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COMMON PEOPLE: BREAKING THE CLASS CEILING IN UK PUBLISHING

Professor Katy Shaw

I've met a lovely friendly writer who introduced me to his circle, and everybody knows everybody else, he got his publishing deal through a friend of a friend, he got a newspaper column through a friend of a friend, he got on Radio 4 through a friend of a friend... When I spoke with him about his career development it was just like watching somebody on the ski slopes when you've never learnt to ski. Off they go with all their friends, wiz wiz wiz and you're still stood at the edge wondering how to strap on the ski boots.

Common People Writing Development Programme participant

COMMON PEOPLE: BREAKING THE CLASS CEILING IN UK PUBLISHING

Professor Katy Shaw

Contents

Jodie Russian-Red and Kit de Waal, *Common People* writers

FOREWORD

Common People came out of a brief conversation at a literary festival. It grew skin and teeth and ended up as the magnificent beast it is today – and the subject of this much needed and excellent research.

My original intention for the Common People project was to extend a hand back to writers like me, someone who started their literary career way outside of London, no contacts, no networks and no idea how to get them. The norm for most working-class writers.

My original aims were that Common People would be a showcase for working-class writers, new and established, that the industry might take notice of the talent on offer, and also that even the term 'working class' would be looked at again and that we could shake off the image of northern flat cap and whippet and embrace the scope and diversity of our experiences.

Because of the input from Arts Council England and the regional writing development agencies, Common People has achieved some wonderful things and has literally changed the lives of the previously unpublished writers in the anthology.

The second part of the project was to facilitate a route into the industry for the new writers, to put them on equal footing with more connected, middle-class writers and, of course, if possible to get them into publication.

This research report shows what targeted and funded creative industry interventions can do. The research findings show overwhelmingly that the new writers have benefitted in many different ways – increased confidence, enhanced industry knowledge, improved writing practice and 60% now have literary agents or publishing contracts. I'm delighted by this, but not surprised.

These outcomes are as important as the recommendations made by this research report. The Common People project cannot be limited to improving the literary careers of just 17 people. There is a lot yet to do.

The publishing industry – and UK government – still needs to wake up to the world beyond the M25. It needs to diversify its workforce and do more than say 'we're listening'. We are past the time for listening and now we need some action.

It is vital that the Common People project does not stand alone and become a piece of history. This research and its findings and recommendations need to be the beginning of something bigger and better, a living breathing thing that continues to change lives for creatives and the creative industries in the UK.

Kit de Waal, March 2020
Writer and editor of the
***Common People* anthology**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Challenge

The under-representation of British working-class writers in UK publishing has been identified as a major challenge by international publishing houses including Penguin Random House and Hachette UK, and also by the British and Scottish governments. The challenge not only impacts the publishing sector, but adjacent creative industries: the outputs of the UK publishing industry provide source material for other creative industries, including theatre, television, film and video games, meaning issues of representation in publishing can have magnified economic and cultural consequences.

The Common People project arose out of an on-going programme of work that New Writing North has undertaken in recent years within the publishing industry to highlight issues of regional and class diversity and representation. With Writing West Midlands, New Writing North brought together the other regional writing development agencies: New Writing South, National Centre for Writing, Writing East Midlands, Literature Works and Spread the Word with the writer Kit de Waal, the publisher Unbound and Arts Council England, to create a new book and an associated development programme for the new writers involved. The project ran for 12 months from 2018-19. It aimed to create a strategic model of intervention to address the under-representation of working-class writers in publishing today.

Impact

To measure the effects of the Common People project, the report author worked with New Writing North and the participating writers and industry partners across the duration of the programme to conduct an impact evaluation. The participating writers completed a survey that generated reflections on their lived experiences and understandings of social class, as well as their interactions with the publishing industry prior to engagement with the Common People project. During the 12-month development programme, the writers were asked to report on the impact of their industry mentoring, their attendance at professional development days and other writing development activities. These reflections were recorded through questionnaires and a personal record drawn up by the writers themselves. Their responses have been anonymised in this report to ensure confidentiality and to encourage full disclosure.

The following analysis is based on a mixed-methodology approach to gathering quantitative and qualitative evidence from all 17 new working-class writers involved in the Common People writing development programme. We undertook 12 one-to-one interviews, 11 completed an evaluation survey and six engaged in both methods, according to writer availability and willingness to participate. The regional writing development agencies, professional mentors and the publishing professionals involved also completed questionnaires.

The Future

Post-Brexit and with the fall of the so-called 'Red Wall' in traditional working-class areas of the country during the 2019 General Election, there has never been a more vital point at which working-class stories and voices need to be heard in mainstream culture. In a post-Brexit Britain, the publishing industry has a critical role to play in helping to define the country's direction of travel. Faced with an uncertain future, industry and government must make strategic interventions and decisions to protect and grow the social and economic impacts created by publishing, and the vital relationships with education and the university sector that enable research and development, creative knowledge exchange and talent development.

The Common People project suggests how one model of a strategic intervention can help publishing move towards representing the full diversity of voices active in British society today. The project has enhanced awareness of working-class writers to the general public and the publishing industry and has informed the future planning and policy of government and industry. For this success to continue and develop, the publishing industry and public investors must learn from the findings of this report and work to enable further change. Together we must find and share new narratives about Britain today to ensure that the contribution made by publishing to the health and wealth of the country continues to develop.

This impact evaluation report concludes by recommending a range of strategic actions aimed at promoting cultural inclusion. These recommendations will facilitate cultural changes that will create the conditions necessary to ensure that new writing remains both relevant and reflective of the broad spectrum of society today.

