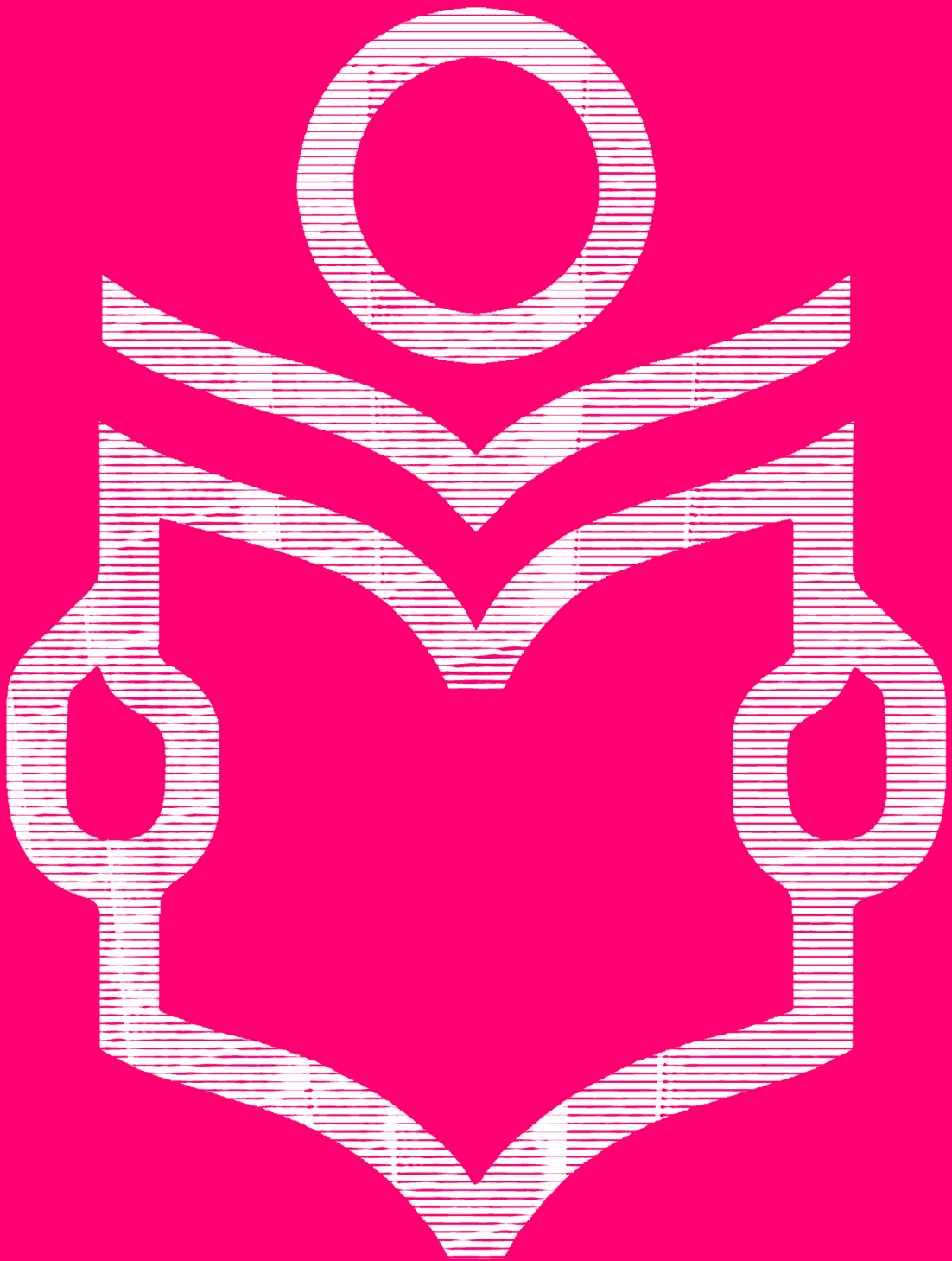
BRUM LIBRARY ZINE



INTRODUCTION

Libraries give us stories and poems. They give us knowledge and joy, inspiration and community. Libraries give us power.

As writers and library-lovers, we never took Birmingham's libraries for granted. Long before they were threatened with senseless closures, we cherished them; proud to live in a city with such a rich landscape of libraries.

When we heard about the council's threatened cuts to community library services, we had to act. We spoke to other Birmingham writers and invited them to join us in a protest. The writers here are a snapshot of the vibrant literary culture of the city: novelists, poets, playwrights, essayists, historians and journalists, all indebted in different ways to the power of libraries to transform lives and nurture readers and writers.

Each writer was paired with one of Birmingham's 35 community libraries. From Acocks Green to Yardley Wood, our writers went exploring. They visited their libraries for micro-writing residencies, spent time chatting to the library staff and users, and created new pieces of work inspired by their visits. The result is a gazetteer of our city's amazing libraries. Each unique distillation of staff, visitors, location, memory, power and magic is recorded here for all to see what we have and what we face losing.

We hope you enjoy this celebration of our community libraries and we urge you to join us in the fight to protect what we love, because once they are gone, they are gone forever.

Liz Berry and Catherine O'Flynn

ACOCKS GREEN

Pete Paphides

Hello old friend,

How strange to be checking in with you again after all this time. I might not have visited you for a long time, but you often visited me in my dreams, just as the significant places of our formative years are wont to do. And if there was a brief period when I was avoiding you, that was my fault. Not that you'll remember, but it was 1981 and I'd already had my library cards for three years. I'll never forget the proprietorial glow as I removed the blue cardboard pouch from my pocket. Even now, I can still hear the click and thump of the stamper on the inside cover of my selections.

I was obsessed with comics – not the cool American ones but their parochial British counterparts. And it was this obsession which sowed the seeds of my self-imposed exile. After taking out Denis Gifford's Happy Days: A Century of British Comics, I'd been inspired to make my own comic – 5 Star Fun – using sheets of chip paper from my parents' nearby fish and chip shop. Absent-mindedly, I left the handcrafted artefact inside the book I'd just returned. I turned to leave and as I did so, was called back by the librarian with chestnut hair a bit like Frida from ABBA. "IS THIS YOURS?" she bellowed. Mortified, I scuttled out, only to realise this now gave her all the time in the world to mock my infantile attempts to emulate the likes of Whoopee! and Krazy.

It would be two years before I would return. In that time, I missed your Penicillin-pink radiators and the reading area which I would henceforth use to place newly-acquired Panini football stickers into my album. No-one talked about mindfulness back then, but I think the reverie of that ritual undertaken in the carpeted comfort of those equidistantly spaced desks was as much the appeal as the act of placing Trevor Francis and Cyrille Regis in their allotted squares.

And now, more than forty years later, I approach you from Jeffries' hardware shop across the road. Everything else in Acocks Green is something different to what it used to be. Woolworths, Don Miller's Hot Bread Kitchen and Easy Listening records are all gone. It's just you and Jeffries left, locked in the mother of all staring contests. Passing the display cases featuring models of railway carriages that were made in Birmingham, I gaze up at the skylight and remember how cozy it felt to be in the same spot on dark November afternoons after alighting the bus from school, when respite from the rain also offered an incentive to get my homework done. I didn't stop to think about it at the time, just what it meant to have this at my disposal. A neutral space that knows nothing about your history, your problems or privations – and therefore welcomes you with no judgement.

Back in those days, you were the ante-room of a future that was unknown to me. What I didn't realise was that – through the work of P.G. Wodehouse, Douglas Adams, Gerald Durrell, Hunter Davies, Clive James and countless musician biographies – you helped create that future. So, I'm back here to say thank you – not just from me, but on behalf of the thousands more futures you also helped to shape.

ASTON

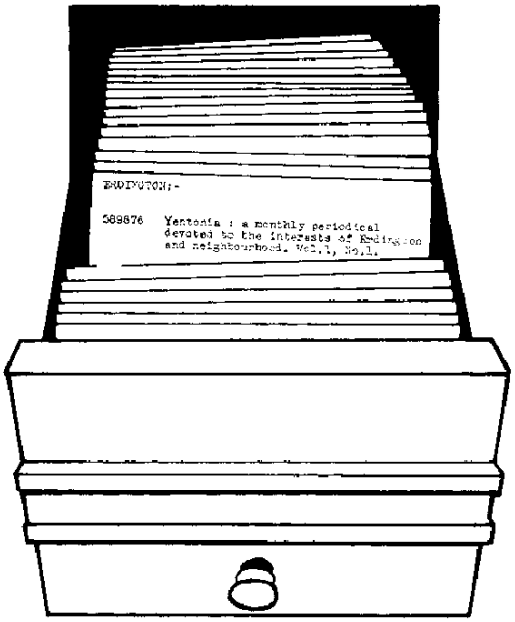
Catherine O'Flynn

Forward!

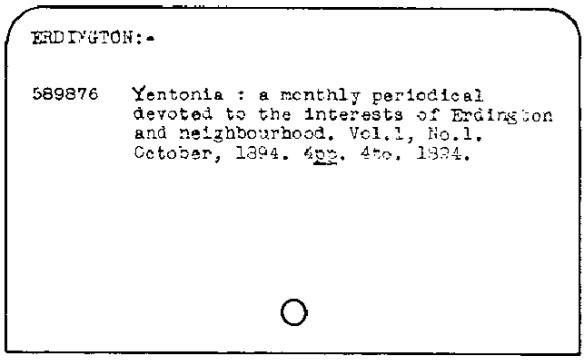
In reverse chronology

Do you remember how it used to be? Squeezed inside two small rooms, tucked away in a museum. A small jolt each time you looked up from the page to find yourself face to face with a heritage fire engine. For Irfan, reading aloud to Zubi, it was hard to shake the feeling that they too were relics not readers.

It was something of an endeavour to even step foot in the library. Like a fairy-tale quest, the path was strewn with obstacles and false clues: opening hours so limited few could make it; a skeleton staff on agency contracts; a web page linking to an unknown library in America. Everything felt provisional, overlooked.



Card index (1941 to 1975)



Index card

The staff were committed despite it all, running story times and reading challenges. They did everything they could on those Tuesdays and Thursdays. Two short afternoons for the school kids to barely arrive and pull homework from deadweighted bags before the computers were turned off and then the lights.

This was Aston. Nowhere else in the city had as many young people. Nowhere else had as many futures.

Each time he visited, Irfan felt unsettled as he passed the building that lay just around the corner. It was imposing and grand, with an octagonal tower and steps leading up to heavy, double doors. Over the entrance, carved on a stone pediment were the words: 'Free Library'. The doors remained locked though with no sign of anyone inside. Irfan would stand outside, holding Zubi's warm hand in his and wonder what it meant.

Two years later the library moved just a little way along the street from the fire station into the Learning Centre. The hours were still few, the library still boxed inside another building, and it's true that some missed the presence of the fire engines but the loss was made up for by the extra books and space and staff. The library became fuller, adult learners used it to study for their classes. Within a few years the opening hours were doubled. Irfan spent his Saturdays there, working for his A-levels, reading poetry, texting Iqra.

Eight years later again and lorries began pulling up at the old building around the corner. Furniture was unloaded, boxes and crates of books and periodicals and maps were carried in. As the truth gradually emerged it seemed so obvious. The library was moving into the library! But it was so much grander than Irfan had ever known. A sweeping staircase with wide brass handrails led him up to a reading room filled with books and newspapers. The library was a palace, an ornate temple, like something out of the picture books he borrowed each week from the children's section. Hope radiated from Aston, spreading to other parts of the city. Soon there were libraries in nearby Nechells and Aston Cross too. Irfan held his father's hand tightly as they marched along the streets feeling so proud to live in the greatest city in the world.

