



This is a repository copy of '*We are here because you were there*': minority ethnic genre fiction in UK public libraries..

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
<http://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/78041/>

Version: Published Version

Proceedings Paper:

Birdi, B. (2010) 'We are here because you were there': minority ethnic genre fiction in UK public libraries. In: Literacy and Reading with Library Services to Multicultural Populations. World Library and Information Congress: 76th IFLA General Conference and Assembly, 10th - 15th August 2010, Gothenburg. IFLA , pp. 1-14.

Reuse

Unless indicated otherwise, fulltext items are protected by copyright with all rights reserved. The copyright exception in section 29 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 allows the making of a single copy solely for the purpose of non-commercial research or private study within the limits of fair dealing. The publisher or other rights-holder may allow further reproduction and re-use of this version - refer to the White Rose Research Online record for this item. Where records identify the publisher as the copyright holder, users can verify any specific terms of use on the publisher's website.

Takedown

If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.



eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
<https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/>



'We are here because you were there': minority ethnic genre fiction in UK public libraries

Briony Birdi

Lecturer in Librarianship
Department of Information Studies
University of Sheffield
Sheffield S1 4DP
UK

Email: b.birdi@sheffield.ac.uk

Meeting:

133. Literacy and Reading with Library Services to Multicultural Populations

WORLD LIBRARY AND INFORMATION CONGRESS: 76TH IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE AND ASSEMBLY

10-15 August 2010, Gothenburg, Sweden
<http://www.ifla.org/en/ifla76>

Abstract:

This paper presents findings of ongoing doctoral research into the reading of, and engagement with, minority ethnic genre fiction in public libraries, with a particular focus on Black British and British Asian authors. The research context is first briefly summarised, looking at the nature of minority genre fiction, and at public library provision and readership of materials for ethnically diverse communities. An empirical study is then presented, for which a general survey was conducted of the reading habits and attitudes of library users in the East Midlands region of England. The large sample population of 1,047 public library users enabled both qualitative and quantitative analyses, considering readers' preferred location for selecting books, their usual reading choices, material that they would not consider reading, and any factors affecting their choice. Finally, a brief comparison is made of libraries of different types, in terms of community, ethnicity or class. The findings indicate that certain respondents appeared to have an increased openness to read from a wide range of genres, even an increased reading confidence as a result of reading books written by minority ethnic authors. It is concluded that promotional activity can play a role not only in offering wider reading choices but also, potentially, in reducing fear and prejudice and celebrating cultural diversity.

Introduction: the changing UK cultural profile

Data from the most recent national Census – held on 29 April 2001 – showed the total UK population at that time to be 58,789,194, of which the minority ethnic population was 4,635,296 (7.9%) (Office for National Statistics, 2003). No further Census has been conducted since that time, but it is estimated that the minority ethnic population in the UK today has risen to 9.1% of the total population (Office for National Statistics, 2010).

UK government research suggests that society today is increasingly affected by segregation and minimal contact between communities in the UK (BBC, 2006). A recent study of the ‘decline of Britishness’ found that white focus group participants referred to a ‘perceived separation’ between British Muslims and the white British population, and again to ‘parallel worlds’ they inhabited (ETHNOS, 2006:10). Yet the issue is equally relevant to all British minority ethnic communities: sociologist Grillo (2007:979) refers to an overall ‘incompatibility of different ways of living’, and cites Sartori’s (2002) description of an ‘excess of alterity’ within Western society.

The aim of the research

Operating within this complex environment, the contemporary UK public library service has been selected as the context for the doctoral research on which this paper is based, primarily because of its intended function as a service for all members of society (CILIP, 2004), and its perceived role in ameliorating relations between communities (MLA, 2005). The aim of the research is to investigate the reading of, and engagement with, minority genre fiction in UK public libraries, with a particular focus on materials written by Black and Asian¹ authors. This paper explores the findings of part of this research, namely an investigation of the characteristics of the readers of minority genre fiction, and of the fiction genres themselves.

