

Capturing a sense of place

A few years ago, I was on the Kings Cross train heading down from Leeds, and I got talking to one of my fellow passengers. This is not particularly common for me; I tend towards awkward politeness most of the time that I'm on public transport. But this man and I just happened to start talking, and, in violation of all codes regarding English diffidence, we got on to the subject of how childhood landscapes had shaped us. I think it was the flatness of the countryside we were journeying through that triggered the conversation; I mentioned how, growing up in Bradford, I was more used to hills. In contrast, my travelling companion was raised in the Fens, and, for him, home and childhood was a place of huge skies and distant horizons; a landscape that we almost entered as the train passed through Peterborough. I say 'almost' because that Fenland was located as much in his memory as on any map.

It was such conversations that triggered my play, *North Country*; a piece that follows three characters over the course of forty or so years in post-apocalyptic Bradford. I was interested in the psychological importance of local landscapes, and that train journey showed how, even with modern transport links allowing us to leap from place to place, they still hold a strong influence. By absencing this ease of travel, I wanted to use the post-apocalyptic genre to address 'home' and its complications, and Bradford was my particular Petri dish. Within that space I unleashed a devastating plague that reduced the population of Bradford from half a million to a few thousand; I then followed the three characters – Nusrat Bibi, Jason Alleyne and Harvinder Sandhu – as they attempted to rebuild their communities over the decades.

There is a retrospectiveness to the post-apocalyptic genre that makes it sit sometimes oddly under a science fiction banner; the post-apocalypse is often defined by the absence of science or by the revival of older ways of life (see David Brin's *The Postman*, George R. Stewart's *Earth Abides* or Emily St John Mandel's *Station Eleven*). It's natural, therefore, when trying to capture a sense of place in the genre to look at local history and geography. In terms of Bradford, there were clear natural markers to the city that first occurred to me in that conversation on the train: the hills. Or rather the valley, which defines the centre

of the Borough, and the river whose crossing point came to name the original settlement (the 'Broad ford'). The Bradford Beck and its tributaries helped wash the wool and power the early mills that were foundations for the city's textile industry. They were also channeled underground as Bradford became the centre of a wool empire. It seemed clear to me that the river would eventually have to reassert itself in *North Country* by bursting to the surface after years of neglect. The image of nature resurgent in the city is a recurring element of post-apocalyptic fictions, but the inspiration in this case came from the city itself. Bradford's slow economic decline from the 1970s had left many of those wool mills in a state of disrepair that made them an obvious trigger for apocalyptic thoughts as I walked around the city with my camera and notebook.

I walked in order to imagine how my characters would navigate around this new Bradford: the roads that they would avoid because of collapsed sewers; the places they would get clean water; the green areas where they would plant their crops; the rims of the valley that would become the edges of their known world. It was an exercise in post-apocalyptic psychogeography; a little morbid perhaps, but, when walking with a friend, it became a game of imaginative doomsday parkour.

But, to mangle the words of Thucydides, it is not just the walls that make a city. Or, rather, there's an interplay between the physical landmarks of the city and the people who live there. Those dilapidated wool mills had reshaped the demographic profile of Bradford not just in the nineteenth century, but also in the mid-twentieth when textiles workers arrived from Pakistan, India and Bangladesh.

I am a product of those migrations, and two of the characters in *North Country* – Nusrat and Harvinder – are also the grandchildren of mill workers. The third, Alleyne, is a white farmer's son from the edge of the city. Ethnicity is difficult to avoid if you're going to write about Bradford; there is a picture of the area as a racially segregated and volatile place. The perception of ghettoisation (despite statistical realities that contradict it) predominates within the city, and the riots of 2001 created their own apocalyptic images to overlay the district: the rioters gathering in the town centre; disorder in the streets of Manningham; a burning BMW garage on Oak Lane. However, one of the great aspects of speculative

fiction is the way it allows writers to reframe and interrogate contemporary issues (in this case, ethnic heritage and perceived separatism). The post-apocalyptic subgenre offers its own specific toolkit; the dissolution of societal structures means that you get the chance to question and play around with conceptions of national, regional and ethnic identity. In the post-apocalypse, we are all migrants and we have to decide what parts of the old country we wish to revive or can no longer hold onto.

My research for *North Country* involved an exploration of the natural and man-made landscapes of Bradford, but I also wanted to convey the cultures of some of the people living there. My writing for theatre is often quite dialogue-heavy, so I had to find ways of representing the *mélange* of languages and dialects I had grown up with. It's easy to write characters that all end up sounding the same; it's natural to find certain registers that are comfortable and then just stick to them. However, we all have our own idiolects, and it's important (and really rather fun) to find the modes of speech that differentiate your characters. For Alleyne, I wanted to tap into a strong West Yorkshire dialect, so I wrote his lines often using phonetic spellings. This was not because I didn't trust the actor's ability to manage the accent, but it was, instead, a deliberate device that made me alter my sentence constructions when writing for the character. Nusrat's voice emerged out of the Manningham ethnolect – a contemporary West Yorkshire dialect influenced by Punjabi/Mirpuri that already points to the interesting linguistic fusions that might occur if Bradford is separated from the wider world after the apocalypse. By having the action take place over decades I could play around with the new resonances that places, people and language might acquire. So, a nominally 'foreign' word – *zameen* – crosses ethnic lines to become the city's primary term for land. Places are renamed – Bradford becomes the Borough; Manningham becomes the Threads. The post-apocalyptic genre loves to reframe geography (think about all the mythologised, renamed or destroyed Inlands, Drylands, and Tomorrow-morrow Lands that pop up in it).

This is what I did. I walked, talked, photographed and read the city as I wrote the play – all the while knowing that I was not trying to create something definitive. How can you sum up half a million people? How can you capture

centuries of history in Bradford and along all the international threads that are tied to it? You can't. But you try to create enough layers so that Bradfordians can recognise certain elements (and complain that you've got your travel times wrong or that should've had characters settling in Heaton instead of Manningham). You try to lay down enough roots so that those who've never seen the place can imagine it; can walk up the valley sides and can hear people speaking. It might even remind them of the places they know closely, and, breaking the habit of a lifetime, they might even talk to someone on a train about a city they once knew.

Blurb

Tajinder Singh Hayer teaches Creative Writing at Lancaster University. He writes scripts for the theatre (with companies such as the West Yorkshire Playhouse and Menagerie), radio (BBC Radio 3, BBC Radio 4 and the BBC Asian Network) and TV (CBeebies). His play, *North Country*, will be produced in Bradford in Autumn by Freedom Studios (www.freedomstudios.co.uk) and will tour in Spring 2017. He has a ludicrously sparse website that he's still trying to work out how to use: www.tajinderhayer.com