BALSALL HEATH

Malachi McIntosh

Remember the invitations to space —

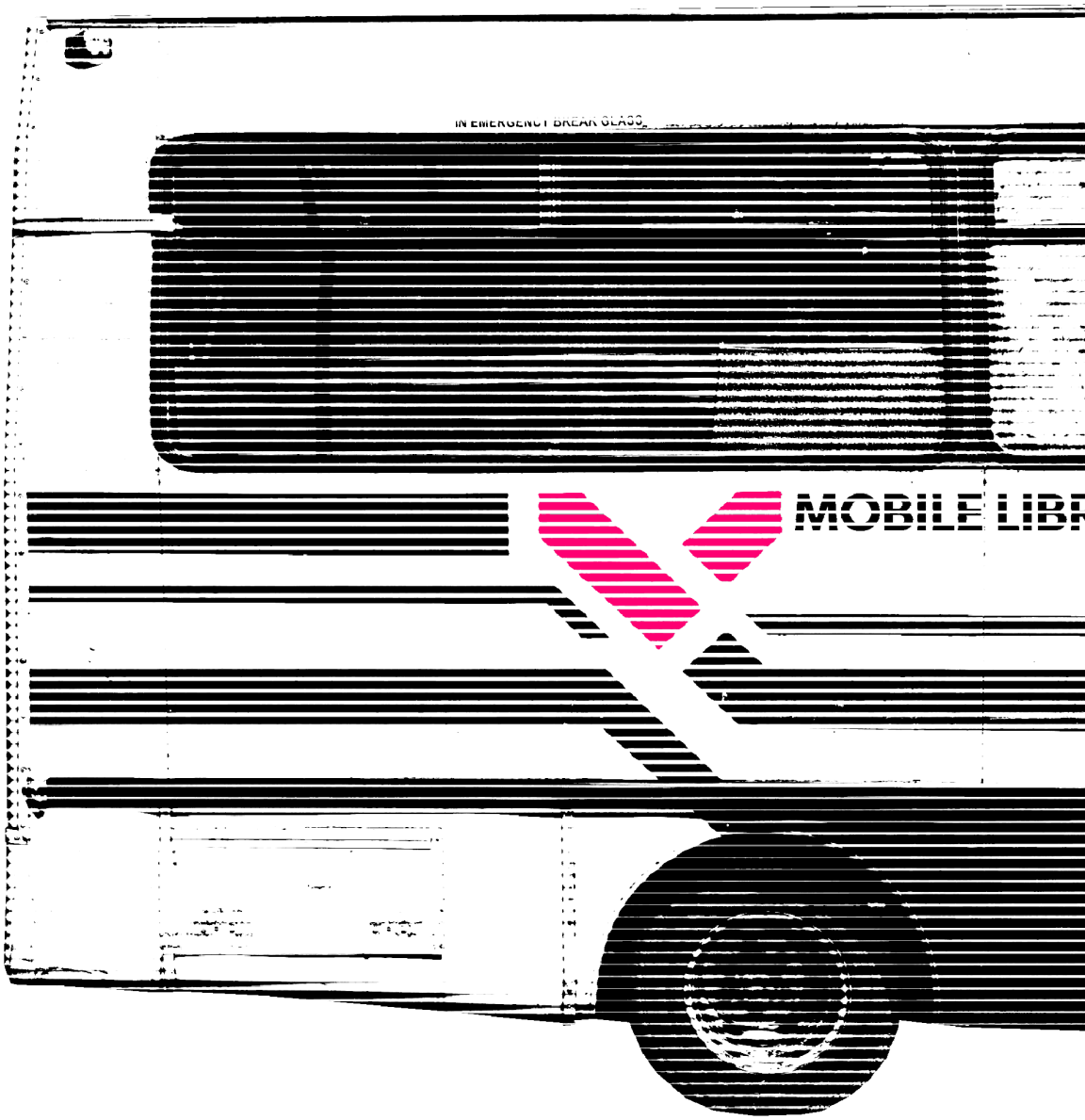
You and mom on the high street,
the turn away from sounds — to stillness,
the quiet and lines on the shelves:
Phillis Wheatley, *From the Mixed-up Files,*
all the Narnias. Your own name on
your own card. Upheld.

Then much later with friends,
goofing, usually, on the top floor
before something else.
Florida drives and sunlight, cassette tapes
('1979', 'Stomp Proud or Die')
But even then *The Assassin's Apprentice,*
Owen Deathstalker, The Wheel of Time.
In bed. Overhead.

A lifetime in libraries.
Down in Streatham
with that FICTION section the breadth of both your arms —
the silence of your bedsit
no chairs, no table, the floor
and yet the roar of *American Pastoral,*
Underworld, Beloved.

A lifetime in libraries, and now with him, here, in this one. You and your son on the high street, the turn away from sounds to stillness; the quiet and lines on the shelves, the colours: Paw Patrol is on a roll!, *Spidey and His Amazing Friends*, all the Peppa Pigs. These new invitations to space: space made or stolen or split open out of the noise, the loss, the hungry stomachs of everyday life, and yet this kid, here, together in the centre of these stories, in this place, re-wombed; his head in the crook of your neck—

Wherever they go, and whatever happens to them on the way, in that enchanted place they will always be playing.



BARTLEY GREEN

Helen Cross

Should Jinny join the circus or the library?

She's had many offers from the circus, but none from the library. That's not how it works.

She'll make cash with the circus, but nothing with the library.

She'll travel the world with the circus, but just cross the road to the library. She imagines disorder at the circus, order at the library. Maybe.

At the circus she'll be ogled as entertainment, but at the library, she'll be… what? Who knows; she's not joined yet.

Some Carnegie Libraries have separate reading rooms for men and women, but Bartley Green's is just one small room. Jinny was ten in 1905 when it opened, right opposite her cottage. She had just 'a talent for embroidery' to distinguish her. The circus scout is a long time ahead. Though really who knows what Jinny's talents were.

Because a year after the library opens, eleven-year-old Jinny falls off her bike and fractures her skull. 1906 doesn't know much about the pituitary gland and there's no treatment for hyperpituitarism, so Jinny keeps growing.

Of course, she's bullied and mocked at school ('Hey, freak of the week, how's the view up there?'). It hurts to sit all day on a wooden chair.

She's shy and in pain. She's taken out of school, gets a job at the chocolate factory but by 18, she's 7ft 11 inches tall. And now not just Cadbury's but, officially, the world's tallest person.

Her auburn hair grows too, and she wears it in two thick plaits down to her ankles.

Despite the lucrative, gasp-inducing splendour of her entire self, Jinny turns down the circus. Instead of touring Europe in a big top, she locks the door, reclines on an extra-long sofa, peeps through her window at the little library.

And then, one day, yes, surely, Jinny joins.

(What if reclusive Jinny had been offered not just a ticket for the library, but a job in the library? The tiniest library run by the world's tallest librarian.)

Several times a week Jinny strides up five stone steps and, ducking, pushes through the double doors like a gunslinger entering a saloon. She makes herself known, stares them all down, stands fully erect, no stooping, no curvature of the spine.

Jinny's radiant in the flattering light (auburn hair touching the ceiling) as she scans the hardbacks. She's a private person, dignified, respected, moving freely through a well-stocked public library.

Hold that image.

Because by 1972 she's not wandering the shelves, she's on the shelves. A photograph of her skeleton and a copy of her death certificate, included in the Guinness Book of Records. Why her skeleton? They put her bones on display, for fifty years in the dusty archives of the University of Birmingham, in the anatomical section, exactly as she dreaded.

Don't picture it.

Instead imagine Jinny's chosen her books, handed over her blue cardboard wallet, got the inky stamp, and gone to sit in the sunlit library garden to read. No questions asked.

BIRCHFIELD

Philip Holyman

Something draws me to second cities. The year I spent in Melbourne was the best of my life. Since then, I've spent over a decade in Birmingham, for better and for worse.

Tasked with writing about libraries in danger, I'm sitting in Birchfield, twenty-five world record javelin throws away from Alexander Stadium. That name gets me thinking of another second city, and a library lost in antiquity — a literal literary casualty of political upheaval.

The Fifth Edition of the Lonely Planet guide to Egypt bears a faded handwritten Dewey Decimal mark — 916.20455. There is not a single date stamp on the inside label. This book hasn't left the building for some time.

Its authors are unsparing in their description of Alexandria — "often said to be the greatest historical city with the least to show: founded by Alexander The Great, yet it bears no trace of him; site of one of the wonders of the ancient world, but there's not a single notable monument remaining; ruled by Cleopatra and rival of Rome, now a provincial city overcrowded with people but short on prestige." That final phrase is the one that stings.

And yet, and yet… Looking back to the Ptolemaic golden days, they concede Alexandria was once "a renowned centre of literary thought and learning, attracting some of the finest artists and scholars of the time. Its famed library contained 5oo,ooo volumes…" A book lover's dream. A paradise of contemporary thinking. But in 48 BC, a besieged Julius Caesar (or more strictly speaking, his soldiers) put paid to all that. Fires started as a strategy for blocking the Egyptian fleet soon spread to the Library, partially destroying the building and much of its collection. (We'll never know the full extent of the damage: Seneca, Plutarch and Cassius Dio disagree on precisely how many scrolls were reduced to ash.)

Woe to a city's people when the flames of power politics come licking round their libraries, depriving them at a stroke not just of the books and the knowledge they contain, but also of those essential, often unnoticed functions such spaces serve in any modern multicultural community.

Meeting places for the newly arrived to learn the local language, or to find kinship with others who share their heritage and homeland. The first place for youngsters to exercise power in choosing what they want to read — for some, the only place to do so outside their bookless homes. A safe, secret, semi-silent space for students to work — or else to curate the impression of working, whilst in fact doing nothing more important than idling away hours with their tablets in their hands. Somewhere to stay warm or keep cool. Somewhere to feel welcome.

Civic leaders should stay the hand that wields the burning torch, not rush forward to light the fire themselves. Alexandria's library is beyond all saving, but the vast early warning system of history means that, in our own second city, we still have time to avoid making the same mistake twice.

BLOOMSBURY

Casey Bailey

The library is a corridor,
punched between two rooms.
Two shelves.
Still space for Zephaniah
but not for his hopes or dreams.

Between the Nechells food bank
and centre for women fleeing
abuse is a corridor that they
call Bloomsbury Library.
A cul-de-sac.

All community and hope,
more glue than material,
clinging to the scraps left
by a pair of scissors
masquerading as a government.

In this lost land where we escape
through trap doors, ejection seats
and underground railroads,
a library has always been a
corridor to somewhere.

BOLDMERE

Garrie Fletcher

Jeff's not drunk. He hasn't been drunk for years but the heady invincibility he remembers drink bestowing washes over him now. The library doors open and he inhales the rich, intoxicating smell of books, and a slight tinge of body odour, possibly his. He scans the space and notices a crumpled old man asleep at a reading table, the man's pointed chin pressed down onto the greyed fabric of an old white shirt and a brown cardigan he is wearing despite the heat.

All those books, he thinks, all that ink, all those words pressed into paper. Something flutters within him, a memory, a longing he hasn't felt since middle school, since those trips with Mr Furnace's class to Far Cotton Library - trips of wonder.

From the outside, Boldmere is very different from his childhood library, looking more like a doctor's surgery than a repository of knowledge and power. But inside it is full of power. Power, that's the heart of it, he thinks and starts to hum the song. The librarian, whose face, worn smooth through years of tolerance and compromise, is perfectly framed by her glorious headscarf, smiles at him and slowly places a finger over her lips. Jeff stops humming but the song builds in his head, the jangle of guitar, the tinny smack of the snare, and it takes all his will to stop himself from shouting out the first line.

This is where it all started. The dreaming, the discovering, the longing. This is where he first saw a world bigger than the Pools coupon and the building site, a world that outstretched his parents' narrow expectations, a world that pushed him far from home.

This is where he started to become him. He'd forgotten that. He'd forgotten about the power; he'd forgotten about possibilities. He tells the librarian he needs to send an email, his phone is dead, along with his car, laptop and career, and she sets him up. The sing-song voices of young readers discovering picture books remind him of his children, long gone now, their expectations bigger than his. He clicks send and wishes he could see his boss's face when she reads it.

He goes to leave, lingers at the notice board and reads a flyer, a campaign to save the libraries, a fight against the council cuts. The song builds again, kettle drums crashing in on a wave of sublime Phil Spector-like splendour, guitars scything with aggression and angst, a vocal delivered with honesty and fire. He tears off the contact details from the flyer and shouts with joy: Libraries give us power! Libraries give us power!

DRUIDS HEATH

Adèle Oliver

Here, skylights are portals to innards
Splayed over pages
Yellowed by anxious fingers
Braced by creased spines
Set firm on the worn carpet
Which becomes an ocean
At the whim of a curious minds.
Dark blots, stains, tears become
Waves of nostalgia
Whispering of old encounters
Shh
If you fill this space with quiet
Words emerge from their inky shells.

Here, age is counted in wonder.
Grey hairs poke out of hands
That nudge arrows on computer screens
And pore over novels
Lips puckered in concentration
Legs dangle with childlike abandon,
Swaying gently to the same rhythm
Of the trees that line this oasis

Pre-schoolers in hi-vis jackets
Socks pulled taut up to knees
Stand on tiptoes
To peer over archives of lines and squiggles
Separated into worlds yet unknown
Biographies, references, large prints, novels
Feet angling towards
The leafy tower block called ‘giggles’.