The term ‘minority genre fiction’ has been used to describe fiction written by authors from minority communities, who for the purposes of this research are specifically Black or Asian authors. Some readers will dislike the term; some may be uncomfortable with the separation of ‘Black’ and ‘Asian’ authors from the full body of literature. The use of appropriate terminology is by no means straightforward, and the decision to use these and other terms within this research was not taken lightly. An important point to make is that the label used to describe the genre should not necessarily reflect its readership. In a study of Black fiction written by African American writers, Thompson (2006) emphasized that although the genre is directly related to ethnicity and ‘racial identity’, it is not necessarily the case that every African American will read it, nor that it is unavailable to members of other communities. Similarly, in a British study Peters (2000) found that members of the British African Caribbean community are likely to read books by white and other authors, and that non-African Caribbean readers are likely to read books by African Caribbean authors. As she states, ‘the definition of *African Caribbean fiction* must be more to do with stocking books by African Caribbean authors, *about* African Caribbean people, regardless of who reads them’ (14).

In a guide to West Indian and Black British literature, Dabydeen and Wilson-Tagoe (1997) claim that the term ‘Black British’ refers to material that has been ‘created and published in

¹ In the UK the term ‘Asian’ is used to refer to people from (or whose ancestors are from) the Indian subcontinent, and not from the Far East.

Britain, largely for a British audience, by Black writers either born in Britain or who have spent a major portion of their lives in Britain' (10). Williams (1999) suggests that 'rather than being a dangerously essentialising ethnic and nationalist term, *Black British* actually becomes more useful because of the shifting nature of what each word signifies'.

It is in recognition of these viewpoints that the author has chosen to use the terms 'Black', 'Black British fiction', 'Asian fiction' and 'British Asian fiction' within this research, albeit acknowledging the controversial nature of any labels to describe such a complex and diverse range of fiction.

Research context: minority genre fiction

Before considering the methodology of this study of minority genre fiction, it is first helpful to understand the context within which it has developed. Historically, fiction in the English language was almost exclusively Western in focus, a body of work that was central to the cultural dominance of the British Empire.

However, the form of this dominance is changing and, as it is no longer possible to deny the achievements and impact of post-colonial authors, in particular from South Asia and Africa, there has been a move to incorporate their work within the Western body of literature. This idea of 'incorporation' was taken further by Salman Rushdie in an essay written in 1983 (in Rushdie, 1992), in which he writes of the 'ghetto' into which he and other authors felt themselves to have been placed, writing in the English language, but 'occupying...a position on the periphery' (61) of the body of English literature.

The importance of minority genre fiction is crystalised by Kobena in 1994 in a critique of Black cultural studies, in which she writes: 'The postcolonial diaspora is not simply immigration into Britain from other places, as for example immigration into the United States...but is instead a constant reminder that "we are here because you were there"'(7). And it is this comment which has helped to form this research, and which is being used as its title.

Research context: the public library service

In 1976 Berry emphasised the importance of delivering a 'culturally competent' library service in the UK, suggesting that minority cultures are not understood in any depth by library staff. Datta and Simsova (1989:43) later commented that readers from minority ethnic communities felt that the library service 'does not care or that it lacks the competence necessary to supply them with the books they want'.

In 1996 Tyerman found that the provision of a multilingual library service was considered to be essential by some ethnic minority groups, and certainly Tso's more recent (2007) study of library services to Chinese communities found that non-Chinese speaking library staff 'usually leave the task of understanding Chinese users' library service needs such as exploring popular fiction choice to [the] Chinese librarians' (28). However, in a study of Danish libraries Berger (2002) concludes that it is mainly older members of minority ethnic communities who request materials in their mother tongue, and that younger users generally prefer to read in English.

Pettingill and Morgan (1996) tested the ethnic composition of a library's stock by comparing the library's holdings against titles listed as 'multicultural texts' in bibliographies. Whilst such a method is fairly limited in its approach, it nonetheless raises questions as to the nature and composition of minority ethnic stock collections, and whether or not they should match the profile of the local community.

