

Public Libraries – Bourgeois Nostalgia and Myths of Neutrality

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Over the past few years, some public library authorities have attempted to reinvent their services: Hampshire Libraries in the south of England have their *Discovery Centre*¹ concept and Tower Hamlets in East London their *Ideas Stores*², for example. Despite these developments, the public knows that fundamentally these re-branded spaces are still libraries in the traditional sense. By removing the name *library* from these spaces, the logic goes that the image conjured up by that name disappears also, bringing about an increase in usage, particularly from those groups that have stayed away.

If libraries are *for all persons desiring to make use thereof*, as enshrined in the Public Libraries Act of 1964, why is that some people feel the library is not for them?

The genesis of the public library service in the United Kingdom is outside the scope of this piece, and has been documented elsewhere³. Depending on perspective, the foundation of Public Libraries was either a noble attempt by the Victorians to reduce the gap between the haves and have-nots, or a necessity for creating a literate workforce to further industrial capitalism, maintaining the hegemony of the British Empire. Since their inception, public libraries have been about providing the information and/or the recreational reading that the state wanted its people to know/experience. That information was naturally in book form. The librarian was the guardian of this store of human knowledge and experience and the quality, and civic value, was a given.

But society has moved apace, far more so than our library services, even those at the forefront of innovation.

Perhaps more than ever before, trust in government is at its lowest ebb. Turn out at the most recent general elections in the United Kingdom has been low (under sixty per-cent in 2001 and only just over sixty-one percent in 2005) and there is a growing sense that the mainstream political parties are one and the same. The British people were systematically lied to by the majority of their elected (or more likely un-elected) representatives about the rationale for war. There has been a general move from the public to the private sphere. Libraries are in danger of becoming obsolete in this culture of social retreat from civic engagement. Local authority spending faces efficiency savings

¹ <http://www3.hants.gov.uk/discoverycentres.htm>

² <http://www.ideastore.co.uk/>

³ See, for example Pateman, John (2005) Public libraries and the working classes *Library History* 21 (3), 189-194.

(cuts) year on year and less staff are expected to provide more with ever diminishing resources.

It is no surprise that, increasingly, people are getting their information needs satisfied from other sources than libraries, and who could blame them?

Libraries have been painfully slow to acknowledge the increasingly informal way people conduct their lives (in itself completely at odds with the library as a bastion of formality, order, classification and tranquillity). Librarians can no longer expect to be treated with deference by the public. The Internet, (for those who can afford access) has revolutionised access to information. For example, a library user looking for information on haemorrhoids once had two options if they did not want to go to their doctor. They could whisper the enquiry to a librarian or skulk amongst the health or medicine shelves for a long time. How much easier, and less embarrassing, for the individual with haemorrhoids (and internet access) it is today. If the sufferer cannot spell, *Google* will accept approximations to the spelling and other synonyms - how many library circulation systems do this?.

Commentators (usually of a middle class, usually writing in the broadsheet newspapers) are at pains to point out the democratic nature of public libraries. They point out that they are open to all. Anyone who has ever used a public library or worked in a public library will know this is utter nonsense. Libraries have excluded the most needy by a number of strategies, insidiously through bureaucratic joining procedures, and more directly - calling security, police etc. They also exclude through stock selection policy. When Victorian libraries opened for business to serve the “deserving poor”, they were more likely to see *The Times*, and not the newsheets and *Penny Dreadfuls* that were popular and circulated amongst those who were literate.

The same commentators will damn the newer incarnations of libraries, they complain there are too few books and too many computers. One senses a nostalgia for row upon row of monolithic bookshelves overseen by the librarian in starched skirt and bun, prehensile shushing finger pressed to pursed lips. Like much nostalgia, it looks a whole lot better with hindsight.