Here, snakes and frogs
Butterflies and sunbeams
Are soft, malleable things
That make heavy waters
Warm to the touch.
But be careful -
Dry yourself off before you leave,
Get used to the crack of your skin
The cuts that desiccation brings
The sting of sweat in new wounds
For soon, this ocean will be drained
And your body, wet with possibility,
Deluged with curiosity
Will become a hazard.
You’ll be punished on dry land,
Once this oasis dries.
Caution:
Water makes glossy floors slippery.

ERDINGTON

Naush Sabah

This could be any Tuesday: the library is open. I push heavy old doors and let myself in. How many places of learning can we still do that in? To walk in from the street whenever we like, without waiting lists and membership fees, without enrolment numbers or student IDs, without £9,000 fees and admission requirements. Here, the words carved into stone above the threshold welcome any woman, man, or child: FREE LIBRARY.

This could be any Tuesday: the library is open. A librarian sits across the desk and greets me on arrival. In the room to the left, is the children's library and, child-like, that's where I'm pulled. It's in childhood we discover the wealth of a library card, of eight books to take for a month to your room where, perhaps, otherwise you have none. Today, a young father chases his toddler who chases a story. She's seeking a shortcut to wonderland, to have a tea party with a white rabbit, a Cheshire cat, a tiger, a jolly postman, Mrs McNally, Mrs McNally's Maureen, the milkman, and the window cleaner, and Ribby, and Duchess, and Mrs Tiggly-Winkle.

This could be any Tuesday: the library is open. I do take tea and biscuits—don't tell the dainty toddler— in the community room at the back of the building, where the Erdington Library Lunar Society meet each week. They set aside these mornings to learn and to think and to question together, listening with concentration while a different member or guest presents a talk on a topic of their interest or shares their research. When I walk in, an image of Aphra Behn is being projected onto the screen. This Tuesday, the topic is women's writing. I leave with my head abuzz: Mary Wollstonecraft writing back on the rights of women, George Eliot's real name, Dorothy Richardson's style, and Harriet Beecher Stowe's dozen-time interrupted letter.

This could be any Tuesday: the library is open. And it's with Stowe's 'deadly determination', 'rowing against wind and tide' that we gather outside for an impromptu protest, placards in hand, voices raised, on the steps before the perfect symmetry of this Edwardian Baroque building that has stood open for over one hundred years. On any Sunday its doors would be closed, as you might expect on a day of rest, but it closes mid-week on a Wednesday too and, now, Monday closures have. been announced. Little by little, against our polite quiet acceptance, the cuts have encroached, each new one deeper and closer to the heart, until we're moved to take our bookish selves out onto the street to shout.

FRANKLEY

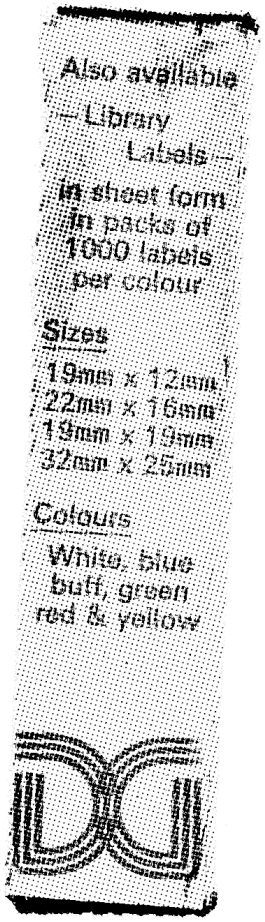
Gregory Leadbetter

I take the Domesday Book off the shelf at Frankley Library, and look up where I am. There is Frankley in 1086: with nine 'bordar' (or cottager) households, six ploughs (one dedicated solely to the service of the landlord), and two slave households. Bordars owned around five acres of land on average, while slaves, unsurprisingly, owned none, being themselves treated as property belonging to the local lord. I learn that there was woodland here, one league (around three miles) in length and half a league wide. Frankley was in the Hundred of Came. The 'hundred' was an administrative division of the shire, whose function became obsolete with the Local Government Act of 1894.

Boundaries still matter. Frankley Library was built by Worcestershire County Council, but a shift in administrative divisions took the Library and New Frankley, where it's located, into Birmingham City Council control. Old Frankley is still in Worcestershire. The devastating cuts now faced by Frankley – like so many other libraries in the region – are a direct result of being subject to Birmingham City Council policy.

The Domesday Book was a reckoning of resources and value in terms of property, the economy, and taxation. It's wonderfully enticing and informative now, as a historical document, but it's the expression of quantitative thinking and an extractive, hierarchical imperative. The public library represents the very opposite of this. It's the expression of qualitative thinking and a social, liberal imperative. The purpose of the public library is to inform and to educate, to give pleasure, and altogether to cultivate the well-being of the person. This function serves both the individual and the public good, because the personal and the public are ultimately inextricable.

As the Domesday Book entry for Frankley should remind us, people can never rightfully be treated as things, or property – nor should they be treated as such under the softer name of 'employment'. We're often encouraged to work; far more rarely to cultivate our own humanity, our dignity as human beings, and our place in the living order to which we belong.



The public library is completely dedicated to these human needs – treating each person not as a means to someone else's end, but as an end in themselves. They are places where we pool and share our collective heritage, our resources, our pleasures, our fascinations. As such, they are places of promise and growth – of both the familiar and the unfamiliar – both what we are looking for, and what we do not (or did not) expect to find. (N.B. Not everything is on the Internet.) Libraries encourage and reward the curious. These qualities make the public library one of our greatest inventions, as a species.

A thousand years on from the Domesday Book, I wonder what a qualitative – as opposed to quantitative – survey of the realm might look and feel like: a Domesday Book focused on our true commonwealth, the resources and facilities that we share in common for our personal and public well-being.

We have arrived at another reckoning. What criteria shall we judge by this time? What do we value? We can choose to prioritise the revitalisation of our commonwealth. We must never allow a policy decision to be dressed up as an inevitability. We can choose to prioritise the human.

GLEBE FARM

Sue Brown

What future do we have when community resources
become limited, leading to tangible spaces slowly being eliminated?

Who would have thought, in 2024, that spaces called
libraries would become endangered?

After serving its community for 72 years, highlighted for closure is
Glebe Farm Library!

In the '70s, when I was 12, I first visited this library in Stechford, Birmingham. Jamaican family from the Windrush era, adjusting to British life, how we tried to settle down. Amid all things and still new to the area, my dad had an idea: *let's go to the library and sign up to become members.*

Over the next few years, located in a quiet space, we would go to the library to read, think and be inspired.

A building of its era opened in 1952; inside, a friendly librarian presented us with our first library cards, which allowed us unlimited access. The use of this card offered a licence to explore shelves filled with books and so much more. Our local library is a storage for information with long-standing memberships accessible to all.

For adults and children, there was plenty to do: stories, poetry, and research, too. We learnt from the tradition of seeing, reading, and listening; however, we respected the rules and read quietly.

Today, the library seems so much smaller. However, its welcome and friendliness are just as I remembered it.

It has continued traditional amenities and tried to move with the times, keeping up with its community and encouraging new visitors. Outside is an outstanding, beautiful garden; inside, they provide coffee mornings, a meeting place for rowdy but good-natured elders, and even technology via computers and Wi-Fi for those who require it.

We thank all our libraries and volunteers for their services and the difference they have made!

HALL GREEN

Leila Rasheed

You can do anything in this library:
wind the bobbin or find your past.
The girl on the train is in this library,
which has two halves like a heart.

You can find anything in this library.
Murders and gardening; languages, art.
The River Cole runs through this library,
like a bookmark in a heart.

There's a warm welcome in the library
And everything else it's been asked to hold.
But someone should fix the broken heating.
Hearts beat slower in the bitter cold.

See the hazard tape? Attempted murder.
Library hit by a thousand cuts.
Someone decided we don't need libraries.
We do. No ifs, or whys, or buts.

We need them for talking and drumming and dreaming,
for balance and friendly cups of tea.
For planning escapes of all types and sizes,
for learning it's us, not you against me.

We can do anything with this library:
wind it up, or stay and play.
Once it's gone, it's gone forever.
We take it for granted. Like our hearts.

HANDSWORTH

Stuart Maconie

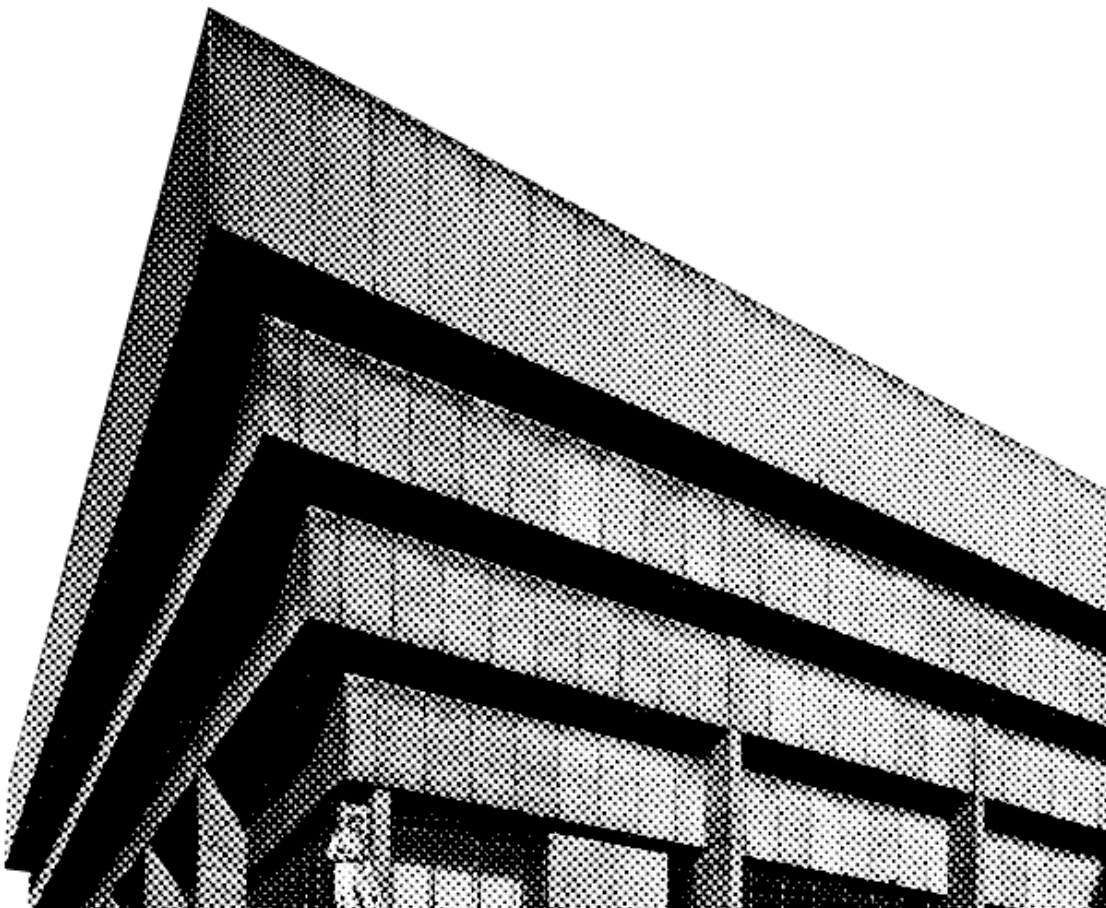
Alphonso mangoes from India, Zatar spice from Damascus, Pho from Hanoi. If Birmingham is the city of a thousand trades, then the Soho Road, Handsworth is a street of a hundred flavours and styles. Bitter Leaf Soup from Benin and bridal gowns from Bangalore. And books, thanks to a building that has stood in the beating heart of it since 1880; Handsworth Library books. Books of every kind from every land for every taste. Greek romances and Farsi thrillers, Vietnamese whodunnits and Black Country football yarns. Dr Seuss said, "The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more that you learn, the more places you'll go." He was right. And you can find that quote right behind me in the children's section.

