A first glance books dealing with two Powell and Pressburger films of the 1940s and Danny Boyle’s Trainspotting, just fifty years later, may seem to address subjects with little common ground. Look again though. Neither of P&P’s films, I Know Where I’m Going! and A Matter of Life and Death (clunkingly re-titled Stairway to Heaven in the US), nor Boyle’s 1996 cult classic belongs in either of the critically revered traditions of the British cinema: both are to one side of the realist strand which, admittedly, won British films a new level of approval during the First World War, and belong as little to the literary values properly enshrined in the postwar oeuvre of David Lean, Carol Reed, and others.

Though, as one writes about these twin arms of Britain’s ‘quality’ cinema, it is well to remember that there were always other things going on in the studios dotted round London, things other than, say, The Way Ahead (1944) or Great Expectations (1946). There was a strong line of popular comedy which took in, not just the critically valorized and affectionately remembered Ealing comedies (which, surprisingly, Mike Leigh has claimed as a major influence), but also the filmed versions of the Aldwych farces in the 1930s (some remade in the 1950s), the naturalistic successes such as Genevieve (1953) and Doctor in the House (1954), the broad ‘CARRY on’ celebrations of national stereotypes, and in a more intellectual and surreal mode the ‘Monty Python’ outrages of the 1970s. There was also the string of profitable costume melodramas which, at the time, only the public loved, and other kinds of genre film-making (thrillers, war films, adventures) which may have received less than their due from up-market critics because they smashed more of Hollywood than of Denham. When one considers this sort of range, the achievements of P&P, remarkable as they are, seem less solitary in their difference from the prestige arms of their contemporary British cinema—and, as well, Trainspotting can be seen to have a history.

All three of the films under discussion are marked by an extraordinary visual and aural inventiveness which puts them at a considerable remove from the realist effects so prized by wartime and postwar filmmakers and critics. There are reasons for these effects being prized, partly because prewar British cinema often seemed at such a remove from the social reality in which they had their being, partly because, in the crucial decade of the 1940s, this kind of realism (descended from the documentary movement of the 1930s), along with the intelligent filiming of classic novels and plays, seemed to offer a viable oppositional cinema. And for a while it worked; and British film enjoyed a popularity and repute unprecedented in its history. But P&P weren’t interested in either realism or the faithful rendering of literary texts, and though Boyle’s film is derived from Irvine Welsh’s novel, wildly popular and critically respected for its regional authenticity as Murray Smith points out, its status depends hardly at all on its being a literary adaptation but rather as a stylistically daring film of its time.

Another point of comparison between the two Powell films and Trainspotting is that each belongs absolutely to the period of its production. I Know Where I’m Going! and A Matter of Life and Death resonate with 1940s thinking: IKWIG! is a film which questions the values by which people live, coming down firmly on the side of the anti-materialistic, full of the idealism about what might constitute a better postwar world, and AMOLAD, even more explicitly, affirms the need for Anglo-American cooperation in the interests of peace, following its wartime achievement. Trainspotting, in its non-judgmental view of the 1990s drug scene, asserts a tiny, tenacious streak of the romantic in its determinedly anti-Establishment approach to the youth culture of its time. Renton, its protagonist, is not, despite all the ugliness of the world he inhabits and confronts, a terminally lost cause.

All three of these books are the work of people who not merely know the respective films inside-out, but who are also well-equipped to place them in key contexts which ensure that they respect the interlocking demands of film history and film criticism. The two P&P books, in the often-idiiosyncratically chosen BFI Classics series (the Modern Classics series is even more so), are the work of two notable scholars in the annals of British film culture. They are each in their different ways highly readable and both succeed notably in evoking both the films under discussion and the circumstances, both industrial and more broadly cultural, in which they were made.

Ian Christie has been a pioneer in the matter of taking Powell and Pressburger seriously. In 1978 he edited and wrote three chapters of the BFI’s Powell, Pressburger and Others: his own contributions comprised an invaluable fifty-page ‘Chronicle’ of the achievements of the pair—pre- and post- the days of their extraordinary partnership, a critical analysis of the ‘Scandal of Peeping Tom’, and an account of the political machinations surrounding the production of The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp. His 1995 book, Arrows of Desire, was more directly concerned with critical appraisal of the films, including AMOLAD, which was intended to satisfy Powell’s ‘ambition to create a vast panorama of national history’ but was at the same time an ‘epic that balances on
the subtle point of what Chesterton termed a "tremendous trifle". Christie’s monograph on the film examines this paradox among several other influential strands in the film’s texture.

All films have complex relations to their time, and if we want to understand a particular text fully we shall need to be sensitive to contexts other than just what the film-maker is up to. Christie places AMOLAD in relation to what was going on in Hollywood in the forties: there was, for instance, a spate of two-world fantasies; to its function as a propaganda exercise in the cultivation of post-war Anglo-American relations; to the vogue for stylization and the influence of radio; and to the general tendencies of British cinema in the latter half of the forties. Further, Christie has the wide-ranging scholarly equipment that enables him to invoke, say, Shakespeare, Thomas Browne and Pilgrim’s Progress on the one hand in placing the film’s eloquence, playfulness and profundity, and on the other, the Hungarian writer Frigyes Karinthy’s Journey Round My Skull, an account of his experience of a brain tumour. And not to forget the references to the visual style of Things to Come, Korda’s 1936 paean to the idea of a scientific utopia. He recognizes the limits of auteurism as having ‘shed little light on working contexts or practices—on the relationship between the filmmakers and with their colleagues and materials’. To this end, he investigates the role of the Rank Organization and its prestige arm, the Independent Producers cartel of which P&P’s Archers Films was the most flamboyant member. He does justice to the contributions of the great designer Alfred Junge, the special effects whiz Percy ‘Poppa’ Day, Jack Cardiff’s use of colour cinematography as a key signifier (Earth is in colour whereas ‘up there’, as Marius Goring’s Heavenly Conductor sighs, ‘One is so starved for Technicolor’), and émigré Allan Gray’s ‘deft orchestration’ of a complexly resonant score; and, as well, the casting processes are canvassed. In surveying the contemporary critical reaction, reminding us that it was the first film chosen for a Royal Command Performance, Christie arrives finally at his assessment of the film as a choice example of English neo-romanticism, brushed with the ‘intellectual uncanny’. He writes of this strange and moving film as a culmination of developments industrial, aesthetic and ideological to that mid-forties point, and to re-view the film after reading the book is to ensure an enriched experience.

