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Special Issue on Radical Bookshops

All White in the Public Library

John Pateman

What are we to make of the BBC2 White Season? What does it tell us about the white working class? And what is its relevance to public libraries? The BBC should be congratulated for their bravery in airing this series which was bound to stir up a certain level of controversy. Britain, the most class riddled country in the world, does not feel comfortable talking about class. It is now safe and acceptable to discuss race, gender, sexuality, disability, age and faith, but class is the final taboo. There is an inherent problem in designing a TV series about class because the media, like all professions, is dominated by the middle class. So it was inevitable that the White series was going to be a middle class view of working class people. However, BBC2 did well to avoid the worst stereotypes (as portrayed in programmes like *Eastenders* and *Wife Swap*) and constructed a realistic and challenging view of contemporary white working class culture.

The first programme in the series, *Last Orders*, told the story of the embattled Wibsey Working Men's Club in the city of Bradford. The Wibsey Club has been operating at a loss for several years and members' worries for their club mirror wider anxieties. With high unemployment and a perception that recent Asian immigrants receive the lion's share of Government benefits, members feel that their very community is under threat and that racial tensions could erupt at any time. Once regarded as the 'backbone of the nation' white working class communities like Wibsey now feel themselves the object of ridicule. They have been forgotten by a Labour government which is reluctant to acknowledge their existence and they have fallen off the edge of the policy agenda, with the smoking ban the latest example.

What can the public library do for communities like Wibsey? First and foremost they can work with the white working class community to celebrate its history and culture. This can be achieved via local history research and projects documenting how the area has developed over the years. This will demonstrate how the community has changed over time, in common with many other parts of the UK. The reasons for these changes can then be examined. This will create a natural bridge to explore the history and culture of other communities which

have moved into the area. Library programmes which are focused on inter generational and inter cultural projects are very successful at easing community tensions, building awareness and empathy between communities and developing social cohesion.

Rivers of Blood took a historical perspective on immigration and race relations. Forty years ago Enoch Powell, the maverick Conservative MP, gave a speech on immigration in which he predicted a future of racial strife in Britain. The 'rivers of blood' speech outraged the political establishment, who considered it both racist and inflammatory. However, the speech struck a chord with the public who wrote to him in their thousands, and London's dockers came out on strike in support.

Freedom of information and freedom of expression were at the heart of Powell's speech and these are also central to public library values. What the dockers were protesting about was that Powell was sacked for speaking out on a very important subject that was of great concern to them and their families. Nobody asked the white working class if they wanted large numbers of newcomers to settle in their communities. Those decisions were made by middle class professionals who did not live in these localities. The public library can play an important part in giving white working class people a voice and a place where they can air their views and concerns. This has inherent risks and needs to be carefully and sensitively managed but if successful it can make working class people feel listened to and valued. Public libraries pride themselves on their neutrality and they are one of the very few remaining free democratic public spaces in our communities.

White Girl was a compelling film about an inspirational 11 year old girl, Leah, and her family's relocation to an entirely Muslim community in Bradford. It explored the hopes and tensions that can arise when two very different cultures collide. For Leah's mother Debbie the move is about getting away from an abusive partner but being the only white family in a wholly Asian community was not part of her plan. For Leah, the feeling of isolation is heightened at school when she discovers that she and her siblings are the only white kids. But Leah views the Muslim culture and faith with innocent fascination, finding a refuge of calm and safety which is in sharp contrast to the pain and sadness at home. Befriending Yasmin, her young Asian neighbour, and with the gentle guidance of teachers at school, Leah learns that her new world is not as alien as she first feared. However, nothing prepares Debbie for the shock of seeing her daughter wearing a hijab.

This programme follows the theme of inter cultural learning and public libraries can play a significant role in helping different communities to understand each other. This can be achieved by putting on displays and exhibitions and holding events which explore aspects of community culture. Sport and the arts provide a very safe platform for these issues to be discussed around and can lead onto more profound subjects. The popular media constantly demonises Muslims, and public libraries can help to portray more positive images of this much maligned community. Having stock relevant to both white working class and Muslim communities is also very important and this can help to promote togetherness rather than division. The recent MLA proposals on managing 'extremist' stock should be vigorously opposed by public libraries which already have stock policies for dealing with these issues.