I write these words on a sunny June afternoon at one of the few empty desks in the library. I was welcomed warmly – there's free orange juice on hot days and hot drinks in the winter – by Steve and Melanie and Arabella (who has made a gorgeous display of some of my books that makes me feel simultaneously enormously proud and a bit sheepish). Terence the security guard took our picture and Steve showed me around. I've been here before many times, once when I wrote about Handsworth in my book Hope And Glory. Then I said the kids creche was like a mini-UN, and around a table in the back, a group of older Asian men are putting the world to rights in Punjabi ('these gentlemen are some of our most loyal customers' says Steve) as a lady from Winson Green asks me for help with a huge reading list. But they were happier times, before libraries – blameless, beautiful libraries - were made to carry the burden for the greed and incompetence of others.

250 borrowers a day. Different activities every day of the week; over 50s exercise, addiction clinics, craft workshops, story time for children, mindfulness colouring for adults, Lego club, Diabetes club. And on and on...

All would go if this amazing place goes. And it could. All Brum's 35 libraries are under threat under proposed slashing cuts across Birmingham. Just ten would remain, rebranded as 'community living rooms', prompting me to wonder if the Manic Street Preachers would have sung 'community living rooms gave us power' quite so inspiringly on their anthemic A Design For Life. It's because libraries give us power (which is what they do sing of course) that some people don't mind if they go.

I do. And I hope you do too.



HARBORNE

Elizabeth O'Connor

Harborne Once Upon a Time*

Without the library, perhaps the row of nail-makers' cottages would have grown roots like the bilberry bushes, thick and twisting, and never been demolished.

Perhaps the only books in Harborne would sit quiet in the house of the nail-master, pages flush against its pure white walls.

Perhaps Harborne would never have joined the city of Birmingham, would have closed in around the dog- and cock-fighting rings on the matchcroft, would have sent the hearts of its children, soft as gooseberries, to city factories alone.

Perhaps families would have sat in dark rooms after sunset, with no need for a candle to read, and no need to tell stories over the din of barking, and no need to dream of other worlds, or other people.

Perhaps the Masonic Hall would never have built reading rooms into its vaulted roof, would never have allowed a thought to run close to the sky, would have shut its doors to the streets, to the markets, to the schools and kept words in dark hollows, never to be laid open, spine cracked against a nail-maker's hand.

**'Harborne Once Upon a Time' is a 1913 book by Tom Presterne, a Harborne resident, that narrates a leisurely walk around Harborne in 1834 and brings to life snapshots of the history of the area up to 1913. It also tells of Harborne Library's history: on the site of a line of nail-maker's cottages, a Masonic Hall was built; this hall became a free public library as a bribe for Harborne to join the city of Birmingham (and you can still see the Masonic symbols above the door). Before then, the only books in Harborne would belong to private libraries of the rich, most notably the nail-master. I also enjoyed the details from this book on the gigantic bilberry bushes of Lord's Wood, and Harborne's history of award-winning gooseberries. Using excerpts from this book and other historical documents in Harborne Library's excellent local history section, I wanted to ask: What would Harborne have been, and be, without its public library?*

KINGS HEATH

Mark Billingham

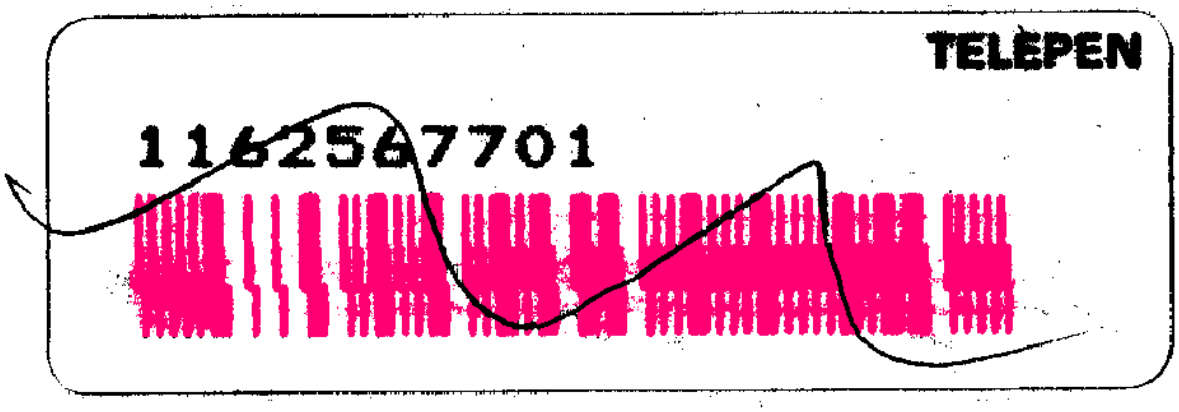
To walk back through those doors was simply magical…

Kings Heath library is just a ten minute walk from what was then my secondary school and I first began going with my mum in the early 1970s. She would visit the library once a week to take out Biggles books or cricketing manuals for her husband along with the odd romance novel or thriller for herself. Jacqueline Susanne, Norah Lofts and Sidney Sheldon. Eventually, I started taking a few books home for myself and those trips became a highlight of my week. I can't remember how long we were in there each time, probably no more than half an hour, but I can vividly remember how excited I was for every single minute; that thrill of anticipation. Wandering away from my mum to go in search of a new adventure story or a mystery, browsing the sections for something funny or scary, studying the jackets and reading the blurbs (I didn't know that's what they were called back then) before my mum and I would hand our haul over to the librarian and watch as the books got stamped before heading home.

Going back to the library was strange and wonderful. As is often the way with the recollection of things, it was the smell that brought the memories flooding back. It seemed somewhat smaller than I remembered, but back then I was a lot smaller, so I wasn't altogether surprised. The librarians that I encountered that day were every bit as lovely as the ones who stamped my books all those years ago, welcoming me back as if I'd last been there only recently, making me tea before taking great delight in showing me where my own novels were shelved. I just stared at the row of books with my name on the spines, gobsmacked and slightly tearful at the thought of those first steps towards being a reader and subsequently a writer; a journey that had begun half a century ago in the very place I was now standing and burbling a little incoherently into a microphone.

That two-thirds of community libraries in Birmingham are currently threatened with closure is nothing short of disgraceful. If you are not one of those lucky enough to grow up in a house filled with books, your local library is a vital resource. To take away the joy and the possibility of reading from thousands of young people is an act not just of cultural but of social vandalism and it must be fought tooth and nail. It's not just about the books. Many libraries are the heart and soul of local communities, providing invaluable resources, safe havens and, above all, places where people can connect – with information, with each other and, of course with the endless number of imagined worlds on their bookshelves.

As a schoolboy wandering, wide-eyed, around Kings Heath library, I was lucky enough to be given that opportunity. To make that connection. The thought that, fifty years on, this possibility might be taken away from others is almost unbearable.



KINGS NORTON

Jonathan Coe

'Austerity is the idea that the worldwide financial crash of 2008 was caused by Wolverhampton having too many libraries.' – Alexei Sayle

I make my way to the library on a Friday afternoon in June. The weather's undecided – grey, clammy, a few showers in the air – as I leave the station and descend the steep incline of the Pershore Road.

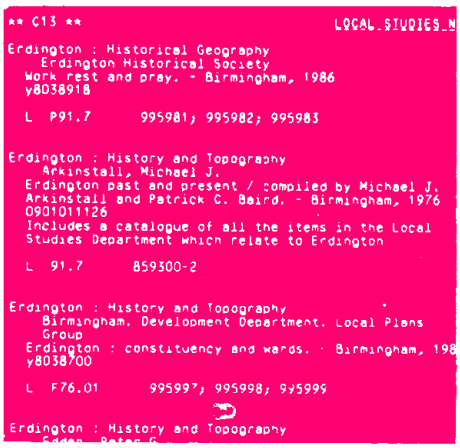
Kings Norton library comes into view. A small, elegant, welcoming building close to the Green. It was built in 1906. It has survived two world wars, but might not survive the economic policies which have driven successive British governments since 1979.

1979: the year Thatcher came to power, and the year my paternal grandmother died. Bertha Coe. She is buried here, in Kings Norton, in the churchyard of St Nicolas, directly opposite the library. About one hundred yards from its front door, in fact. Before I go inside, I wander through the churchyard, and find the gravestone, and spend a few moments with Bertha and her husband Frank, who died when I was eight years old. I barely remember him, but I vividly remember the house where they lived in the 1960s, in Hawkesley Drive in the Austin Village, about three miles from here.

When I go into the library itself, I make straight for the local history section, to see if there might be anything about that village, or about the place where my grandfather worked all his life, the Kalamazoo factory on the Bristol Road. It's a beautifully organised and curated section, full of pamphlets, privately-printed books, labours of love produced by local amateur historians – what will happen to it all, if the library closes? You can't find this stuff anywhere else. What the library offers to its community is unique.

And, as should always happen when you're browsing a library, instead of finding what I'm looking for, I find something I wasn't looking for: a photo of the old Kings Norton cinema, which used to stand on the Green before being demolished in the 1980s. The scene of so many of my adolescent cinema-going memories. I came to see Monty Python's And Now For Something Completely Different here in 1971, at the age of 10: a parental treat, my reward for passing the entrance exam to King Edward's School.

Microfiche reader (records 1975 to the present)



Part of a page from microfiche

These days, cinemas are closing all around the country as people choose to consume films at home, in private, rather than share the experience with other people. Libraries, too, have always been places where people gather to share something: not just the experience of reading but, perhaps even more crucially, a free public space. A light, cosy, inviting space in the case of Kings Norton. But because you can't monetise this experience, a whole generation of post-Thatcherite politicians has never seemed to understand it.

Have we become a society which has entirely forgotten how to share things – whether they be public spaces, or books themselves? If so, perhaps we can no longer call ourselves a society at all.

KINGSTANDING

Liz Berry

Storytime

When it opened in 1964, Kingstanding Library was the first community library in Birmingham to hold a children's storytime on the carpet.

A book comes alive when we share it,
read it aloud, it sings;

lift it and turn it, its pages are wings,
speckled bright, as it flies between us

over bookshelves and desks,
children cupping hands to catch it,

but it can't be caught, only followed
because now we're in the story

and this carpet's a jungle, a rocket to the stars,
a wood so dark we hold hands to enter,

librarian, babies, carers, toddlers
wriggling and kneeling, rocking, holding,

each peach pear plum, a slinking cat,
a fish slipping, shining, from the net.

Here's our gift to those we dream for:
a story like a boat to skim

across oceans, a library to harbour in
when life blows a storm.

MERE GREEN

Luke Kennard

Look,

Because it can't be turned to profit alone, because
the young woman reading a big white book
called Advanced Techniques in Animation and the man
ranting about the hollow moon are equally welcome,
and babies set each other off, sobbing or laughing,
because we gather too to hear a book aloud
or find some purpose in a vague Tuesday*
that lifts our thoughts above the paving slabs…
Hard not to conclude they want us ill, or sad, or both
(wind howls in a whisper through the metal awning).
Hard not to conclude they want us all in Wetherspoons
instead, benumbed and spending; it's just over there.
Hard not to make a "they" of them, they give us little choice
if they deny the absolutely free grace of the curving shelves,
(ghost of a price tag on my paperback). Hard not to turn from
the unofficial biog of Black Sabbath to Paradise Lost.
Hard not to pick up a KJV and flick through to Jeremiah where
they bend their tongue like their bow for lies. Hard when
there's still money to repaint the double yellow lines,
immaculate and thick as fondant icing.

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*The first time I got properly lost was at the age of four in Luton Central Library – I wandered away from my mum and it took her half an hour to find me. I remember – at least I think I remember – that feeling of suddenly being responsible for yourself and where you choose to go. Which, before you know it, is just your life. This is wonderful and terrifying. The quality of that life is dependent, at least in part, on there being places to choose to go.

NORTHFIELD

Jasmine Gardosi

The Roar

In 1914, Northfield Library was burnt down by the Suffragettes. A note with the slogan 'Give Women the Vote' was found at the scene. A book by Christabel Pankhurst with the inscription 'to start your new library' was found nearby.

Windows blown of its glass. Ceiling
agape, beams shocked awake
like hair on end. Nearby, a note,
a tiny roar: Give women the vote.

A century after the rebuild,
closure hovers over its roof
like a bomb. Local residents
fit themselves into the dwindled
opening hours, unsure if the pages
before them will blacken and curl
to a whisper, yet again. This place
still a battleground for the unheard.
Once more caught in the crossfire
of a fight it never asked for.

When buildings or people
are shut down, they don't always
go silent. Sometimes it's enough
to spark a flash of red. A roar.

