f-ross-theres-only-one-danny-garvey>

Reviews include the Times Higher Educational Supplement (26.06.2014) and Booklist (American Libraries Association – July 2014). Rhodes gave talks related to *FAN* at events including the Edinburgh International Book Festival (18.08.2015), Manchester Football Writing Festival (6.9.2014), Lowdham Book Festival (28.6.2014), and Humber Mouth Festival (16.11.2014).

4. Details of the impact

Rhodes’ novel, *FAN* (2014), brings new insights into the events of the 15th April 1989 and their repercussions, benefitting those directly affected by the disaster, broader readership, and bringing a different perspective to wider understandings of the tragedy.

Impact on those directly affected by the tragedy and contribution to wider understandings of the Hillsborough disaster.

The resonance that *FAN* has found with those directly affected by Hillsborough is in part evidenced by its inclusion in the chapter on Hillsborough in *Forever Forest: The Official 150th Anniversary History of the Original Reds* (2015). Club historian Don Wright writes of how the Forest fans experience of Hillsborough has been ‘unconsidered, unacknowledged’ and ‘rarely heard’ and draws attention to the trauma experienced by Forest players and supporters. He continues to detail how Rhodes ‘graphically tells what it was like in his outstanding 2014 novel *FAN*’ [5.1]. Further evidence of the effect the book had on those at Hillsborough was initially indicated through unsolicited emails to Rhodes through his website and evidenced here by individual statements kindly provided for the purposes of this case study. Damian Kavanagh, Hillsborough survivor and campaigner, writes: ‘I am grateful that Danny contributed to what it was like to see the disaster from the other end of the pitch [...] Hillsborough has never been about football for me. It was the human story, the tragedy, the pain and the deceit... and the fightback to recover the Truth. I have always felt the Nottingham story is the

forgotten story of Hillsborough. Well that, and the story of those who escaped death and acted as the rescuers on their own and collective initiative. [...] It was so important that Danny got his facts right. He did just that. I am grateful for the research he did, for lending his first-hand experience to the subject, and for helping explain what happened in just a straightforward truthful manner. [...] It's heartening to experience people who stand up for what is right and fair. Danny has done that.' Steve Wright was 15 when he went to watch Nottingham Forest at Hillsborough. He writes: 'I remember going to school the following week and those of us who had been there feeling helpless, adrift. We were part of something dreadful, but we weren't [...] Twenty-five years later the novel FAN was published and put into the public domain the feelings that have always gnawed away at us. For all of those years the families of the 96 football fans who died had been fighting for justice. [...] We didn't want to compete, we hadn't been through anything like the horror that those families had. Yet, we watched fellow fans die, [...] we had been left alone in our own sense of pain, frustration and even guilt that it wasn't us laid on those stretchers. FAN gave voice to all of that [...] [a]t a personal and collective level it said it was okay to feel the way we did when we returned to school as teenagers, changed but not understanding how, and it was okay to say this is my story too, just a different part of the whole.' [5.2]

New insights brought in relation to Hillsborough resulted in Rhodes contributing to acts of remembrance for the 25th anniversary of the tragedy; including speaking about his experience from the perspective of a Forest fan on BBC World Service's Witness (15.04.2014); contributing to the Football Supporter Federation article, *Remembered: The Hillsborough Disaster* (11.04.2014); and an extract of *FAN* being published on the Nottingham Forest News website (15.04.2014) [5.3]. In 2015, author and Hillsborough survivor Kevin Sampson asked Rhodes to contribute to *Hillsborough Voices: The Real Story Told by the People Themselves* (2016). Compiled and edited by Sampson, and in association with the Hillsborough Justice Campaign, *Hillsborough Voices* brings together accounts of those at Hillsborough or who played a key role in the search for justice. Rhodes is one of 18 contributors and the only Nottingham Forest fan, and was invited to be a member of a panel discussing *Hillsborough Voices* (07.02.2017) alongside the author Kevin Sampson; Hillsborough justice campaigner, Mayor of Manchester and ex-Cabinet Minister Andy Burnham; and Sheila Coleman of the Hillsborough Justice Campaign. Burnham's introduction to *Hillsborough Voices* writes of the need for these 'authentic Hillsborough voices [...] to echo through the decades and centuries to come.' [5.4a]. Reviews give further insights as to its significance and include: 'It is important on any number of levels. First and foremost, it gives us the opportunity to hear those voices that the authorities wanted for so long to drown out.' (LSE Blog – 26.05.2016) [5.4b]. Additionally, Rhodes contributed to Mike Nicholson's *The Hillsborough Disaster: In Their Own Words* (2016) which includes a foreword by Margaret Aspinall, Chairman of the Hillsborough Family Support Group [5.5a]. Extracts from this publication (including a contribution from Rhodes) feature in an Independent article *Hillsborough Disaster: Witnesses give their account of the events that led to a tragedy* (25.05.2016) [5.5b].

Impact of FAN on its readership. Evidenced by media coverage, blog posts and reviews, *FAN*'s readership highlight the emotional and cultural resonance of *FAN*, emphasising the authentic and moving nature of the narrative and its ability to echo with personal experience. Media coverage includes: Times Higher Educational Supplement (26.06.2014) 'brings back at a sweep that grim era when football fans died at matches. This painfully compelling tale of a fan who, 20 years on, can never forget that day is like a relentless drumbeat inside your head'; the Australian football culture magazine *The Thin White Line* (12.12.2014) 'FAN is a novel grounded in authenticity. Rhodes evokes time and place without sacrificing story. A compelling book'; Booklist, American Library Association (July 2014) highlights the 'spare, atmospheric prose, and credits FAN as 'an affecting novel'; and *The Daily Mail* (17.04.2014) wrote 'At times stylistically reminiscent of David Peace's *The Damned United* [...] it's no wonder Rhodes' depiction of disaster and ensuing PTSD has the ring of authenticity: he was at Hillsborough that fateful day' [5.3].