That is happily true of the other two excellent books under discussion too. Pam Cook has written widely on British romantic cinema (e.g., Fashioning the Nation: Costume and Identity in British Cinema) and it shows in the way she addresses IKWIG!, one of the most irresistible romances the screen has produced. Cook succeeds admirably in keeping the film whole before the reader while at the same time exploring in detail the individual contributions of such distinguished collaborators as (again, preceding their work on AMOLAD) Junge and Gray, and the uncredited work of famous costume designer, Elizabeth Haffenden. There is real skill in focusing on details, even on occasion the technicalities associated with these matters, without losing sight of the film as an entity, especially in relation to a film which, whatever its cerebral qualities, is above all a wonderfully emotional experience. For Cook, the costume plot is a ‘kind of storyboard’. Like Junge’s designs, it is another way of articulating the film’s affective and intellectual agenda.

Cook explores the influences on the film of the German studio, UFA, from which many émigrés made their presence felt in the look and sound of British film from the early thirties. IKWIG’s designer Junge joined UFA in 1920; its cinematographer, Erwin Hillier, was there from 1926 to 1928, and composer Grey worked there in the early thirties. Cook finds such similarities between Powell’s film and UFA alumnus F.W. Murnau’s Hollywood romantic classic, Sunrise, as to ‘suggest an unconscious relationship, one that goes deeper than the level of visual style or artistic tribute to what might have been called a collective world view, or a shared way of looking at things’. And Pressburger also had connections with UFA, though he tended to dismiss his period there. As well as the undoubtedly European resonance, there is also the background of Rank, the Independent Producers and the Archers to be taken into account, and Cook reads the film scrupulously in terms of geography, industry and ideology. Its basic plot is simple, even archetypal: a journey, a quest, obstacles and a reconciliation of opposites. As Cook says, though the model depends on a linear structure, ‘it allows for digression, delay and disruption’, as the peerless Wendy Hiller (with whom Cook had extensive discussions) as the film’s heroine reluctantly and painfully changes her materialist goal for a commitment of the heart. The book’s chronicle of the processes by which this comes about not merely places the film in the context of its time or as the product of its influences, but also accounts for its enduring power to move and delight.

Trainspotting is of course a world away in almost every possible way, and yet there is, among the incessant onslaught of its hectic visuals and soundtrack—both utterly integral to its pop culture framework—an identifiable note of romantic longing. Murray Smith’s brilliant addition to the BFI Modern Classics series is as alert to this as he is to, seemingly, every other aspect of this cult
success. Mercifully, the book is written by someone who not merely responds to the film’s exhilarating challenges, aesthetic and ideological, but brings to it an irreprouachable (and by no means dowdy) scholarship that enables him to evoke the film with piercing clarity and, like the two other books under discussion, to respond to its inter- and intra-national dynamics. Smith’s account places the film in relation to the novel’s runaway success, to the skilful reorganization of the screenplay which ditches the novel’s multiple narrators to make Renton’s voice and point of view crucial, and to the aptness of its timing. In regard to the latter, he refers to the way ‘the idea of the “New Lad” came to prominence in the earlier 1990s, marking a reassertion of traditional male values and prerogatives’.

Smith’s book is equally strong on the wider national life (inter alia the Punk legacy, Young British Art, as well as the drug culture, the fashion world and, elsewhere along the spectrum, the Edinburgh Festival) of which the film is a manifestation and on the formal properties of the film. He wants to demonstrate as well as situate the film’s habits. This is no tiresome hipster rave but a rigorous analysis of how the film works: how it uses Renton’s voice-over in its ‘playful mode of story-telling’; how it ‘establishes a dialectic between restless forward movement, and a series of frozen, Proustian moments which call up and demand reflection on the past’; its complex treatment of time; how it transforms the realist ethic enshrined in Grierson, the New Wave and Ken Loach into a kind of ‘black magic realism’. Like the film it celebrates, and in a style that is trenchant, elegant and spikily unexpected, Smith’s book provides not only a benchmark for the series but for all further exegeses on a great British cult classic.

All these books are admirable. They all carry the weight of serious scholarship without letting this become oppressive; they open up the texts that they examine without leaving them merely exposed in fragments; and they are all refreshingly free of that egoism that sometimes comes between writer and cherished film.

Brian McFarlane is Honorary Associate Professor in the School of Literary, Visual and Performance Studies, Monash University. He compiled The Encyclopedia of British Film for Methuen and the British Film Institute (2003) and is now co-authoring a book on British ‘B’ movies, from the 1930s to the 1970s.