The Poles are Coming looked at the issues created by the recent large influx of migrant workers from EU accession states. This phase of immigration is different from those that preceded it in two respects – the numbers are much larger and the immigrants are our fellow white Europeans. But this does not make it any easier for local communities to accept. Listening to some people in Peterborough it would appear that the city is being pushed to breaking point by the arrival of a huge number of Eastern Europeans. Some want the Poles, and others, to go home. So does the city of Gdansk which now cannot find enough workers to fill its shipyards or build its football stadium for Euro 2012.

There are few communities in the UK which have not been affected by this issue. Places like Lincolnshire where I work, and which have seen little demographic change, are now having to manage large numbers of new arrivals. This is a challenge to migrant workers and to local communities, and public libraries can work with both to ease tensions and build mutual understanding. Migrant workers are attracted to public libraries because they provide free internet access for them to email home and look up first language websites. Public libraries are an ideal venue for different communities to meet and build awareness of each other's needs, many of which are shared – a decent home, a good school, a secure job, health and happiness. Positive action can be taken to recruit migrant workers to public library services and work can be done with local schools to develop community solidarity.

Work with primary schools is particularly important and The Primary captured a term in the life of Welford Primary School in Birmingham's Handsworth area. Welford is a thriving school with pupils from 17 different ethnic backgrounds and only a handful of white pupils. The film followed headmaster Chris Smith and the pupils at Welford revealing what life is like for nine year old Nathaniel, 11 year old Aleyx and their diverse peer group, Mariam, Saubia, Conrad and Xhosa. The film was an inspiring example of how a charismatic head and his staff can navigate their way around the minefield of community relations and build a cohesive school based community.

Although the school library was not featured in this film, public libraries are well placed to work with local schools and raise cultural awareness through reading, story times, talks, events and displays. School Library Services can supply materials for the classroom which support national curriculum areas such as Citizenship. Public libraries can work with the Ethnic Minority Achievement Service and Traveller Education Service to support pupils for whom English is not their first language or those who do not have a cultural tradition of going to school.

Working with young people is very important because this will help to shape the views and attitudes of the next generation, but working with older people is vital as well. The final programme in the White series, All White in Barking, looked at how a traditional white working class community in East London was dealing with demographic change. Lifetime Barking residents Susan and Jeff have never said hello to their Nigerian neighbours, insisting that 'they are not our people'. Dave is so angry by the influx of non white faces to Barking that he becomes a BNP activist – yet both his daughters have relationships with the very people he is lashing out against.

Public libraries can work with people like Dave to find out why he is angry and what this is based on. If it springs from popular media denigration of new arrivals then the public library can help Dave understand the real situation. This could be through the production of myth busting information giving the facts and fiction about immigration, the real numbers and the stories behind them. This can show that new arrivals are not taking our jobs, schools and health service away from us; that migrant workers do not jump the Council house queue or hospital waiting lists; that refugees often live in appalling accommodation conditions and are exploited by employers; that asylum seekers are not legally allowed to work and have to live on £35 Morrison vouchers each week. I'm sure that if Dave knew these facts, and not the hate peddled by the Daily Mail and the BNP, then an appeal could be made to his white working class sense of injustice and fair play.

The White series gives public libraries the opportunity to help build solidarity between the White working class and the new arrivals which have moved into their communities. The public library can broker these relationships and help people understand that the real enemy is not their fellow workers but the powers that be. The public library can promote positive images of the white working class and new arrivals which are attacked and denigrated in the media as 'white trash' and 'chavs' or job stealing migrants. As Andrew Anthony has pointed out:

'It's the children of people such as Dave who live cheek by jowl with new arrivals and adapt to rapid change. They are the ones who really embrace people from other countries and cultures by forming relationships and raising children together. Meanwhile, the liberal arts community, for all its eloquence in anti racism, is far more inclined to retreat to private schools and affluent enclaves, the better to maintain a homogenous culture while pronouncing on the benefits of diversity.'

[Andrew Anthony. *How Britain turned its back on the white working class*. The Observer 2 March 2008.]

John Pateman
Head of Libraries, Learning & Inclusion
Lincolnshire County Council