Reviews by an influential community of book bloggers (an indicator of their reach being a combined Twitter following of approximately 30,000) include: 'Raw, intense and profound, it is a book that will stay with you' (Bleach House Library - 24.04.2014); 'A cracking and compulsive read which drives you relentlessly on – football, the eighties, relationships and growing up – it's all in

there' (Football Book Reviews - 15.08.2014); 'sharp, raw and convincing [...] The emotion and feeling screams out of the page' (Random Things Through My Letterbox - 20.04.2014); 'It is brutal in places, yet compelling and thought provoking' (Never Imitate - 24.05.2014); 'dark, brave and completely enthralling [...] I found the plot really thought-provoking and impactful' (Book Drunk - 26.03.2014); 'painful and deeply moving [...] incredibly emotive' (Books with Bunny - 15.04.2014); 'one of the best books I have ever read for impassioned impact, [...] absolute authenticity and pure emotional resonance.' Liz Love Books (12.08.2015) [5.6]. Reviews on Amazon (4.2/5* from 33 ratings and 29 reviews) and Good Reads (4.07/5* from 76 ratings and 23 reviews) further evidence readers' emotional response to the novel, and how it chimes with their personal cultural experiences. Examples include [5.7]:

- 'I found myself transported back in time and able to relate to the novel's social themes and protagonist.'
- '[A]s a lad from a post-industrial drab midland's town [...] this struck many chords with me. The musical, political and cultural references were pervasive.'
- 'I re-signed a contract with Adidas sambas and dusted down the Roses albums [...] It's a little gem of recall of memories and times past.'
- '[B]rilliantly conveys the loneliness involved in pursuing answers to events that took place many years ago [...] It should have a deep effect on everyone that reads it.'
- 'Unimaginable horror is handled with straightforward honesty that will break your heart.'

Documenting a lost culture and experience, making a distinctive contribution to football writing. *FAN* foregrounds football's relationship to community identity, and contrasts football in the 80s and 90s to today's sanitised and packaged offering. It focuses on the experience of working-class fans whose lives were marked out in football matches and travelled week in week out to support their team. Lee McGowan in his monograph *Football in Fiction: A History* (2019), highlights the perspective *FAN* offers on disenfranchised fans (p.81) and the centrality of match attendance and a 'love of a club' (p.110) [5.8]. In his Guardian review of Andrew Cartwright's (2016) novel *Iron Town*, Mark Blacklock comments that both *Iron Town* and *FAN* foreground the role of football in community identity and culture, detailing *FAN*'s 'melancholic reassessment of hometown roots.' He continues: 'In the hands of such writers the football novel is becoming a regional lament and a fictional reimagining of our nation.' [5.9] Reflecting this, Rhodes was invited to talk about football and its links to community, childhood and nostalgia at the inaugural Manchester Football Writing Festival (in association with the National Football Museum) in September 2014.

Although Hillsborough is the pivotal event of the novel, *FAN* also highlights the dangerous state of football grounds in the 70s and 80s and the sad inevitability of the tragedy. The Thin White Line says of *FAN* (12.12.2014) 'Rhodes recreates the world of the Saturday afternoon football terrace. Crammed together in perilous conditions in pens unfit for animals, voices thundering around decrepit stadiums.' Booklist (American Library Association) wrote: 'Rhodes alternates between past and present, between home and away, exploring the neglect that led to the tragedy [and] the massive cultural changes that followed.' [5.3] Readers' reviews and comments also reference *FAN*'s depicting of a lost culture and experience, crediting it as 'a remarkable evocation of the pre-Premiership era of English football' [5.6]; 'literally describing what is now a lost world'; and showing how the game has 'changed beyond recognition for its fans', making *FAN* a 'seminal piece of football fiction for future generations.' [5.7]. Steve Wilson, Match of the Day commentator said of the novel: 'I feel exhausted/moved/uplifted/shattered' and '[i]f you watched football in the 1980s, you'll want to read it. If you started watching the game post-Hillsborough, you MUST read it.' [5.10]

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

5.1 Wright, D. (2015) *Forever Forest: The Official 150th Anniversary of the Original Reds*. Stroud: Amberley Publishing. ISBN 9781445661315. (pp. 206-207)

5.2 Testimonials from those directly affected by Hillsborough.

5.3 Collated media coverage.

5.4 (a) Sampson, K. (2016) *Hillsborough Voices: The Real Story Told by the People Themselves*. London: Ebury Press. ISBN 9780091955625 (b) LSE Review

<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lseviewofbooks/2016/05/26/book-review-hillsborough-voices-the-real->

[story-told-by-the-people-themselves-by-kevin-sampson-in-association-with-the-hillsborough-justice-campaign/](#)

5.5 (a) Nicholson, M. (2016) *The Hillsborough Disaster: In Their Own Words*. Stroud: Amberley Publishing. ISBN: 9781445634869 (b) <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/hillsborough-disaster-witnesses-give-their-accounts-of-the-events-that-led-to-a-tragedy-a7039796.html>

5.6 Collated blog coverage.

5.7 Readers' reviews from Amazon <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Fan-Danny-Rhodes/dp/190980780X> and Good Reads https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/21523396-fan#other_reviews plus PDF of collated examples.

5.8 McGowan, L. (2019) *Football in Fiction: A History*. London: Routledge. (Pages 60, 81, 110, 126, 129, 152)

5.9 Mark Blacklock's Guardian review <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/may/20/iron-towns-by-anthony-cartwright-review>

5.10 PDF Arcadia Books publicity material and associated social media.