THE CLASS CEILING IN UK PUBLISHING

The United Kingdom is home to under one percent of the world's population but is the largest exporter of books in the world. As a creative industry, publishing does not stand alone, but rather operates with, and significantly contributes to, the success and vitality of other creative industries.

As well as significant income from physical and digital sales, publishing creates a financial ripple effect, impacting on adjacent sectors including retail, printing and marketing, making a significant contribution to the overall British economy. It plays a key role in shaping our culture and enhancing wellbeing, feeding the wider creative industries including theatre, television, film and the video games industry. It is an engine of British culture. Yet publishing has a real and recognised problem: an under-representation of diversity in new writing talent. This challenge not only impacts the production of new writing but has a wider effect on the economic vitality and sustainability of publishing as a creative industry in post-Brexit Britain [(1)].

In 2017, Arts Council England (ACE) commissioned its *Literature in the 21st Century: Understanding Models of Support for Literary Fiction* report [(2)]. The report aimed to explore how fiction writing is being supported and to identify potential new models for enabling the creative production and promoting the commercial dissemination of new writing in future (p.3). The findings of the report were stark in terms of its focus on the number of writers of 'minority backgrounds who continue to face barriers to breaking into' (p.5) the publishing industry today. The report concludes that UK literary fiction is dominated by 'insider networks' that are 'so established that the reality of breaking into these areas still proves impossible for many writers' (p.3), and makes a clear statement that:

> *all literary publishing is concentrated on London. The major publishers are in London. All but one of the Independent Alliance are in London. The newspapers and reviews are based in London. Decisions are made in London. There is little sign that any of these things will change in the future (p.36).*

Refracted through a ‘prism of insider networks’ (p.36), the report argues that the potential for change in publishing without incentive or resource is limited. The report argues that ‘opening up the insider networks of writers, agents, publishers, reviewers and commentators around literary fiction is [...] one of the key challenges in opening it up generally’ (p.37). It concludes that unless we recognise 'a need for more support and new models of support’ then we run the risk of 'returning to a position where only the best-off writers can support themselves [and this] should be a source of deep concern’ (p.52).

Following this call for action, working-class writers like Kit de Waal [3] began to speak up about the lack of opportunity for other working-class writers in UK publishing. Kit even used some of the advance from her first book to establish a writing scholarship for people from disadvantaged backgrounds at Birkbeck University. ACE supported initiatives such as the Good Literary Agency, an agency committed to only representing writers from marginal groups; and publishers including Penguin Random House experimented with diversity schemes for staff recruitment and writer development, including their *Write Now* programme that aims to develop and publish new writers from communities that are under-represented on the nation’s bookshelves. Elsewhere in print, *Know Your Place* – a collection of poetry, fiction and memoir – was published by Liverpool-based Dead Ink press in 2017 via the Kickstarter crowdfunding platform. The collection profiled essays about the working class by the working class. While the steps taken by these organisations to address the challenge of enhancing class diversity are recognised, the Common People project proposed that even greater reform and new approaches were required to ensure that the publishing industry can be more representative of all socio-economic backgrounds.

Issues of representation are compounded by the London-centric location of the publishing industry. Recent years have seen some positive developments happening outside the M25: the Northern Fiction Alliance, a coming-together of several independent small publishers headed up by Manchester-based Comma Press, has challenged the dominance of the major London houses. Out of the ‘big five’ publishers – Penguin Random House, Pan Macmillan, Hachette UK, HarperCollins and Simon & Schuster – only Hachette UK and HarperCollins have very recently announced plans to relocate small numbers of staff outside of the capital.

In the wider creative industries, more movement is evident. With the BBC’s move to Salford acting as a catalyst for media companies in the area, and with Channel 4 and Sky now with active bases in Leeds, the media landscape has shifted north. The wider cultural and economic impacts that followed these decentralisations have raised further questions about why the literary and publishing industries have resisted this wider impetus and remained staunchly situated in London.

Jenny Knight, *Common People* writer
© Richard Kenworthy

CREATING COMMON PEOPLE

The Common People project was conceived as a vehicle to address the under-representation of British working-class writers in the publishing industry.

The programme marked the first joint bid for funding from Arts Council England from all seven of the regional writing development agencies. The collaborative nature of the bid reflected the shared recognition of the wider challenge of the class ceiling in publishing. Common People aimed to identify new unpublished working-class writers, to create opportunities for these new writers to have their voices heard and their words profiled in print, and to offer them professional writing and career development. The project was comprised of two distinct elements: an anthology published by Unbound to profile new work; and an accompanying professional development programme to support the writers as they entered the industry.

Common People: The Book

The first part of the project, an edited collection of new British working-class writing – *Common People* – was published by UK press Unbound in 2018. The anthology featured new fiction and non-fiction, poetry and short stories by 17 previously unpublished British working-class writers alongside new work by 16 established British working-class authors (including Louise Doughty, Jill Dawson, Alex Wheatle, Stuart Maconie, Tony Walsh, Malorie Blackman and Daljit Nagra).

The geographic reach of the chosen authors was used to highlight that working-class experience doesn't always happen up North and in industrial areas, that associations with manual labour and class have largely disappeared, and that today's working classes are largely based in sales and service industries. The collection considers this shift in work profile and implications for working-class experiences and their representation in popular culture today. All writers involved in the anthology – whether new or established – were paid the same fee of £250 for their work. The combination of new and recognised names was designed to make readers look again at established writers who they may not have realised come from working-class origins, as well as to engage readers with new British working-class writers from across the country.