PERRY COMMON

Bohdan Piasecki

You know about time, don't you. It's an obsession,
stamped inside your Penguin Book
of Love Poems: 2007, Roy. 2009,
Begum. You are not silent about cycles.
Your children observe the liturgy of wheels
and spiders. Your regulars give each other guided
tours of their obsessions. Your radiators
are the ribcages of extinct mammals.
What do you think you are, a museum?
But most of your stories are not even finished:
they come in smiling, or sit down sullen
at the computers, or they stride to your desk
like they want to pick a fight.
You give these stories time. You hear them.
They spin: you're the centre, an unspooling reel.
You make them feel connected, with instant
coffee, with new shelves in old bookcases,
with flyers. Meanwhile, your covers
are fading: all powder blue and buttermilk.
It's your skylights, splayed like pages on your ceiling.
So much sun here, even with these clouds
trying to outrun their own symbolism, racing
like they did on the night foretold by the prophecy,
or like the thrumming hearts of star-crossed lovers,
or like pirate ships searching for treasure,
or like the dissolution of civic life in late-stage capitalism,
you know, depending on who you ask -
and there are many you could ask, if you can bring yourself
to disturb them, as they take their time looking
for something with a good ending, solemn and hopeful
between the stacks.

QUINTON

Mike Gayle

Elaine, Quinton library's assistant manager tells me she's worked here at the library since December 1976, the year after she passed her A Levels, and the year after the newly built library first opened in January 1975. I know she's not fibbing (why would she?) because despite the forty-four years that have elapsed, I recognise her as the librarian who back when I was ten in 1980 refused to let me take out Peter Benchley's Jaws on my blue junior ticket. I'd like to say that I'm not one to hold a grudge, but the truth is I am as vengeful as any mythic Greek entity you'd care to mention.* I am however willing to put aside my long burning fire in order to highlight the wonderful work she, Marwa, Rasmi and Alan are doing at Quinton library. 'They like us here,' says Elaine. 'They come as kids, then when they grow up they bring their own children and later grandchildren here too.' And it's true. Despite their overzealous safeguarding of children's reading materials.** There absolutely is a deep-seated love for this library in the community, and I know this because I share that love. Week in week out I came here as a kid, taking out four books every time, devouring them, and then running back for more. I wouldn't be a writer without Quinton Library. I couldn't be. The volume of books I used to consume would've cost a small fortune that I didn't have. And they stay with you, the books you've read, lurking in deep dark corners of your mind, they wait for their moment to germinate. Then one day, they get watered, and out emerges something different to the parent plant, but connected nonetheless, and just like that a writer is born. Perhaps not a writer of blockbuster novels about killer great white sharks that get turned into Hollywood films, but a writer all the same.

**Joking!*

***Also a joke!*

SELLY OAK

Anna Metcalfe

Sam and Jia

Sounds of voices. Saturday morning. A busy community centre. Trestle tables are strewn with cardboard and glitter, some spilling to the floor. An OLD MAN sits in an armchair reading a socialist pamphlet. SAM'S MOTHER sits in another chair, with SAM (3) on her knee. A line of ballet dancers snakes down the hall then disperses round crates of books. One of the dancers, JIA (6), spies SAM reading a book she already knows: Owl Babies.

JIA: *(whispering) I want that one*

JIA'S MOTHER: *Ask nicely, use your manners.*

JIA: *(curtseying extravagantly) Please when you've finished could I please read this one please.*

SAM'S MOTHER smiles, nods, reads on.

JIA: *My favourite character is Owl Mother because she goes out for ages. Probably she told them it would be five minutes, but then it's ages. Probably she said she just had to send one email.*

JIA'S MOTHER: *That's enough.*

SAM'S MOTHER: *We're nearly finished.*

SAM: *Nope.*

SAM'S MOTHER: *She can have it when we've finished.*

SAM: *Nope. (pause) I mean—*

SAM'S MOTHER looks hopeful.

SAM: *I mean: No, thank you.*

SAM'S MOTHER: *Well library books are—*

SAM: *Yes, thanks Mama. But I can just let you know right now that I won't be sharing anything today.*

The MOTHERS' eyes meet.

JIA: *I asked nicely—*

JIA'S MOTHER: *He's only little.*

SAM'S MOTHER: *Let's just finish reading it first, then we can give it to this little girl.*

SAM: *(Joyful, high-pitched singing) Noooooooooooo.*

The OLD MAN glances up. JIA lunges for the book. SAM hurls himself onto the floor, Owl Babies secured beneath him, arms circling as if bodyboarding. Briefly, JIA cries but then her expression shifts, brisk clouds clearing into bright weather. She kneels by SAM and whispers something in his ear.

SAM sits up, still clutching the book.

JIA: *(addressing the MOTHERS) I'm Owl Mother and I quit!*

JIA'S MOTHER: *Owl Mother doesn't quit.*

SAM'S MOTHER: *She just goes out to get dinner.*

SAM: *(delighted) I'm Baby Owl and I'm cross!*

SAM gets up, dropping the book. He looks around, then pulls a twig from a muddy furrow of the OLD MAN's boot. The OLD MAN appears not to notice and turns a page of his pamphlet.

SAM: *This is my tree, where I live with Owl Mother but she's not here. Waaaaaahhhhhhh.*

JIA: *I'm Owl Mother! Doing mummy things and going out for ages!*

SAM sits on the twig.

SAM: *Mama! Where are you? Come back! I'm so cross!*

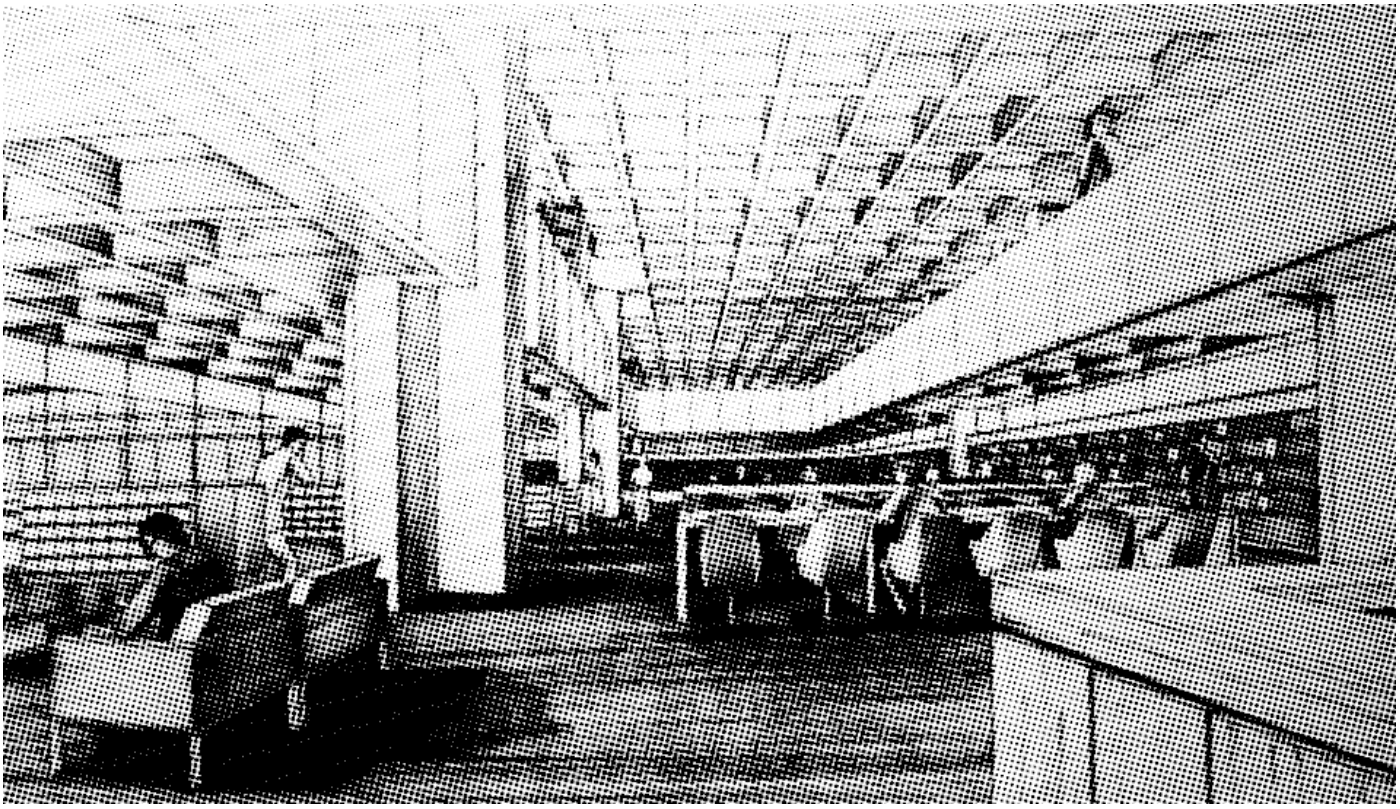
JIA: *I'm really busy actually. I have so many eeeeemails!*

JIA'S MOTHER: *Not how I remember it.*

SAM'S MOTHER: *A bold interpretation.*

The MOTHERS stand together, suddenly irrelevant, quite free.

The other dancers gather round the stage, SAM and the tree of a single twig at its centre. JIA, by the craft tables, does six cartwheels and a pirouette. Then soft and silent she swoops towards SAM with winged arms and they embrace and the OLD MAN lowers his pamphlet to applaud.



SHARD END

Keiran Goddard

Despite living there for most of my childhood, and despite my family house being quite near to a window repair shop called SHARD END GLASS, it wasn't until years later that it occurred to me that calling a place "Shard End" was a pretty weird thing to do.

I remember a university friend – wealthy, detached, insulated – responding incredulously to a story I was telling about what it was like to grow up there... yes, but it wasn't really called that, was it?

Shard. End?

As in ... a broken bit of glass??!

It had genuinely never occurred to me. Not once. It's a tale as old as time – I had to leave Shard End to finally begin to understand it. For the first two decades of my life, all I ever wanted to do was run away from it, and yet slowly, I have begun to realise that returning to it, embracing it, honouring it, might well be the principal artistic purpose of my life.

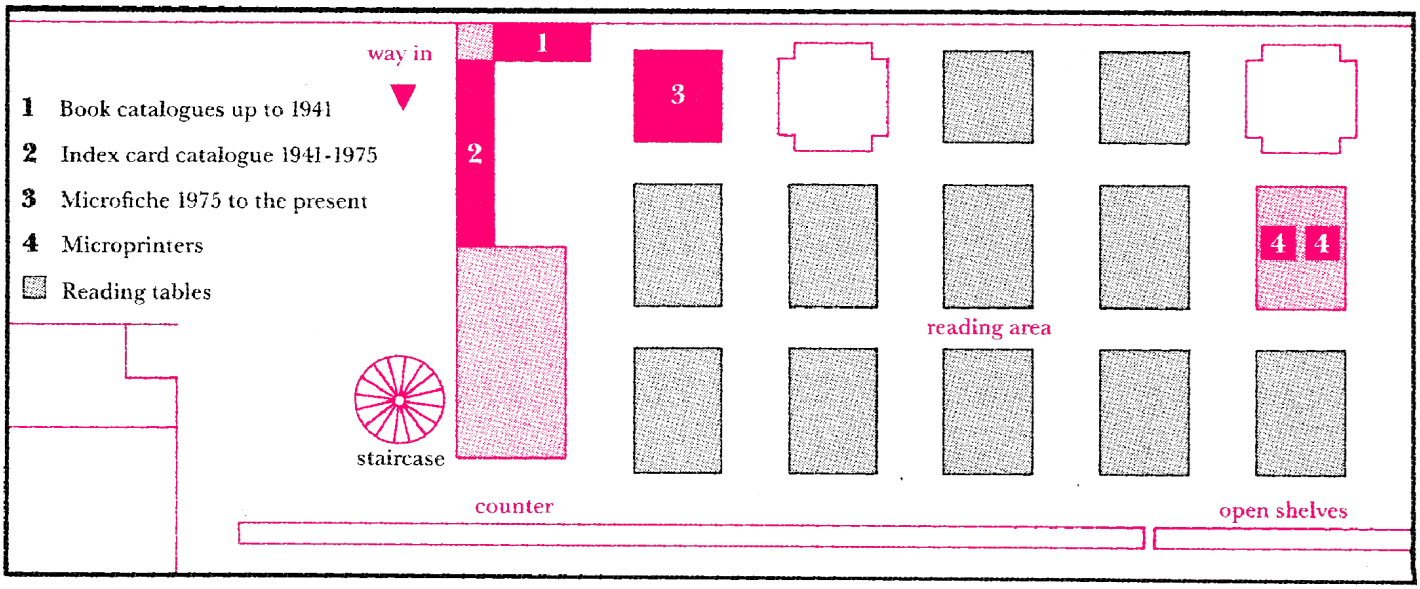
I know that sounds grand, and a bit wanky. Mostly likely because it is. But I've ceased to care. It's also true. And that matters more.