Moving away from the specifically linguistic provision of multicultural resources, we can also consider the provision of such materials in the English language, and their capacity to reach a wider readership. Research into the capacity of fiction reading to increase intercultural awareness and understanding has tended to focus on the interaction between children and young people, with a frequent finding that fiction reading is a 'tool' with which to educate children and adults 'about understanding others' (Mar et al, 2006). A 2002 study by Usherwood and Toyne into the value and impact of reading imaginative literature reported that readers felt that reading improved their ability to relate to other people, even that it had increased their understanding of people from other backgrounds and cultures.

The relevance of the research

This research moves away from previous studies, with an emphasis on the cultural, rather than the linguistic, aspects of fiction stock provision and use, and its focus on minority (ethnic) genre fiction within public libraries has not been addressed to any significant extent by previous research. Opinion pieces and news items form the main body of existing work on the subject of minority genre fiction in general, whether in the context of public libraries specifically, or within the book trade as a whole.

Research aim and objectives

The overall aim of the research was to conduct a general survey of the reading habits and attitudes of library users in the East Midlands region of England, with a particular focus on the Black British and British Asian fiction genres. This was undertaken at the same time as the *black bytes* fiction promotion was introduced to public libraries within the region. This was a set of fifty titles (in the first instance) written in the English language by Black or Minority Ethnic (BME) authors, in particular those of a Black British background. As an intervention it aimed to increase the readership of Black British fiction by both minority and majority communities. The target audiences of the *black bytes* promotion were described by the project manager as follows:

'people who think books by Black writers are not for them;
people who think books by Black writers are all the same;
people who don't know where to start with Black British writing;
people who are not aware of the full range of Black British writing (this includes Black readers)' (Van Riel, 2002).

The author was employed by Opening the Book Limited, the UK-based reader development agency which developed and managed the *black bytes* promotion, to devise a means of evaluating the intervention. This paper therefore presents relevant findings of that evaluation and of related research conducted by the author, for the purpose of her doctoral thesis. Although the titles within the promotion itself were uniquely Black British, the focus of the study was expanded to include British Asian authors writing in English, in order to broaden

the investigation of attitudes towards British minority ethnic fiction. Within the above stated aim, the research had the following objectives:

1. To devise and analyse a brief reading habit survey to be distributed at issue points in one library in each of the nine participating local authorities prior to, and towards the end of, the installation of the promotion.
2. To interview a sample of respondents to obtain further information concerning their reading habits and preferences, and to investigate perceptions of the *black bytes* promotion.
3. To repeat points 1. & 2. in a sample of control (i.e. non-participating) libraries.
4. To statistically compare the impact of the promotion in different types of libraries, for example of rural/suburban/urban areas, of different minority ethnic communities, of different socio-economic communities.

As stated above, the *black bytes* promotion featured only titles written by BME authors. As all titles were originally written in the English language, a key objective of the project was to enable all English-speaking library users to borrow and enjoy the books, whatever their cultural background, thereby developing their own reading choices and habits. This is reflected in Van Riel's definition of reader development:

'Reader development means active intervention to increase people's confidence and enjoyment of reading, open up reading choices, offer opportunities for people to share their reading experience, raise the status of reading as a creative activity'. (Opening the Book, 2010)

The requested focus of the original evaluation was on the impact of the *black bytes* promotion on the reader. However, with the above definition in mind and in order to reduce the likelihood of conducting a biased study, the author decided that the evaluation should have a more general focus, investigating people's reading choices, and factors that may affect these choices. This decision is therefore reflected in the aim and objectives given above.

Survey of reading habits

A brief reading habit survey was devised and distributed by library staff at issue points in a total of 16 public libraries in the nine participating local authorities before, and a time after, the installation of the *black bytes* promotion. In addition, the survey was distributed twice to five control libraries, libraries that did not participate in the promotion, each within the East Midlands region. The aim of this was to avoid any anomalies in the findings of the evaluation. For example, other factors, that bore no relation to the *black bytes* promotion, may have influenced respondents' answers. The final element of the research was to interview a sample of library users to obtain further information on their reading habits and preferences.

The questionnaire: What do you like to read?