The collection *Common People* (2018) was published by the specialist crowd-funding publisher Unbound. Incentivising prospective readers with a free copy of an e-book or hardback, signed editions, and original artwork prints in exchange for support, Unbound hit its target for publication in just eight weeks on 21 Feb 2018 with over 750 contributions. The anthology was ultimately 115% funded with 876 individual contributions of varying amounts. The commitment of subscribers to the project demonstrates the interest in the idea from readers.

The collection received a positive critical response and trended across social media on the hashtag #commonpeople. Critics praised the collection for 'shining a light on the huge diversity of people in the United Kingdom and

celebrat[ing] this richness loudly' and noted its 'variety of dialect, racial heritage and regional culture. Considering the UK is quite a small collection of islands and nations, it is incredibly rich in language and culture and the publishing / literary world is missing a trick not exploring that' [4]. Nationally, the publication was cited as an 'important collection' by *The Guardian* [5].

By engaging in a coordinated campaign to promote the *Common People* book across the UK, the new writers featured in the anthology were exposed to the rare and vital experience of participating in live literature events, interviews and media work. Guided throughout by mentors, and supported to travel and speak by the programme funding, they collectively appeared at panels on working-class writing at over 20 events, including a wide range of book festivals (Hay, Edinburgh International, Durham, Birmingham, Manchester, Belfast, York, and Greenwich), and venues including the Southbank Centre.

The social media response raised the profile of the book, the new writers featured in it, and the issue of class in UK writing and publishing as a pressing national challenge. Reviews and features about the book were profiled in 12 newspapers and magazines including *The Guardian*, *The Irish Times*, *Private Eye*, *Literary Review*, *Red Magazine*, *Stylist* and *The Observer*. The book was the focus of features on many online sites and on podcasts for *The Spectator*, *The Bookseller* and BBC Radio 4's *Open Book*.

Common People: Writing Development Programme

The second part of the project, the Common People Writing Development Programme, enabled the emerging writers to effectively use the publication to make a step-change in their creative careers. The competition to be chosen for a place on the Common People programme was coordinated by the regional writing development agencies who were collectively 'inundated' with applicants, demonstrating the unmet needs of writers from working-class backgrounds.

The year-long professional development programme sought to support the writers in developing their writing skills, developing professional networks and opportunities, building confidence, and demystifying the industry. It was delivered through the following activities:

- one-to-one mentoring with an established writer and contact for each writer with their regional writing development agency
- two professional development days with opportunities to hear from publishers, agents, funders and the Society of Authors, and to build peer networks
- support with costs incurred alongside publication (for instance, meetings with potential agents or publishers, PR activities and events)
- free access to writer-development activities being run by the seven writer development agencies during this period, including writing conferences and New Writing North's Summer Talent Party, an industry networking event held in London during the Summer of 2019.


Newcastle Writing Conference 2019
NEW WRITING NORTH
Where are All the Working Class Writers?
Lisa Blower
Anita Sethi
Chaired by Professor Katy Shaw
#NWC19

COMMON PEOPLE: WRITING CLASS

Publishing stands out in wider debates about diversity and inclusivity within the creative industries due to its role in feeding new writing to other areas of the creative economy. Over the past decade, there has been a striking renewal of interest in the analysis of social class inequality in social, cultural and economic studies, driven by accumulating evidence of escalating social inequalities, notably with respect to wealth and income, but also around numerous social and cultural indicators, such as mortality rates, educational attainment, housing conditions and forms of leisure participation. Yet the way we configure social class in the 21st Century is more complicated than ever.

The working classes of the UK have been the cyclical subject of sociological and political interest from the post-war years to the present day. What unites these studies is a cultural concern with manifestations and representations of class and the role of the British working classes during a period of profound social, economic and political change. In the 21st Century, the study of social class in Britain has been led by the work of sociologist Mike Savage [(6)]. Developing the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to draw in social, cultural and economic capital, Savage created a model of class distinction that did not simply draw upon parental professions or employment inequality. His 'new model of class offers a powerful way of comprehending the persistence, yet also the remaking of social class divisions in contemporary Britain' (p.246). Savage's work illustrates how economic, cultural and social capital can be combined to provide a powerful way of mapping contemporary class divisions in the UK. Savage's study suggests that inequality in the UK is increasing as a result of wealth and income.

Savage argues that this also applies to social and cultural capital: those with more also earn more through networks of privilege and prestige. Through the 'transmission of advantage', connections, associations and insider knowledge are passed on within groups rather than disseminated and shared between the social classes. Working with colleagues at the London School of Economics, Savage created a new seven-category schema, one that suggests long-range social mobility in the UK today is now as challenging as 'climbing mountains' [(6)]. While shorter range movement is possible through university education and/or relocation to London, his research underlines a persistent 'class ceiling' whereby personal background continues to inhibit individuals from reaching the top of their industry – if they even make it into the industry in the first place. Savage's work suggests that social class remains a powerful force in creating the Britain of the future.

Conceptualising Class: Shame or Pride?

At the start of the project, the 17 Common People writers were asked to reflect on how and why they self-defined as being 'working class'. Their responses offer a diverse range of interpretations and reflections on the economic and political manifestations of class today and expose a deep complexity in relation to the cultural dimensions of the lived experience of social class in contemporary British society.

For many of these new writers, their class status was primarily expressed through cultural markers, such as 'customs, attitudes, ways of going about things and, most importantly, language'. Every new author presented their working-class status as profoundly intersectional – with issues of gender, ethnicity, disability, regionality – and more significantly as a core element of their writing.