The old library is long gone. The one I remember. The one I remember not just for the books, for somewhere you could be without having to spend money, but for its flat roof that we used to climb on after school.

I was often too scared to jump, always somewhat of a physical coward. Instead, I would stay on the ground, near the bins. But looking back now, I wish I had spent more time cultivating my courage, my willingness to jump.

Because values are useless if you haven't cultivated the courage to enact them.

The new library might go too. Although the people I speak to about it seem bemused that this could happen, that this could be allowed to happen... but it's practically brand new, and where else will people take their kids ... and what about the speech therapy and the occupational health ... and a lot of people around here can't afford their own internet ... what about that?



They are right, of course, there is no logic to this. Or at least there is no logic that it is bearable to witness. If there is a logic, it is the brutal logic of violence. To call what is happening an act of class warfare is too mild – war implies casualties on both sides, some symmetry of power. Slaughter maps more closely. Not just of our access to culture, to beauty, but to the endless, nameless things, to the things that live within us and that we live within, which shape us and which we shape in turn, the things that are so much a part of us that we can only ever know them from the inside out ... yes... Shard. End ... as in a broken bit of glass.

It won't always be this way. A better future is both possible and necessary. And in my brighter moments I also think it is inevitable. But I remain ashamed and angry that I have let so many things I love slip away without a fight.

I wish I had spent more time cultivating my courage, my willingness to jump.

This is too much. The new world must exist. And it must be ours.

SHELDON

Rochi Rampal

Davy says all you need is dry moss, a Maccies cup, matches and white hot sun. Whoomph. I've only got matches, and Nan says it's gonna chuck down later. So.

The library doors are juddery. They slide shut, open. Shut. Open. But there's no one outside except me, perching on the ramp railings. I kick the peeling black steel in rhythm to the doors, and tap a match on its box too. Davy says the brown brick block isn't a library, it's an eyesore.

From nowhere, Joan Barker's beside me, leaning close enough I can see her shimmery lipstick smudged onto her teeth.

She says: You shouldn't be playing with those.

I shove the matches in my pocket.

She says: It's black over Bill's Moms. Where's your coat? Get yourself inside. The books won't bite.

Then she says: Your Nan out of bed today?

Then Mrs Fernandes bursts out of the stuttering doors and joins us by the railings - a cloud of rosy perfume.

She says: Unbelievable. They cannot put this phoney out with the greats. Evaristo, Orwell, and… and…Titchmarsh?! It's inappropriate.

Joan says: There's all sorts in the information section. Morning Silvia.

Silvia says: It's a bloody hodge podge.

Joan says: That's the beauty of it.

Silvia tuts: Clive's got the coffee in the urn and the computers are ready.

Then Joan is in through the doors which, miraculously, glide open.

She calls back: Tell your Nan to join us, kid. Come on Silv, let's log on. Our lines of descent await.

Silvia pulls out a cigarette, lights up, and looks at me. The buttercups behind the car park fencing waver in a cold breeze.

Silvia says: You're always out here.

I say: You're always in there.

She says: What else have we got?

A gust of wind kicks a Maccies cup up the access ramp, which rests at my feet. Davy says there's no such thing as coincidences. A low rumble comes from a nearby sky. I feel it in my belly.

Silvia says: Better get ourselves inside.

The doors glide open for her too.

I'm off the railings, grabbing the cup, turning it upside down with the matches inside, like a magician's trick. I push it through a hole in the fence to keep it safe.

Inside, the shelving is low enough for me to see faces over the top. There's a Mr Men book that once made me laugh until I needed a wee; a chair in the corner where my Mom chatted to another Mom, her own cheeks as salt stained as my newborn ones; rows of Lee Childs my Nan can't put down, she says they give her good ideas; a computer keyboard with a faded 'A', where Davy showed me how to type his name…

Doors stutter on my way out. The sun's emerged - white hot. I linger in the place where I hid my matches. The cup is exactly where I left it. But when I lift it from the ground, the matches are gone. Disappeared, as though in a puff of smoke.

SMALL HEATH

Mandy Ross

Long into the future, the archaeologists presented their findings.

'This was the Tribal Hall. It formed the collective welcome of the society. Here, members of the tribe shared stories, dreams, warmth, friendship and peace.

'The tribe was diverse and multi-lingual. All members were welcome in the Tribal Hall. Tribe members undertook their preferred ritual practices here. Uniquely, no money was charged.

'Evidence suggests tribe members visited daily, weekly or occasionally. They came singly, in family pods, or sometimes even in groups of 30. They chose and borrowed artefacts ('books', we think they were called) in a language of their comfort. Some sought help studying for tribal initiation ordeals at age 16 and 18. Many used electronic devices to connect instantly with worldwide information, or to search for local employment. Some came simply for company and encouragement when the world felt harsh.

'Two small gardens were cultivated in front of the Hall. We found seeds of many plants including poppies, parsnips and mint (edible and/or symbolic?)

'Our most illuminating finding is this testimony from two esteemed tribal leaders, Saema and Veronica:

> *We started work on the same day twenty years ago. We work in our community to ensure that all the stories and all the facts of all the world are here, or can be sourced here. We welcome adults and elders, responding to their interests and requests. We welcome the little ones who come with their adults to choose stories. We watch them grow, and learn, and do their homework. We support their ambitions, whether it's to become a surgeon (Maryam), police officer (Elias), or to work in AI (newly-arrived Tharusha). Some we welcome back years later with their own little ones, who come to choose more stories.*

The archaeologists smiled. 'This Tribal Hall is evidence that the tribe valued kindness, learning and community.'

SOUTH YARDLEY

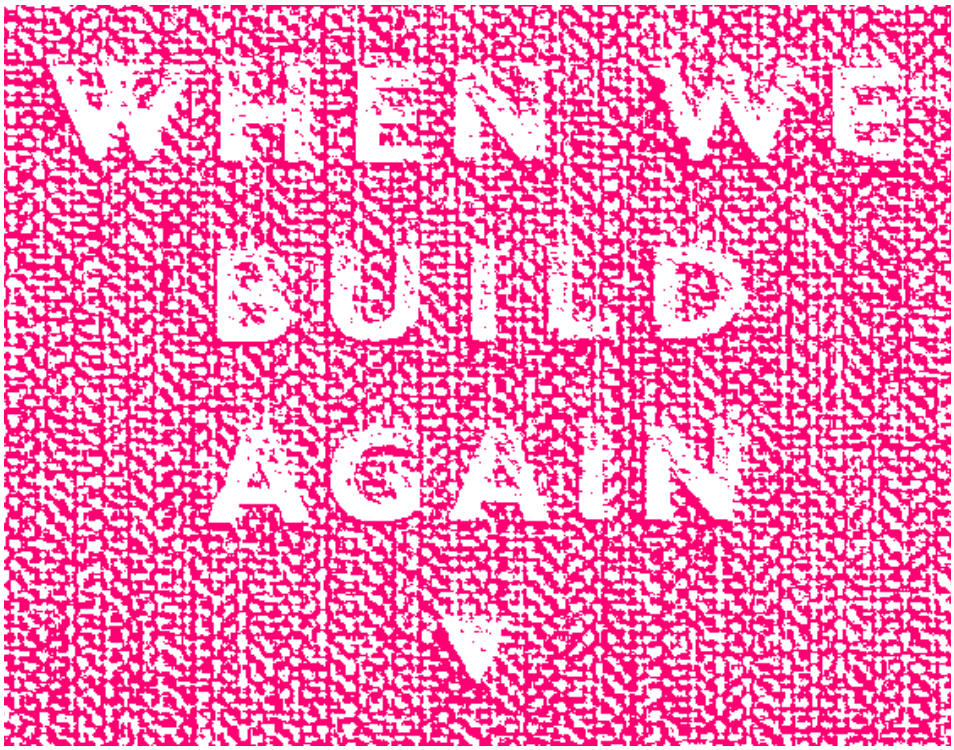
Charlie Hill

South Yardley Library opened in 1939. It's built in a style that might be described as Municipal late-Deco, with a column on either side of the porch providing a Neo-Classical flourish. The building is part of Birmingham's architectural fabric. Above the front door is a stone relief from William Bloye. Bloye studied and taught at the School of Art and his work can be seen across the city. The relief above South Yardley Library's front door features two cherubs holding open a book that says Nutrimentum spiritus or 'Food for the soul'. This quotation also appears on Berlin's Alte Bibliothek, which places the library in a centuries-old transnational conversation about civic responsibility, the provision of public spaces and the importance of the written word.

Visiting the library on a Monday afternoon, I meet Gay, a librarian. She shows me around. Like its façade, the interior of the building still has many of its original features. There are skylights and fluted pillars and two free standing column radiators in the Children's section, the function rooms are panelled in oak. Despite this air of constancy – which hints at the library's contribution to a communal glue – there is also a busy-ness to the place. There are people using PCs, browsing Local History and Biography, and reading; a regular called Howard exchanges news with Gay and then settles into a paperback novel, another chats to someone shelving. This activity is underscored by the number of posters and flyers on display, advertising new books and meet-ups and celebrating literature; one of these is a lovingly handwritten illustration of 'THINGS WE SAY TODAY WHICH WE OWE TO SHAKESPEARE', which includes 'NAKED TRUTH', 'FIGHT FIRE WITH FIRE' and 'BRAVE NEW WORLD.'

If this reads as a love letter to South Yardley Library, that's because it is. But you might have seen there's something else here too, something between the lines. I am visiting the place because Birmingham City Council has mismanaged its budget. A consultation process is underway, and libraries may close. As with all such

consultations, any decisions have doubtless already been made. There are, however, still questions to be answered, questions about the council's responsibility for our urban spaces, questions about its relationship to its people and to Westminster, questions about the public sector's role in nourishing the soul. What is the purpose of local government? for example. And how should we respond when our democracy – literally 'power of the people' – is revealed to be a democracy in name only?



SPARKHILL

Kit de Waal

Sparkhill Library is next to the swimming baths and the police station across the park, old, Victorian, like a school but different to a school because there's no-one to tell you off and no-one checking if you're sleeping or not.

Sparkhill Library has a lady at the desk at the front as soon as you walk in and if you give her a book, she gives it back with a date stamped inside. I never give her a book but my sister swaps three at a time.

Sparkhill Library is always open and always warm and always quiet and if you sit with your back against the radiator, the warm seeps through your damp coat and thin jumper and heats you up from the inside, the sort of heat that lasts the whole walk home, past the swimming baths and the police station and across the park.

Sparkhill Library has swirls of dust that dance in the thick light and windows that open with a rope because they're so high up. No-one can look through the windows but I can look out. The sky is always the colour of newspaper and when it rains the library goes dark.

Sparkhill Library has a funny way of lining up the books with a space behind them and a funny bit of paper on each book with letters on that tells the lady where they go when people bring them back. When she sees me looking at her, she smiles.

Sparkhill Library doesn't care if you're poor and black and not wearing the right clothes, it only cares if you make a noise. Even a cough sounds loud, even your shoes on the wooden floor, even when you drop a book. Then everyone looks at you but only for that reason not for anything else.

Sparkhill Library is somewhere to go even if you don't like books. It's quieter than home, warmer than home, tidier than home and the wooden shelves are shiny with polish.

I see Mr. & Mrs. Carpenter choosing their books and Dot across the road choosing her books, I see Mr. Sharif choosing his books and old people that live on the next street choosing their books and all the neighbours and all the neighbours children and sometimes I wonder if I'll ever choose a book and get a stamp but I never do because my sister is the one who reads and I'm the one who watches.

SPRING HILL

Ruth Millington

The Library of Birmingham is haunted, according to local legend, by the ghost of John Baskerville. By night, he wanders between the shelves where books are printed in his famous typeface, as if appraising the elegant letters by moonlight.

It was under the light of the full moon, during the late 18th century, that Baskerville would meet other members of the Lunar Society at Soho House. Across the table, he faced Birmingham's great industrialists and inventors: Matthew Boulton, James Watt, Josiah Wedgwood. Fascinated by typography, printing and calligraphy, he shared with them design typefaces of his own; among them, his enduring font, Baskerville.