A questionnaire was developed that would firstly be straightforward and rapid to complete, and secondly would be accessible to as many library users as reasonably possible, whatever their age, gender, socio-economic or ethnic background. It consisted of five simple questions:

1. During your visit to the library TODAY, what type(s) of book were you looking for?
2. Where did you look for these books?
3. What type of books would you USUALLY borrow from the library?
4. (In the following list), are there any types of book that you would NOT consider reading?
5. What factors usually influence you in your choice of library books?

Following each question there was a series of options, and respondents were asked to tick as many as were relevant to them. For Questions 1, 3 and 4 respondents were given as options the same list of 13 genres (excluding 'Other'), which were the result of a series of discussions between the researcher and the project group, and were agreed to represent a wide range of the stock available in a typical library in the East Midlands:

1. Science fiction/fantasy
2. Gay/lesbian fiction
3. Black British fiction
4. Family sagas
5. Non-fiction
6. Romance fiction
7. 'Lad lit' e.g. Nick Hornby, Irvine Welsh, Mike Gayle
8. Crime fiction
9. 'Chick lit' e.g. Lisa Jewell, Jane Green, Marian Keyes
10. Asian fiction in English
11. Audio books (books on tape/CD)
12. Literary fiction
13. War/spy/adventure.

In the survey itself, variables for each question were listed randomly in order to emphasise that all choices were equally significant, and that no judgment of the respondent was implicit in the survey.

Response rate and sample population

Of the 1,150 questionnaires distributed a total of 1,047 valid responses were received, with a combined response rate of 91.0%. Of these respondents, 277 (26.4%) were male, 572 (54.6%) were female, and 198 (18.9%) chose not to state their gender. There was a fairly similar number of respondents in each of the age groups over 30 (slightly more in the 70+ group), and considerably fewer for the 16-19 and 20-20 groups. However, it was encouraging that there were 162 (15.5%) 30-39 year olds (i.e. people who would not normally be regarded as frequent UK library users).

Reading habit questionnaire and interviews: findings

Before considering the findings of the 'What do you like to read?' survey, it is important to note that it would not be appropriate to make generalizations as to universal attitudes towards different book genres and their selection and promotion within the library service, based only on these data. However, they could be regarded as an indicator that research with a similar methodology, conducted under similar conditions, would produce comparable results.

Preferred location for selecting books

Figure 1. Table to show where in the library respondents looked for their books [Question 2]

Popularity ranking	Variable (location)	Combined results (% of total 1,047)
1	On the shelf	777 (74.2%)
2	Displays of new books	510 (48.7%)
3	Returns trolley	464 (44.3%)
4	Other displays or promotions	175 (16.7%)
5	Library catalogue	164 (15.7%)

As **Figure 1** illustrates, the data collected regarding respondents' preferred location in the library for selecting books showed that almost three-quarters of the total sample of 1,047 respondents (74.2%) looked on the library shelves, in other words in the traditional A-Z sequence. At first glance this seems to be a discouraging finding in terms of promotion planning: if library users prefer to go directly to the shelves, why should library staff make the effort to devise specific promotional displays? However, given that respondents were asked to tick as many options as were relevant to them, in many cases the library shelves were just one of a number of locations they selected. Approximately half of respondents selected 'displays of new books' (48.7%), although far fewer selected 'Other displays or promotions' (16.7%), both findings of obvious relevance to the present investigation of attitudes towards minority genre fiction and its promotion.

Figure 2. Table to show where in the library Black British fiction and Asian fiction readers looked for their books [Question 2]

Variable (location)	Popularity ranking	Black British fiction readers (% of total 36)	Popularity ranking	Asian fiction readers (% of total 29)
On the shelf	1=	28 (77.8%)	1	21 (72.4%)
Displays of new books	1=	28 (77.8%)	2	14 (48.3%)
Returns trolley	2	15 (41.7%)	3	7 (24.1%)
Other displays or promotions	3	10 (27.8%)	5	5 (17.2%)
Library catalogue	4	6 (16.7%)	4	1 (3.4%)

A total of 36 respondents stated that they would 'usually' borrow Black British fiction, and a total of 29 respondents that they would 'usually' borrow Asian fiction in English. A cross-tabulation was conducted of these two groups and their preferred location for selecting books. The results show that the most frequently selected options for Black British fiction readers are 'displays of new books' and 'on the shelf. The two most frequently selected options were the same for Asian fiction readers, although with a higher proportion of readers choosing the library shelves. The library catalogue was a similarly unpopular choice for each group. Overall, the data would suggest that both Black British and Asian fiction readers look in a wide range of locations for their books. An explanation of this could simply be that fewer titles tend to be available in these categories than in the more 'popular' genres, such as crime

fiction. It would therefore be reasonable to suggest that both minority fiction genres should be promoted using a wide range of display methods.