Economic status and background

"The most obvious meaning (of the) term 'working class' is that you will be in low paid, low status and insecure work. This is the aspect of being 'working class' most of us try to escape from because it's no fun, nor is it even healthy to be economically disadvantaged"

"To me, 'working class' means to have grown up in a family where the caregivers were either employed in manual work or would have been if they were well enough to. Both of my parents were too ill to work when I was growing up, which meant that they received Incapacity Benefit and Income Support. I have heard the term 'benefits class' and 'underclass' being used to describe people with such a background as mine, but I strongly object to these terms because they imply that people who receive benefits are somehow 'below' everybody else"

"I think that's a middle-class thing. It's aspirational to be an intelligent person. ...the world I've grown up in it's aspirational to make as much money as you possibly can and look as rich as possible. ...the dream is to be a lottery winner, not to have recognition for anything. Actually, it doesn't matter, the main aim is getting rich. So, I think that is a working-class thing, definitely"

Growing up as a writer and a reader

"Reading was considered to be a waste of time unless it was the News of the World or the local regional paper, yet television was acceptable. My parents did not consider my writing of any interest and nobody encouraged me in writing. If anything, it was mocked as an excuse to avoid chores"

"When I said to my extended family, if I ever mentioned I was writing, they would be sniggering... It was just a ridiculous, really poncey thing to do"

"I thought if I can make someone else feel what I used to feel when I was ten or 11, reading, that is just ... what a beautiful job that could be and straight away my family were like 'you can't!'. That writing is a job for people who have done all the other things that they've done in life, they've worked hard, they've managed to like maybe buy a property or do all their things and it's something that you do when you've got money and it was never an option and even now they're still sort of like 'what are you doing? You're crazy'"

"Setting yourself up as a 'working-class writer' could make you vulnerable to patronising from above and piss-taking from your peers"

Cultural capital

"Well you know everybody's different, like in that room of working-class people some of them are not going to have the same shame that I have, some of them are going to have grown up in families that are really proud to be working class and achieved, but mine was the kind of working-class family that was very ashamed... [my mother] was also too ashamed, too shy to even speak to doctors or teachers, or anyone in authority, anyone middle class"

"I didn't know people who wrote. I didn't even know creative writing degrees existed. When your family are working class every day at work counts because that's another meal and that's another rent and I think no matter what the age range of the people on Common People it's the same experience – there hasn't been much progress, there hasn't been much change, I think we are all similar with that"

COMMON PEOPLE:
CLASS CEILINGS AND BARRIERS

Outcomes

Participating in the Common People programme had profound personal and professional outcomes for the new writers involved in the project:

100% feel **more confident** describing themselves as a writer

60% have **literary agents** or **publishing contracts**

83% claim that their **networking opportunities and skills** are 'much better or better'

75% say that their level of **industry knowledge** is 'much better or better'

92% report that their experiences of **peer support** are 'much better or better'

83% assert that their **confidence** is 'much better or better'

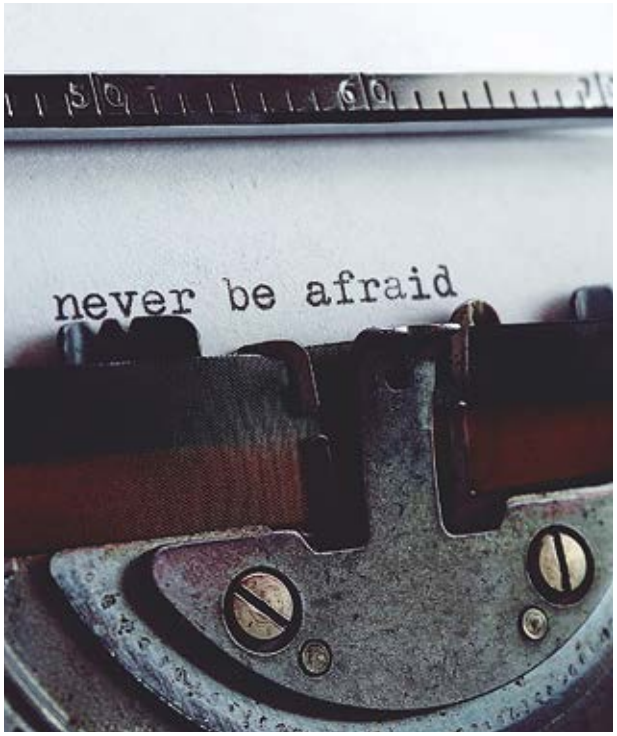
75% reflect that their **writing practice** has been significantly improved

FINDINGS

The Common People project has found that aspiring writers from working-class backgrounds are at a disadvantage when trying to develop their creative careers due to a series of hard and soft barriers that limit access to the literary and publishing industries. Our research identified five barriers:

1 Confidence and Imposter Syndrome

Confidence, or lack of it, was cited as one of the most significant barriers to publication. This is about having the permission to call yourself a writer, perhaps because that term is not valued in the background you come from. A lack of cultural capital – growing up in families with a lack of books, or receiving a poor education – can lead to a lack of confidence, or imposter syndrome.



"It's about confidence, feeling allowed, having permission, feeling allowed and entitled and confident and I think being in this thing will help my confidence"

"I've had chances before, and I've blown them because I don't ... I don't really know how to move in those circles really... so I don't really know how to say the right thing or capitalise on stuff. And it's all the stuff about pitching, I can't do it. And that's ... I spoke to someone who was doing a thing about working-class shame etcetera and she said it's about taking your space and we don't ... a lot of us don't feel that we have that entitlement"

"I am still not very good at being confident and selling my work. I often feel the need to apologise and don't push myself towards people. [I]t would be great to have that assurance and validation and (to) approach publishers, agents, other writers and eminent interviewers (to propose) that I am a worthy person with plenty to say"

2 Peer Support Networks

Writers said that they lack networks amongst other writers who could provide moral support, but also feedback on and help with their writing. The peer networks that some writers had already explored were often populated by middle-class people who can be perceived as patronising.