But back at Easy Hill mansion, now known as Baskerville House, a woman could be found hunched over woven paper, experimenting with dark inks, printing alphabets of her own. Long eclipsed by this Lunar man is the forgotten female designer, Sarah Eaves.

It was in 1750 that Mrs Eaves found a job as a live-in housekeeper for Baskerville, after she was abandoned by her husband Richard. When he fled England to avoid arrest for forgery, she was left to fend not only for herself, but their five children.

That same year that Mrs Eaves arrived at Baskerville's house, he was setting up his printing and type business. Behind closed doors, she was doing far more than dusting. Soon, she was helping him with his design and calligraphy work, swiftly becoming indispensable to his efforts to craft clearer, more elegant typefaces.

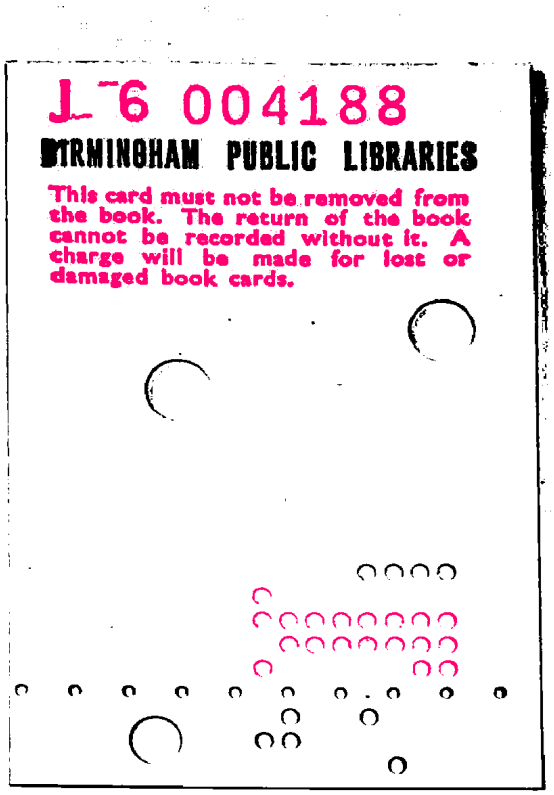
Printing with brass presses, and adding embellishments to classic fonts, the design duo released letters from their formality, adding flicks, new lightness and graceful edges. As Baskerville's partner in printing, Mrs Eaves made meaningful contributions to one of the world's most famous typefaces – Baskerville was born in 1754, taking his name, not hers.

As the couple collaborated on creative endeavours, they also became closer personally and married in 1764, just a month after the death of Mrs Eaves' estranged husband. She and Baskerville had one child together, a son, who died in infancy, though several of her children and grandchildren took the name Baskerville.

While it found little success during the lifetime of Baskerville, the beautiful typeface made a huge influence in Europe, thanks to Mrs Eaves. After Baskerville's death in 1775, she continued their work, and sold the Baskerville punches and matrixes to France, where it circulated among foundries. She continued to manage the workshop until she died in 1788, aged 80.

Across the road from Spring Hill Library is Warstone Lane cemetery where Baskerville's grave can be found. Here a ghostly woman has also been spotted many times, shocking onlookers by walking through walls, before disappearing. Could this be Mrs Eaves, looking for her design partner and those libraries where her letters live on?

Lost libraries mean lost histories. Books have been made by many hands, including those of Mrs Eaves. In 1996, designer Zuzana Licko created a font in her name, which is now used on the pages of Penguin Classics, among other titles.



STIRCHLEY

Bradley Taylor

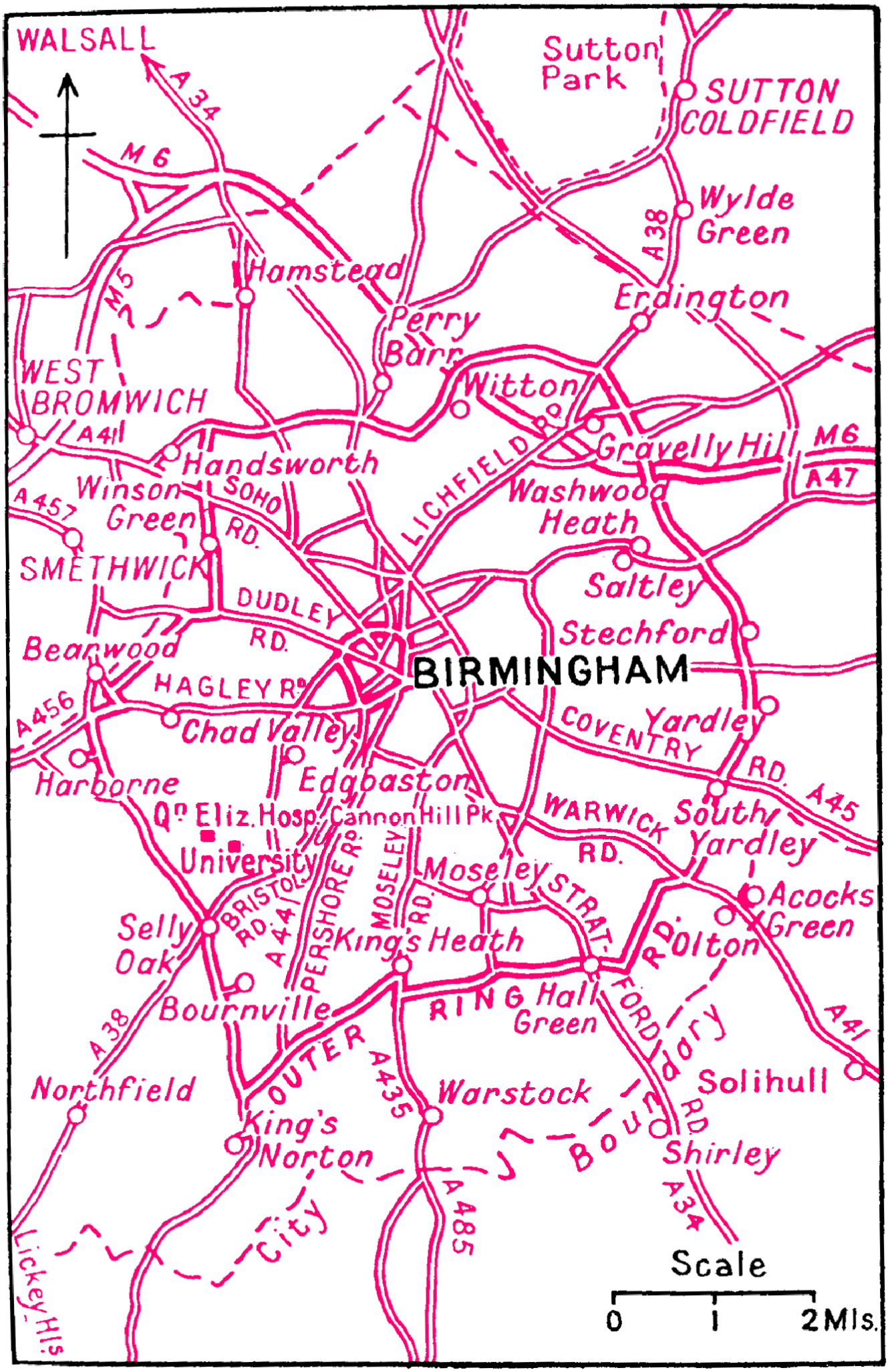
Yes, and so much more

Have you got this book
Have you got that
Have you got my next obsession
Have you got the history of the world
Have you got my childhood favourite
Have you got my old mate in the pages
Have you got somewhere quiet I can sit
Have you got a place where I can sing
Have you got a haven for the kids
Have you got enough love to keep going
Have you got jigsaw club on next week
Have you got any more of those biscuits
Have you got that holiday booked
Have you got any books on Birmingham
Have you got enough ink for that printer
Have you got enough room on the shelf
Have you got enough love to go on
Have you got a lock for the doors
Have you got a cup that I can fill
Have you got a shelter from the storm
Have you got those cassettes my nan loves
Have you got a moment just a moment
Have you got a warm seat just for me
Have you got enough love to stay
Have you got that one book oh what's the name
Have you got everything I ever asked for
Have you got everything I ever wanted
Have you got everything I ever needed...

SUTTON COLDFIELD

James Yarker

Card Index Archive | backs to the War Poetry, facing the Crime | *Fatal Last Word* | *A Grave For Two* | soft play's closed (false ceiling collapse) | a quartet of bean bags | felt-tips and crayons | free juice and coffee | Erin's on the loose | board game play | picture card sort | pre-school and home schooled | "You can't take those books out on your kiddy's card, you have to take out kiddy's books with that. There are six books overdue - ten in total" "We're not the most organised household" | TOILETS OUT OF ORDER | Older Adult Well Being Workshops | YouTube surgery masterclass – adverts in Polish – checking the catalogue – project work – email wrangle – searching for a house to buy | teachers meeting | Fiction J - selecting and rejecting | Teen Fiction to hand | *Blood Fever* | *Concrete Rose* | photocopier behind | Classics and returns trolley | Cyrillic volumes and Talking Books | *Under The Duvet* (unabridged) - 5 cassettes | *When Sorry Is Not Enough* - 14 CDs | PLEASE DON'T OPEN THE WINDOWS | "This is one of the ones I've ordered in for you" | Large Print Medical Romance | *Daredevil, Doctor… Husband* | *Dream Date With The Millionaire* | *Taken By Her Greek Boss* | desk ideal for meticulously rolling cigarettes | opposite the bins and fire extinguishers | *iPad For Seniors* | *Book Of Tarot* | *Ghosts In The Spirit World* | power for laptops (and phones) | *Wedding Etiquette* | *Mythology* | THIS TABLE IS RESERVED FOR LOCAL HISTORY RESEARCH | swivel for microfiche machines and a printer | Chronology Of Maps | Newspaper Cuttings | Register of Electors | ring-binder for Methodist Registers kept in The Stack | Fractions of melody stand in for a ring "Good Morning Sutton Coldfield Library can I help you? [long silence] This is the library, I mean [shorter silence] Erm.. yeah [shorter silence still] you see we're a library, we don't have information about that" | Taking a quiet moment, eyes closed, a book just resting on your lap


WALSALL
A34
M6
Sutton Park
SUTTON COLDFIELD
Wylde Green
A38
Hamstead
M5
Perry Barr
Erdington
WEST BROMWICH
A41
Witton
Gravelly Hill
M6
A47
Handsworth
Winson Green
SOHO
RD.
A457
LICHFIELD
Washwood Heath
SMETHWICK
DUDLEY
RD.
Saltley
Stechford
Bearwood
HAGLEY Rd
BIRMINGHAM
A456
Chad Valley
COVENTRY
RD.
A45
Yardley
Harborne
Edgbaston
Qn Eliz. Hosp.
Cannon Hill Pk
WARWICK
RD.
South Yardley
University
Moseley
STRAT.
Acocks Green
Selly Oak
BRISTOL
RD.
A441
PERSHORE Rd.
MOSELEY
RD.
King's Heath
Olton
Bournville
RING
Hall Green
FORD
RD.
A441
A38
OUTER
A435
Solihull
Northfield
Warstock
King's Norton
BOU
RD
Shirley
A34
CITY
A45
Lickey Hls.
Scale
0
1
2 Mls.

TOWER HILL

Iona Mandal

For the Love of Words

When the Library of Alexandria burned,
I was not there to engulf its flames
nor save its leather-bound victims.
Seized by invaders, as Nalanda watched
her custodians of knowledge murdered,
I remained absent.