Respondents' 'usual' reading choices

Responses to Question 3 ('What type of books would you *usually* borrow from the library [please tick all that apply]?') are analysed in more detail than those to Question 1 ('During your visit to the library *today*, what type(s) of books were you looking for [please tick all that apply]?'), as they are more likely to accurately represent respondents' reading choices in general, not only those choices they may have made on one particular visit (*today*) to the library. **Figure 3** (below) shows the number of responses given for each genre, listed in order of the frequency of response.

Figure 3. Table to show the frequency with which individual genres were 'usually' borrowed from the library [Question 3]

Popularity ranking	Variable (genre)	Combined results (% of total 1,047)
1	Non-fiction	550 (52.5%)
2	Crime fiction	452 (43.2%)
3	Family sagas	308 (29.4%)
4	Literary fiction	276 (26.4%)
5	Romance fiction	264 (25.2%)
6	War/spy/adventure	250 (23.9%)
7	Science fiction/fantasy	198 (18.9%)
8	Audio books	106 (10.1%)
9	Chick Lit	89 (8.5%)
10	Black British fiction	36 (3.4%)
11	Lad Lit	44 (3.2%)
12	Asian fiction in English	29 (2.8%)
13	Gay/lesbian fiction	10 (1.0%)

As illustrated in **Figure 3**, the most popular reading choice was non-fiction (52.5%). It is notable that more than half the respondents selected this option, as national data and professional opinion would appear to contradict this, indicating that more fiction is borrowed from public libraries than non-fiction (Van Riel, 2003; CIPFA, 2008). One possible explanation for the high response rate to the present study could be that respondents were including in their responses any non-fiction material they may read while in the library such as reference works, magazines and newspapers, even online texts. Commenting on the findings of the present study, Van Riel (2003) also suggests that although non-fiction tends to be the category towards which people express the least negative feeling, it is also 'an area where most people actually read less'. As she states, 'An absence of perceived problem with non-fiction does not translate into an increase of readership'.

The minority fiction genres included in the survey (Black British fiction, Asian fiction in English, gay/lesbian fiction) were three of the four least frequently cited genres. A statistical (Spearman's Rank Order Correlation) test was conducted, in order to calculate the strength of the relationship between Black British and Asian fiction variables for Question 3. If a person

‘usually’ reads the former category, would he or she be likely to ‘usually’ read the latter? The correlation demonstrated that the two variables are indeed strongly related. This could be of value to those working to raise interest in Black British and Asian fiction material, as it would appear that the two could reasonably be promoted together.

Genres that respondents would not consider reading

As **Figure 4** (below) illustrates, the genre ‘gay/lesbian fiction’ was respondents’ least popular reading choice (63.6%, n=666). The second least popular genre was Asian fiction in English (44.7%, n=468), whereas interestingly Black British fiction was less unpopular, but would nonetheless not be considered by 32.3% (n=338) of the overall group of respondents.

Figure 4. Table to show the frequency with which individual genres would not be considered by reading survey participants [Question 4]

Unpopularity ranking	Variable (genre)	Combined results (% of total 1,047)
1	Gay/lesbian fiction	666 (63.6%)
2	Asian fiction in English	468 (44.7%)
3	Science fiction/fantasy	438 (41.8%)
4	Romance fiction	373 (35.6%)
5	Chick Lit	369 (35.3%)
6	Black British fiction	338 (32.3%)
7	Lad Lit	316 (30.2%)
8	Audio books	284 (27.1%)
9	War/spy/adventure	234 (22.3%)
10	Family sagas	179 (17.1%)
11	Crime fiction	151 (14.4%)
12	Literary fiction	134 (12.8%)
13	Non-fiction	45 (4.3%)