"Critical feedback is very useful, but I think it's hard to get unless you're involved with something like that because with the best will in the world people don't know many writers necessarily"

"I've been trying for a while to set up a little writers' group, so I guess maybe something like that. I don't really know many writers, so I haven't managed to get enough people to get together"

3 Industry Networks and Knowledge

There is a general understanding among the new writers that you have to have contacts in the industry in order to get on and to get published. Experience has shown some of the writers that having broader industry networks can also help to leverage your success once you enter the publishing industry.

"I've met a lovely friendly writer who introduced me to his circle, and everybody knows everybody else, he got his publishing deal through a friend of a friend, he got a newspaper column through a friend of a friend, he got on Radio 4 through a friend of a friend. That's how it's done. He got a 20 grand advance just because he asked for it. When I spoke with him about his career development it was just like watching somebody on the ski slopes when you've never learnt to ski. Off they go with all their friends, wiz wiz wiz and you're still stood at the edge wondering how to strap on the ski boots"

"It's about confidence, feeling allowed, having permission, feeling allowed and entitled and confident and I think being in this thing will help my confidence"

4 Gatekeepers, Influencers and Role Models

The reality of the lack of social diversity in publishing is evident amongst many of the writers' experiences of the industry, which in some cases presents a major barrier for them.

"I think humans are predisposed to give preferential treatment to their own kind, and right now there aren't many working-class influencers occupying the key positions in the industry"

"This has been the biggest surprise for me: publishing and the industry around it are very much representative of the privileged, in my experience, I'm afraid"

"People stick to what they know and a lot of people ... the more people I meet in the print publishing industry I realise it is such a southern thing, it is really southern and it is really ... I'm not even going to say middle class, I think in some cases upper class actually. I think it's just a different world"

"Yeah you've got to get our lot right in ... you know, inside the agencies to change the gatekeepers"

5 Experiences of Inclusivity and Diversity Schemes

Recently there has been a range of new initiatives in the UK publishing industry designed to enhance diversity among its authors, but our writers' experiences of participating in these schemes varied significantly. There is a perception among the new writers that some existing publishing diversity schemes are tokenistic in practice, more of a box-ticking exercise than a meaningful attempt to uncover talent, and that barriers are still not well understood or addressed amongst the publishing workforce, or within adjacent creative industries.

"I've been to agents over the past few years and every single one has made me cringe and made me really depressed because they're all very posh, white. It just seems like people from another world, another age"

"Well, I think there's still this huge ignorance. I think the people at agencies and publishers, I think they are saying – and thinking, a lot of the time – 'we want to be inclusive'. But I think they have so far to go. I just think they are so comfortable how they are. They aren't people like us, they aren't people like the people in that room. And as well-meaning as they are, I don't feel they are really, really, engaging... I feel almost that some of them are sort of paying lip service by doing these schemes"

I went to one of these diversity events and it was just five very middle class agents on a panel talking at us for hours with about ten minutes for questions. And you really got the sense that they … we were almost like some weird little motley bunch of, cos you know the black people, some disabled people, some working-class people, this kind of rabble that they'd got in there. And it was awful, they were so patronising.

And as I think I might have said at one point a woman said at the end, you know, 'so how are you good for us?' Because you know there's this general feeling that you've got to be scared, these people are the big bosses and you must be nice to them. And they didn't have an answer.

The youngest one there turned to a woman who was with her, so they were from one agency and she went, '[whispering] did we sponsor this scheme?' She didn't even know, she was just there, and the older woman went, '[whispering] yes, we did'. And then they kind of looked embarrassed and we just sort of went 'woah'.

One of the guys went, 'well we actually just like good writing. You know, from any section of society', and had nothing to say. And I just came away and thought I'm not going back to any of these ever again because it's a waste of my time and it's also demoralising, I hate being patronised.

COMMON LESSONS

1. Professional Networks Are Powerful

The most significant impact of taking part in the programme for the 17 new writers was to find and engage in peer support and community building as a profoundly two-way process.

92% of the participating cohort of new authors state that their experiences of **peer support** are 'much better or better' as a result of development days, mentoring and the community of new writers that they have found on the programme.

"The other Common People writers have provided an immense level of support and guidance. We feel like a family and like we're all part of the same team. We try to encourage each other as much as possible and read each other's work. When others have got agents or other good news, it feels like the group itself has gained something. It's extremely positive and has made me feel less isolated as a writer"

"Common People has been a revelation – in particular, the camaraderie and bonding involved between us. This has changed my life. Not just to be with other writers (always welcome) but to be with a group of people in which I don't have to explain who I 'am'/where I come from and who have similar backgrounds to mine as opposed to purely middle class. Before this I didn't actually know any writers with the same background as me! We support and help one another constantly; share work, buoy each other up"

83% of participating new writers claim that their networking opportunities and skills are 'much better or better' as a result of engaging in events and activities associated with the project.

"While I am not yet at the stage of submitting to agents, my publication in Common People *has allowed me to begin to forge connections with some agents. It has also helped me to open doors in theatre. Once they know I have a publication in* Common People*, artistic directors and programmers are very willing to meet with me or offer advice regarding my professional development as a playwright. Publication in* Common People *has also given me the confidence to develop my networks and contacts. 12 months ago, I would not have dared to send an email asking the artistic director of a theatre to meet with me to discuss my work; now I can do so quite easily"*

2. Confidence is Critical

So-called 'soft barriers' such as confidence emerged from the research as key to enhancing professional development and chances of success. Project evaluation data shows that **100%** of Common People participants now feel **more confident describing themselves as a writer** after taking part in the year-long programme.