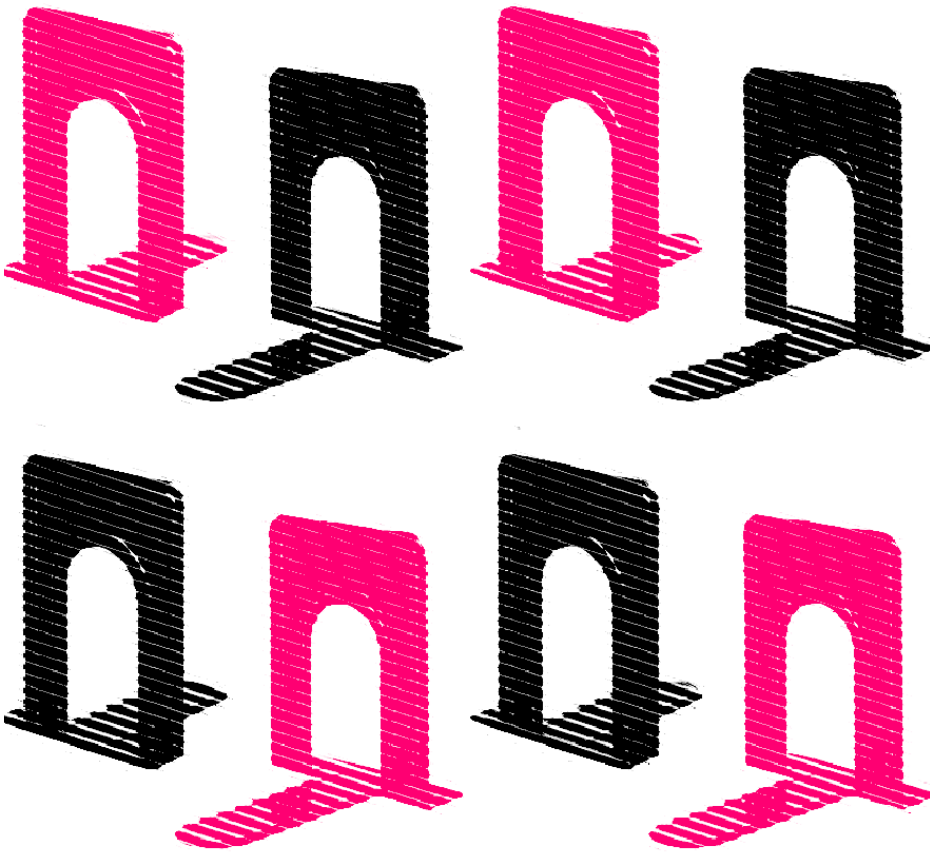
Today, when they close
our warehouses of dreams,
extinguishing the fires of curiosity and hope,
I fill our libraries, so they are never void,
and write poetry so that the words live on
in the indelible ink of my mind.

There is a book left in a corner somewhere,
caressed by sticky fingers,
dog-eared by an unknowing child
to remember where they left,
on paper and in heart.

The boy who forgot
his mother tongue over the years,
borrowed a book, his father read to him as a child,
and for a moment, felt what it meant to be home,
in a library in Birmingham.

Each page touched here,
letters traced by the young and old alike,
immigrant mothers, school dropouts,
the homeless and the coy,
embraced within its warm spaces,
learning to shape words to the timbre of their voice.

When people are placed before profit,
empowerment before power,
and community before corruption,
our children shall grow old
in a world they are proud of,
libraries building bridges,
the words never going extinct.



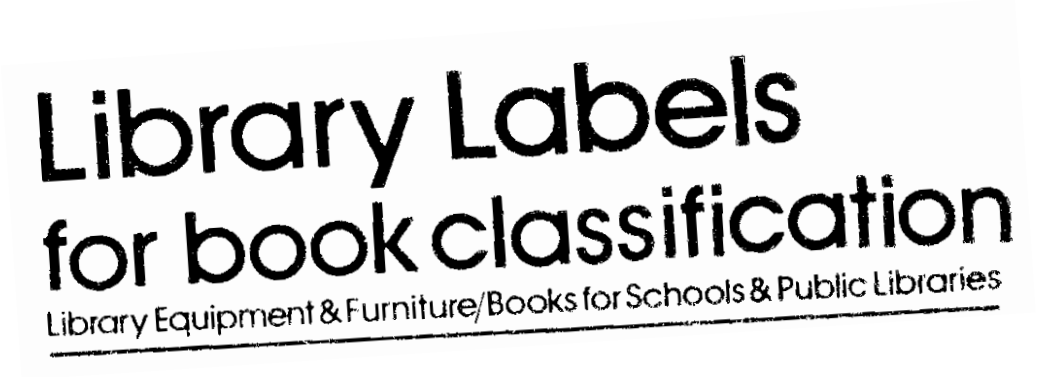
WALMLEY

Natalie Marlow

I spend the morning in the library. Sit in a corner with a free cup of tea and a notepad, listening to the chatter, the rustle of papers, the low hum of traffic from the nearby main road. That perfect comfort of ambient noise only a library can provide.

Of course, I browse the shelves. I start mid-alphabet in fiction: Peter James, Harper Lee, Stephen King, Hilary Mantel. But I end in the local history section, becoming lost in pamphlets on forgotten manor houses and Victorian ironworks.

'Bit depleted at the moment,' says a member of staff. 'The schoolkids need them for projects.'



'That's nice,' I say. 'It's good that they're learning about the local area.' There are no schoolkids in the library right now, but I know they'll come because I know libraries. Ten o'clock on a Monday in June is the time when toddlers and retirees rule. Today, there is a reading group on. The women are all dressed for the summer, but I'm struck by their smartness – linen frocks, neat jewellery. They sit, perhaps eight or ten of them, around a long table nursing the latest Elif Shafak. I intrude, and I sit, attempting to chat. I ask them how they would feel if their local library – small, well-stocked – were to close. They blink. I hope I'm not the bearer of bad news. 'Devastated,' they say, finally. 'Absolutely devastated.'

I leave just before the library closes at twelve. It will open again at two. Then, it will close again for days. I don't say goodbye but slip away. This is because the staff are busy, and because I'm perpetually embarrassed by being a writer.

At the bus stop, I sit next to a man. His head rests against the Perspex as he takes small sips from a can of lager. He tells me he's missed the bus. I give him my sympathies. He's just finished work, he says. He asks me where I've been. The library, I say.

'Have you read Harry Potter?' he asks.

'Yes,' I say.

'Have you read Fifty Shades of Grey?' he asks.

I'm silent. I'm not happy with the turn in the conversation.

'Have you read Stephen King?' the man-with-the-can changes tack.

'Yes, I like Stephen King. Do you like Stephen King?'

'I don't read books, but I like the films.' The man-with-the can pauses. 'I should read, though.' He taps his temple with the can of lager. 'They say it's good for the health.'

'It's very good for you,' I say. 'It takes you out of yourself. I don't know where I'd be without books.'

My bus comes, and, once again, I slip away, forgetting to tell the-man-with-the can to join his local library.

WARD END

Nafeesa Hamid

Khush ameed achoh, welcomes all at the door
welcome, Ward End khush baash? How can we help,
are you looking for respite, a moment for yourself,
place yourself like a bookmark, save yourself
a page in the must of a book, you are a sentence,
you are words that won't die, you have paper wings
to glide you across wildest lands,
glossy fantasies to rotting nightmares.
Do you have your magic key ready
to adventure to another land from Rock
Geology or gemology, geography or gymnastics,
history sci-fi fan-fic lit or science revision.
You don't have to read it all today, not at all.
If you can't or don't want to read you can
sit and hear the hum drum of Brum,
watch the traffic stand still at rush hour,
get help with your council tax bills, bring kids
Bivi and Bava crossing busy road on Saturday.
No meeting at pubs cos library's our living room,
Ward End park's our garden, see ya there at 10.
Ward End library is community connection,
it's swings and roundabouts
in Washwood Heath, Alum Rock.

This library must close so the staff can
open up another library - don't know which
staff will be notified on the day, don't stress
nobody stress nobody panic no no no no no
body worry about anything, library will open again
LIBRARY Open Up Open Up your doors kids protest
CLOSED again, we don't know when we'll be back
and it doesn't make any sense oh it's not making any sense
I am worried I am sick No sense Nonsense

One Saturday, I found Benjamin Zephaniah's ear hiding
in the teen section when the children's was a crowd.
I read about Birmingham. I read stories in rhyme.
This guy's from Brum, a writer from Brum still around.
Decades later I became a poet; that I couldn't have known.
Decades later Zephaniah told me: don't go about this alone,
be wise with that rage and hone that sharp tongue to teamwork,
beautify your language, heart and mind - sing your soul song.
I'd expire deadlines but I've not owed a fine here in years.
I never came alone. When I visit again I'm too grown,
no little siblings claiming corners of their own on those tiny chairs.
Imagine the library was my home, children's corner my throne,
the place I could be still and hear the white noise of my heart,
the place I felt safe reading for hours, learning new words to express
my world: reading stories that made my young pains make sense,
the place my poetry began when books became my right to roam.

WEOLEY CASTLE

Jake Oldershaw

Like many parents, I reached a peak of library visits during my kid's early years. The promise of an hour or so's freewheeling toddler fun was too good to miss and our local storytime was always well attended.

The stalwart librarians ran a rota for who delivered the session. This resulted in performance levels ranging from 'I'm so shy not even the person sitting directly in front of me can hear' to 'This personification of a lion is so committed and frankly brutal that pretty much every preschooler, and even a parent or two, is crying'. They were brilliant, we all loved it, and the gift of literacy, sociability and most likely chicken pox that the sessions gave us is something I'll always be grateful for.

They even provided the inspiration for a site-specific piece of family theatre that we toured between 2018-19, based on Michelle Knudsen's book *Library Lion*. This beautiful picture book is a wonderful allegory for libraries as a sanctuary for anyone in need; a friendly, warm, safe and transaction-free haven in a world that is often anything but that.

As I sit here in Weoley Castle library, 'Jumping Jellybeans' storytime in full swing; friendly conversation, quiet study and good-natured helpfulness happening all around, it's impossible not to feel a deep sadness that these resources will be lost. I can't help wondering what the forward thinking, socially minded Cadbury's, who extended their estate into this area between the wars would think if they knew how pitiful the situation in their beloved city had become.

The moral of the story in *Library Lion* is 'sometimes there's a good reason to break the rules.' Maybe it's time we took a leaf out of that book and reminded some of the powerful ones this century that some things in life are worth holding on to, whatever the cost.

YARDLEY WOOD

Tracy King

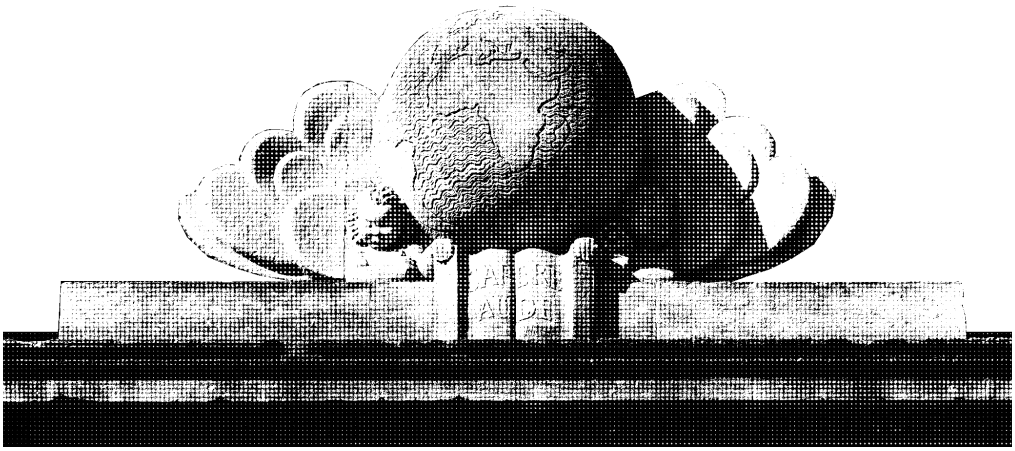
"What's that?" I said, pointing up. The words PUBLIC LIBRARY engraved in stone overhung a vast arched wooden door imported from Rivendell itself. Above that, a carved stone panel, the focus of my query.

It was unusual for me to look up. I was used to keeping my head down, eyes peeled on the ground for scary things (spiders, boys) or lucky things (I once found a five pound note). But this part of Birmingham, where my grandparents lived, had old buildings like this library whose design seemed to say "imagination is welcome here". The estate where I lived had little to look up to, and a library only accessible if I had bus fare. But I was to stay with my grandparents for a little while, and I needed books, so my grandpa Symon walked me to their local library.

"It's a sculpture," he said, used to my questions.

"Cherubs?" I half asked, half declared. "That's right," he smiled down at me and moved to go into the building.

I lingered for a second, beaming at my knowledge, craning my neck to make out the details of the sculpture. Either side of the globe leaned a long-haired chubby baby. Together they held up a book inscribed with the words SAPERE AUDE. I didn't recognise these words. Magic words, I supposed, for a magic spell. Behind the cherubs were stone clouds in the shape of hearts. Satisfied, I stepped inside.

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To join the library campaign visit
www.birminghamloveslibraries.org

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