It is notable that there appeared to be less reluctance to read Black British than Asian fiction. Nonetheless, a statistical (Spearman’s Rank Order Correlation) test revealed that if a person stated that they would not read Asian fiction, it is also highly likely that he or she would not read Black British fiction. As minority genres such as these vary considerably in subject matter, we could infer that large numbers of respondents are choosing not to read these books not because of their content, but because of the cultures or lifestyles that they represent. This issue was explored further in the interviews, during which a number of interviewees felt compelled to qualify their lack of interest, perhaps in order to assure the interviewer that their reason was not due to any particular prejudice. In almost all cases, the types of book that they were discussing were gay/lesbian, Asian or Black British fiction, as the following comment illustrates:

‘It’s not that I’m against reading them, if I picked one up and it looked interesting, I might, but it’s not something that I’d go and specifically look for to read.’ [Asian fiction and Black British fiction]

Factors affecting choice of library books

The fifth and final question in the reading habits survey explored those factors influencing participants' choice of reading material. **Figure 5** (below) presents the findings.

Figure 5. Table to show the factors influencing respondents in their choice of library books, in order of popularity [Question 5]

Popularity ranking	Variable (factor)	Combined results (% of total)
1	Display in the library	682 (57.6%)
2	Friends' recommendation	483 (46.1%)
3	Newspaper/magazine/TV review	464 (44.4%)
4	I saw it in a bookshop	407 (38.9%)
5	I saw it/them on the returns trolley	403 (38.5%)
6	Library staff recommendation	215 (20.6%)
7	'Prizewinners' e.g. Orange prize, Booker prize	181 (17.3%)
8	Current events	172 (16.4%)
9	Internet	82 (7.8%)

The findings given in **Figure 5** would strongly suggest that the effectiveness of stock promotion is enhanced if the potential influence of display is not overlooked. More than half of respondents (57.6%) said that their choice of reading materials was affected by the 'display in the library'. In other words, the presentation of books in the library building itself can influence a reading choice more than any other internal or external factor.

A statistical (Spearman's Rank Order Correlation) test was conducted, in order to calculate the strength of the relationship between each of the variables 'Black British fiction' and 'Asian fiction', and the nine possible 'choice' factors influencing readers in their choice of library books. This revealed that people who 'usually' read Black British fiction are significantly more likely than those who do not usually read the genre to choose their books from a 'display in the library' or the 'Internet' and, to a lesser extent, from 'prizewinners', 'current events' or 'library staff recommendation'. However, Asian fiction readers do not appear to differ significantly from non-Asian fiction readers in terms of the factors influencing their choice of library books.

As in previous analyses, the reading behaviour and choices of the Black British fiction and Asian fiction readers appear to be quite different from one another. Interestingly, the former again seems to be more influenced than the latter by displays in the library (see also **Figure 2**). It is also notable that the readers of Black British fiction are significantly more likely than Asian fiction readers to look for prizewinning titles when searching for their books. Could an interpretation of this be that fewer prizewinning titles are perceived to have been written by (British) Asian writers than Black British writers? This would be relatively surprising, as although both Black British and Asian writers have featured in national book prizewinning long and shortlists², representation from either 'group' is not yet commonplace. In 2007 the UK bookseller Waterstone's devised a list of 25 'future greats' (Brown, 2007), relatively new

² e.g. the prestigious national *Man Booker Prize* (<http://www.themanbookerprize.com/>) and *Orange Prize for Fiction* (<http://www.orangeprize.co.uk/home>)

authors who it felt to be the ‘next generation of superstars (Hoyle, 2007). Of this list of 25, just one was black (British Nigerian author Helen Oyemi) and one was British Asian (Gautam Malkani), in total less than a representative percentage of the overall non-white population. As the Independent newspaper noted in 2007, it would appear that ‘Britain’s book business remains determinedly Caucasian’.