83% of participating new writers assert that their **confidence** is 'much better or better' as a result of taking part:

"Having been published makes such a difference. And sharing how we feel with each other really helps. The first experience of being published, and feeling anxious, self-conscious etc. was made more manageable by being able to talk to the others and know how we're all feeling, and support each other to keep moving forward. Also having a group of people that understand some of the same barriers really helps, because it reduces the feeling that you as an individual should have been able to do better by now, and makes you feel more hopeful that with the right support and community you could make progress"

75% of participating new writers state that their level of **industry knowledge** is 'much better or better' as a result of taking part in the programme:

"No one had ever read any of my work. I had never sat in a room with an agent or an editor and been able to talk to them. I'd never met a writer before. So I feel like this is an 'in' into a world that I'd just thought was closed off and just part of a dream"

"I had very little knowledge of how the industry worked, or what is required to break through. Since actually meeting other writers, agents, industry professionals and having my mentoring by an author I feel I understand it a lot more and it doesn't feel as daunting"

"It has very much demystified the publishing industry for me. I now don't feel like I'm looking at a wall I don't even know how to begin scaling [...] Key to this has been learning what agents are looking for, how pitches work etc"

3. Targeted Developments Create Change

Research suggests that this targeted writing development programme helped the working-class writers improve both their **writing practice and professional success**. 60% of the Common People writers found agents, publishing deals, or further funding within 18 months of starting the writing development programme.

All 17 new writers described their status at the end of the programme as either newly published (18%) or emerging (82%) as a writer, and 60% reported having signed with literary agents or having been offered commercial publishing contracts as measurable indicators of the impact of the programme on their professional development.

75% of participating new authors reflect that their **writing practice** has been significantly improved by taking part in the Common People writing development programme:

"My writing practice is now so much better – I am now a much more disciplined, focused writer. It's great to be amongst people who take writing seriously. Having the mentoring and discussing with the rest of the group what we are all working on has all contributed to more effective writing practice"

"The sheer joy and feeling of validation and empowerment of working with an established writer as a mentor. The support too from the other Common People – we all offer to read each others' work and help if we can, right down to just boosting someone on a bad day. Incredible!"

"This is what helped my writing go up so many levels. No one had ever read my work before and having a professional give me feedback was game changing. My understanding of writing as a practice, an art, and a skill is so much clearer. My mentor helped me understand their journey to getting published, and the art of writing itself. I now understand my own work so much better and as a result of the mentoring have improved the quality of my writing and have a better focus"

4. Mentoring is Mutually Beneficial

As part of the Common People writing development programme, each new author was paired with an experienced mentor from within the literary and publishing industry for the 12-month duration of the project. The mentors were authors, literary agents, editors and publishers. Research suggests that the mentoring programme benefitted both the mentees and mentors.

85% **of the new writers said that mentoring** was the most impactful element of the Common People writing development programme. For publishers and agents, mentoring created a stronger talent pipeline for their businesses, generated new professional networks and explicitly addressed wider industry concerns regarding gender equality and representation.

Socially, the mentoring process fostered new relationships between the writers and industry professionals and produced support and guidance as well as additional opportunities beyond the programme. For new authors used to working in isolation, the mentoring element of the programme enabled them to share knowledge and also develop their practice:

"I was partnered up with someone, a public speaking expert and she spoke about lots of techniques, and the third session, it was almost like a counselling session where it was more talking about my issues around being reviewed or appearing in front of people, so yeah that was beneficial"

"Through the mentoring it's been the first time that the door has ever really been opened for me"

"The mentoring has been the most invaluable. So I've learnt kind of how to write for a reader rather than to write for myself, which is what I think I had been doing for a really long time... there are so many things like if you haven't been taught, you haven't done any courses, you can't really talk about what you're doing because you don't know what it is. So I know now about an omniscient narrator and that is what I'd been doing but I hadn't realised it. It's just having someone that says, you know when you write like this, this is what it's called and this is what the effect is and it's like – how do you know about that if no one can tell you?"

COMMON LESSONS

The mentors who guided the emerging working-class writers across the project duration also reported multiple benefits. In the mentors' evaluation survey, **100% of responding Common People mentors** said that they had enjoyed a positive experience mentoring the new writers, and felt that their mentoring had created a 'significant change' to the writing and professional development of their mentee.

Many mentors reflected that taking part in the programme not only enabled them to give something back to new writers, but also enhanced their own awareness of new talent and the development needs of emergent authors.

"The reality more than exceeded any expectations I could have had. Common People has definitely raised awareness in the industry. The programme has been much discussed by the industry across social media and I became aware of it via Twitter long before I was approached to mentor"

"I felt, more so than anyone else I've previously mentored, that I was pulling another writer up behind me, giving a hand to someone who, in the absence of my mentoring, might have run adrift eventually and found themselves with no other support or encouragement to persist with their writing"