That the public library was ever a neutral space is preposterous. If libraries are open to all, why have these institutions invested so much energy in excluding people? One is reminded of the scene in *Kes* (Loach, 1969) where Billy, a working class young person from Barnsley is denied the opportunity to join his local library. Here is a young person with a specific information need - a book on falconry to facilitate his care of a young kestrel he has acquired. Access to this information will not just help Billy, it will transform his life.

The scene is superficially funny but it is also highly revealing in terms of information, society and justice. It begins with a Billy entering the library, conspicuous by his age (the other library users are much older) and his clothing (the attire worn by the rest of the public is very formal). For those reasons perhaps, he is singled out by librarian, who is female and is perhaps no more than ten years Billy's senior.

Librarian: Hey, are you a member?

Billy: What do you mean?

Librarian: Are you a member of the library?

Billy: I don't know about that, I only want a book on falconry, that's all.

Librarian: Well, you have to be a member, to take a book out.

Billy: But I only want one.

Librarian: Well, have you filled one of these forms in?

Billy takes a long, hard look at the form

Billy: No

Librarian: Well, you're not a member then. You'll have to take one of these home first, for your father to sign.

Billy: My dad's away.

Librarian: Well you can wait 'til he comes back home, can't you?

Billy: I don't mean that, I mean, he's left home.

Librarian: Oh, I see. Well in that case, your mother will have to sign it.

Billy: Aye, but she's at work and she'll not be home 'til tea time and it's Sunday tomorrow.

Librarian: There's no rush is there?

Billy: *(Pause)* I've never broke a book you know, I haven't torn it or...

Librarian: Well look at your hands, they're absolutely filthy! We'll end up with dirty books that way.

Billy: I don't read dirty books!

Librarian: I should hope you don't read dirty books – you're not old enough to read dirty books!

Billy: My mum knows one of the people who works here – that'll help, won't it?

Librarian: No, that doesn't help at all, you'll still have to have the back [of the form] signed. To be a member you'll have to have somebody, over 21, who is on the Borough electoral roll, to sign it for you.

Billy: Ah well, I'm over 21

Librarian: You're not over 21

Billy: But I vote.

Librarian: You don't vote!

Billy: I do! I vote for my mum. She doesn't like voting so I do it.

Librarian: You'll just have to wait for it, won't you?

Billy: Where would I find a book, then? In a shop, like?

Librarian: Well you'd have to go down the street, there's a second hand bookshop there. You'll find some down there.

The original book (Hines, 1968) begins the dialogue in the library slightly differently from the film adaptation:

“Got any books on hawks, missis?”

“Hawks?”

“I want a book on falconry.”

“I'm not sure, you'd better try ornithology.”

“What's that?”

“Under zoology.”

The librarian can only communicate in a language that whilst appropriate to her profession, is hardly appropriate in this particular instance. In both book and film, she does not even leave the counter to show Billy where the books might be on the shelves. Her major concern is whether or not Billy is a member of the library, even though, as a member of the public, he is perfectly entitled to be in the library.

In these representations, the librarian is duty-bound by the rules, she is custodian, gatekeeper, and – because knowledge is power – she is incredibly powerful, even though her demeanour, at face value, is far from tyrannical. She represents all that is held in high regard by nostalgics – she is the archetypal librarian.

In the book, when a customer approaches the counter, “The girl [librarian] attended to him immediately”, further emphasising the desk-bound nature of this librarian's world and in her actions ignoring the presence of Billy. The processing of the member's books is more important than dealing with this young person (who is not a part of this exclusive club). Billy also offers to sit at a table and read a book but the librarian states that this is not allowed, as he is not a member. “It's against the rules”.

The book and film are nearly forty years old. A similar scene, more or less, may have taken place in a public library near you, forty minutes ago.

Hines, Barry (1968) *A Kestrel for a knave* London: Michael Joseph

Loach, Ken (1969) *Kes* [film] Hollywood: United Artists

[The scene under discussion can also be accessed on You Tube]:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OzAGLlfarEg>