Comparisons of libraries of different types

In order to collect further data pertaining to the nature of the survey sample, the project representative for each of the nine participating local authorities was asked to define each of the libraries participating in the *black bytes* evaluation (both control and non-control) according to the following variables:

- The nature of the community (rural/urban/suburban)
- The predominant ethnicity of the community (White/Black/Asian/mixed)
- The predominant class of the community (middle class/working class/mixed) in which the library is situated.

Figure 6 shows the number of participating libraries and valid responses (from each library) for each of the 3 variables ‘community type’, ‘class’, ‘ethnicity’:

Community type	Number of participating libraries	Number of valid responses
Rural	3	192
Urban	10	457
Suburban	8	398
Total	21	1,047
Predominant community ethnicity	Number of participating libraries	Number of valid responses
White	16	811
Black	0	0
Asian	0	0
Mixed	5	236
Total	21	1,047
Predominant community class	Number of participating libraries	Number of valid responses
Working class	7	308
Middle class	5	260
Mixed	9	479
Total	21	1,047

A brief summary of findings is given below.

Analysis by community type:

- More respondents read Black British and Asian fiction in urban areas than in rural or suburban areas.

- Perhaps conversely, a higher number of respondents from urban areas than from rural or suburban areas would not consider reading Black British fiction.

Analysis by community ethnicity:

- The majority of respondents who read Black British and Asian fiction were from libraries in ‘mixed’ communities. For example, 7.3% of respondents who read Asian fiction were from ‘mixed’ communities, whereas only 1.5% of respondents from ‘white’ communities ‘usually’ selected this type of book.

Analysis by class:

- Respondents from working class areas read more Black British fiction than those from other areas.
- Respondents from working class areas read less literary fiction than those from other areas.
- Similarly, more respondents from working class areas would not read literary fiction than those from other areas.
- Reading choices made by respondents from working class areas appear to be less influenced by books seen in bookshops, and more by library staff recommendation, than those from other areas.

In conclusion

This study has investigated the profile of the minority fiction reader, and those factors affecting his or her choice to read (or not read) those genres. The large respondent group for the survey (n=1,047 in total) enabled the collection of a more representative view of the population of library users within the East Midlands than would otherwise have been possible with a smaller sample group.

In drawing comparisons between responses and attitudes towards thirteen different genres, it has been possible to draw initial conclusions about the readers – and, interestingly, the non-readers – of Black British and Asian fiction. The data revealed that the two variables are strongly related, in that if a person ‘usually’ reads from one genre, he or she is significantly highly likely also to read from the other. However, of particular interest is the clear finding that despite this apparent link it should not be assumed that the reader of each genre will always have similar patterns of reading behaviour, or similar attitudes towards fiction selection or reading.

For example, those who usually read Black British fiction are quite different from those who do not, in that they are significantly more likely to look for their books from displays of new books or other displays and promotions, whereas those who usually read Asian fiction in English appear to use these promotional tools no more than those who do not. A further example to illustrate the differing characteristics of the readers of each genre can be found in the analysis of negative attitudes, whereby Asian fiction in English was 12.4% more likely *not* to be chosen by respondents than Black British fiction. However, statistical tests also showed that if a person stated that he or she would not read Asian fiction, it is also highly likely that he or she would not read Black British fiction.

Evidently, it would be wrong to assume that all fiction written by minority ethnic authors is identical in subject matter and style, or that the ethnicity referred to in its label should automatically reflect its intended (or actual) audience. As previously discussed, the use of any label or classification is problematic, and terms such as 'Black', 'Black British' or 'Asian' will inevitably carry with them certain cultural, ethnic and racial characteristics and stereotypes when used to describe the books we choose in a public library. However, if those who would make a deliberate choice to avoid one genre would behave in the same way towards the other, does this suggest that these individuals are doing so because of the cultures or lifestyles that they perceive 'minority genre fiction' to represent, and how different they feel them to be from their own? Despite the apparent lack of intended readership for minority genre fiction, do some white people perhaps feel that these genres are not relevant to them, being more comfortable identifying themselves with other genres?