Adam Sharp, *Common People* writer
© Richard Kenworthy

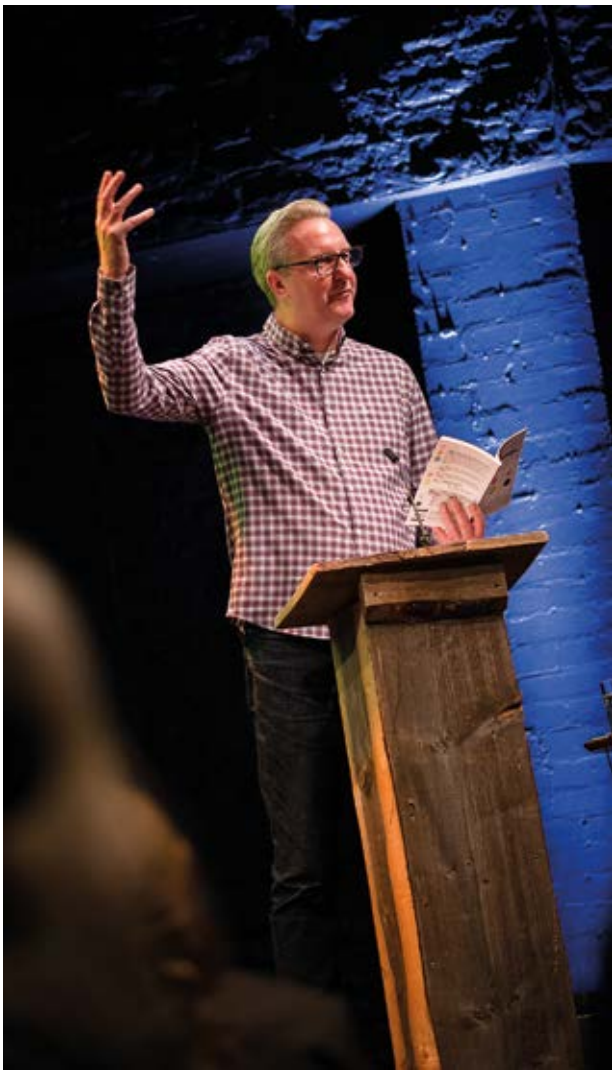
5. Regional writing development agencies are well positioned to facilitate change

For the participating regional writing development agencies, the Common People project marked the first time that all seven had come together to collaboratively tackle a nationwide issue. Evaluation data from the agencies reflects that all will now use the Common People project as a sustainable model for future working and enhanced communication and connectivity.

100% of the regional writing development agencies said that taking part in the Common People programme had benefitted their business. 100% also thought that the programme had worked well. 100% of agencies would like to engage in future collaborative national-level bidding and/or activities with other partners. As one agency lead asserts:

> *"In future, working together across the regions to promote and support writers on a national platform would be of huge benefit. Working together to share best practice and process and delivering cohesive messaging would be fitting. Agencies working together would create a national peer network of writers increasing opportunity and encouraging their confidence and ambition"*

Agencies identified that working collectively on a national project, at scale, and with a commercial partner, was a beneficial and creatively empowering experience. Working collectively also enabled agencies to benefit from sharing resources and expertise.



Tony Walsh, *Common People* writer
© Richard Kenworthy

6. Government is Listening

The Common People programme has contributed to shaping future UK government policy. Directors of the Common People programme were called to give witness evidence at the third oral evidence session of an inquiry into the class ceiling in the creative sector in UK Parliament on 13 May 2019 before the Performers' Alliance All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) [7].

The Performers' Alliance APPG provides a forum in Parliament for arts and culture-related issues, with its focus firmly on the performers and creators who deliver the arts, working alongside the trade unions of the Performers' Alliance (the Musicians' Union, Equity and the Writers' Guild of Great Britain). The session aimed to understand key barriers to breaking into a career as a writer in the industry (i.e. for TV, film, computer games) and to discuss and scrutinise different policy options for addressing these barriers.

Nicola Sturgeon, Scottish First Minister © Louise King

Members of the APPG asked the questions and facilitated the discussion with Tracy Brabin MP (chairing), alongside Giles Watling MP and the Earl of Clancarty. Discussions centred on the barriers facing working-class authors trying to break into a career in writing, the barriers producing unequal access to networks, forms of potential financial support, and the issue of 'London-based opportunities', as well as investigating government and other schemes to support early career creatives.

The evaluation results from the Common People programme were presented to the Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, Creative Scotland and Arts Council England at the Northern Lights Conference in August 2019 that was produced by Edinburgh International Book Festival in collaboration with Bradford Literature Festival. The event was designed to bring together Northern and Scottish publishers. The event was free and open to all in the publishing industry at any level, including booksellers, literary agents, editors, publicists, publishers, libraries and authors.

"Having a strong and diverse literary scene is essential for the future of the country. It brings joy and enlightenment to countless readers and helps make our society more interesting, vibrant and outward-looking. This research shows that resisting the gravitational pull of London and the South East in publishing and literature is fundamental to the future.

The incredible power of literature is its capacity to open our minds to new ideas and perspectives; it is literally impossible to overstate the value of literature to the wellbeing of our society. Publishers can give voice to those who are purposefully not heard by society. Literature, and the empathy it brings us, is core to the work of a leader and especially a political leader. This matters because our story as a nation is incomplete going forwards unless we represent the full range of diversity in society in publishing and literature"

Nicola Sturgeon, Scottish First Minister
Northern Lights Conference,
Edinburgh International Book Festival, August 2019

RECOMMENDATIONS

The future prosperity and well-being of the country depends on recognising the transformative economic and social power of its creative industries. The future of publishing does not begin and end at the M25: funding regional writing talent development, incentivising the decentralisation of the publishing industry, and investing in devolution across the country will enable not only publishing but the wider creative industries that rely on new writing talent to fully contribute to the future social, political and economic success of the country as a whole.

The findings from this report are best addressed through a private and public sector response. By working much more closely together we can significantly enhance representation in the publishing industry and adjacent creative industries, supporting access for writers from all backgrounds and creating an improved geographical distribution of resources and opportunities.

To do this we need to acknowledge the interdependency of education, the third sector and the commercial creative industries in producing a pipeline of talented, well-supported writers from under-represented backgrounds.

We need to shape and invest in new infrastructure outside of London that can support longer term change and new ways of working. Place-based initiatives which harness local and regional resources would enable longer term change and create new access points outside of London for everyone.

This would significantly strengthen a currently burgeoning ecology in the writing industries.

1 **New public and private investment** is required in production and to support new publishing ventures outside of London. Doing so will bring publishing closer to more diverse audiences, broaden recruitment into the industry, generate more points of entry for writers and develop a profile for UK publishing that is more inclusive and relevant.

2 **Increased investment in regional writing development agencies** will ensure an equitable distribution of professional development activity across England. This is where talent can be identified, nurtured and supported, where networks and peer support can be facilitated, and relationships with industry brokered. Writing development agencies are still relatively new within ACE's National Portfolio; many organisations have undergone significant growth and development and now need a higher level of support. Literature as an artform needs to be supported to grow and 'come of age' within the portfolio. Many organisations are already creating new cross-sector models of working between education, commercial and creative to diversify and maximise opportunities for writers: this should be built upon.

3 **More literary agents need to move outside of the capital**. Opportunities must be found for new collaborations and bridge-building between this part of the publishing industry and regional writing. Agents need to be mindful of how they are perceived and to develop their own workforces to better reflect society so that their taste-makers remain relevant and that their businesses are viewed as accessible and open to people with different lived experiences.

4 **The UK publishing industry needs to decentralise** and to build on the change it has started to make, work in new ways, and undertake initiatives that enable deep and lasting change. This would be demonstrated by the opening up of progression routes for young people into the industry; transparent job opportunities and pay; accessible, well-publicised recruitment campaigns; and by the diversification of the workforce, especially in relation to those from lower socio-economic and working-class backgrounds. The profile of the gatekeepers to publishing needs to change.

5 **Awareness of the multiple barriers** for writers that are described in this report needs to be present in the design of schemes to support under-represented writers. Such programmes need to offer genuine and meaningful support and sustained engagement for new writers. The commercial industries can learn from good practice that has been developed in the third sector. Partnerships with the third sector would maximise reach and promote relationship building with writers. This is especially relevant for early stage writers.

6 **Developing and supporting new working-class writers ultimately benefits everyone** – and everyone needs to play a part in increasing the profile of this work and to promote new role models for subsequent generations.

COMMON FUTURES

The Common People project has inspired a rise in public and professional awareness of the persistent class ceiling in UK publishing and offered a model of strategic intervention to redress the balance and better represent in publishing the full diversity of voices in society today. Common People suggests how such a vision for change might be articulated, co-owned and implemented.

By investing in diversity and inclusivity as a core part of business, it shows how structural change and cultural change become possible through connected working between incentivised stakeholders across the industry and the third sector. When we stop staging diversity as an event and start embedding diversity and inclusivity in our practices we can develop more financially equitable relationships between all key players in the literary and publishing ecosystems of the UK.

Transforming the profile of the people who are writing and being published also means transforming the industry gatekeepers in publishing who shape our literary culture. Prospective working-class authors and employees need to be able to see themselves not just in the literature being produced but in the industry that produces it. The Common People evaluation data makes clear that this is a matter of social justice, not just of representation. Diversity is simply another word for cultural inclusion, or, in the words of Kit de Waal, 'it's about making room for everybody' [3].

Inspired by Common People, a new Working Class Writing Festival is planned for 2020 to enhance, encourage and increase representation from working class backgrounds, which can be quite underrepresented at other literary festivals. New writing development programmes aimed at working-class authors have also been inspired by Common People. 'The Writers' Plan' writing development programme for working-class writers and the 'Working Class Writers Collective' led by Carmen Marcus have used the momentum and industry focus on class and writing to leverage new developments using the internet and networking to mobilise a wider community of working class authors across the UK.

Inspired by the success of *Common People: An Anthology* (2018) a new anthology entitled *The 32* (2020) will offer a collection of essays and memoir, bringing together 16 well-known writers from working-class backgrounds with an equal number of new and emerging writers from Ireland. These new writers will be selected by an open call. Unbound will again publish the project, and will work with the Cork World Book Fest, Irish Writers Centre, Munster Literature Centre, and Words Ireland to identify and profile new Irish working-class writers.

> *"it's about making room for everybody"*
>
> **Kit de Waal**

Common People has inspired new research to better understand and address the challenge of diversity and inclusion in UK writing and publishing. Funding for future research has been secured via a collaborative doctoral award at Northumbria University to examine the longer term impacts of the Common People programme on its writers and industry partners. The researcher will work alongside the original team who delivered the Common People project to undertake evaluation and to generate original knowledge based on the experience of the new writers as they enter the professional writing industry.

Literature has a significant role in opening our minds to new ideas and perspectives – it offers us a critical understanding of ourselves and our world that is increasingly vital in a post-Brexit, divided Britain. The value of a diverse literary scene and publishing industry to the wellbeing of our society is also key. Regional and geographical disparities compounded by socioeconomic inequalities are limiting the output of UK publishing and the potential of the UK creative industries today. As the evaluation evidence suggests, diversity and inclusivity is good not only for fairness and equality: its economic case is also imperative for longer term quality, profit and competitiveness.

The Common People project has generated a body of evidence that demonstrates how a single intervention founded on collaborative approaches across industries can tease out systematic challenges and foster new connections across other creative industries facing similar diversity issues (including the UK film and television industries). Addressing class barriers within the UK publishing industry is essential not only because our story as a nation is incomplete going forwards unless we represent a full range of diversity in society in publishing and literature, but also because we need to ensure the viability of the publishing industry as a major British export for the future.

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Addressing class barriers within the UK publishing industry is essential not only because our story as a nation is incomplete unless we represent a full range of diversity in society in publishing and literature, but also because we need to ensure the viability of the publishing industry as a major British export for the future.

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