Encouragingly, the data have also revealed an openness on the part of many respondents to read from a wide range of genres, and to try new material. Reader response theory, and the related concept of reader development, can help us to explain this pattern of respondent behaviour. To return to the definition of reader development, an 'active intervention to increase people's confidence and enjoyment of reading, open up reading choices, offer opportunities for people to share their reading experience, raise the status of reading as a creative activity' (Opening the Book, 2010), it is therefore perhaps unsurprising that certain survey respondents appear to have indeed opened up their reading choices, perhaps even increased in reading confidence as a result of reading books written by minority ethnic authors.

In conclusion, an understanding of the nature of the readers of 'minority genre fiction', and the nature of the material they choose to read, we are more likely to devise effective reading promotions – and sustainable reading practices – via which to celebrate cultural diversity. And although this study was based in a particular region of the UK, it is felt that this research would be transferable not only to other minority fiction genres, but to other ethnic cultures, and to public library readers in other countries. The findings have indicated that there is a promotional opportunity waiting to be taken by public library staff working with any minority ethnic community: in order to encourage people to find the elusive 'good read', themed displays can be used to remove fears and prejudices in an entirely unobtrusive way, to present wider reading choices to all library users.

References

Berger, A. (2002) 'Recent trends in library services for ethnic minorities – the Danish experience'. *Library Management*, 23(1-2):79-87.

Brown, J. (2007) 'Brought to book: literary Britain – the next chapter'. London, *The Independent*, 17 May 2007: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/brought-to-book-literary-britain--the-next-chapter-449143.html>

CILIP (2004) *Equal Opportunities and Diversity Strategy: a report by the CILIP Equal Opportunities Panel*. London: CILIP, October 2004.

CIPFA (2008) *Public Library Statistics - 2006-7 actuals*. London: Statistical Information Service, CIPFA [The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy].

Dabydeen, D. & Wilson-Tagoe, N. (1997) *A reader's guide to Westindian and Black British literature*. London: Hansib Publications.

Datta, S. & Simsova, S. (1989) *Cultural diversity & libraries: today and tomorrow*. London: PNL Press

ETHNOS (2006) *The decline of Britishness: a research study*. London: ETHNOS Research and Consultancy: http://www.ethnos.co.uk/decline_of_britishness.pdf

Grillo, R. (2007) 'An excess of alterity? Debating difference in a multicultural society'. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 30(6): 979-998.

Hoyle, B. (2007) 'The 25 writers tipped to be literary lions of the future'. London: *The Times*, 17 May 2007: http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/books/article1801013.ece

Kobena, M. (1994) *Welcome to the jungle: new positions in Black cultural studies*. London: Routledge.

Mar, R. et al. (2006) 'Bookworms versus nerds: exposure to fiction versus non-fiction, divergent associations with social ability, and the simulation of fictional social worlds.' *Journal of Research in Personality*, 40(5), 694-712.

MLA (2005) *Public libraries and community cohesion: developing indicators*'. London: Museums, Libraries and Archives Council: www.mla.gov.uk/resources/assets//l/id1410rep_pdf_6655.pdf

Office for National Statistics (2010) *UK Statistics Authority*. London: Office for National Statistics. <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/>

Office for National Statistics (2003) *Population size* [Online]. London: Office for National Statistics. <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=273>

Opening the Book (2010) *What is reader development?* [Online]. Pontefract: Opening the Book Ltd. <http://www.openingthebook.com/about/reader-centred-approach/definition/default.aspx>

Peters, R. (2000) *We live in a multi-cultural society. How far is this reflected in the range of adult fiction available in public libraries with specific reference to the African-Caribbean community?* University of Sheffield: Masters dissertation.

Pettingill, A. & Morgan, P. (1996) 'Building a retrospective multicultural collection: a practical approach'. *Collection Building*, 15(3):10-16.

Rushdie, S. (1992) *Imaginary homelands: essays and criticism 1981-91*. London: Granta Books, 2nd edition.

Sartori, G. (2002) *Pluralismo, multiculturalismo e estranei*. Milan: Rizzoli.

The Independent (2007) 'Cover stories: Dawn French's memoirs; ethnic diversity; Abu Dhabi Book Fair; IMPAC award'. London: *The Independent*, 13 April: <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/cover-stories-dawn-frenchs-memoirs-ethnic-diversity-abu-dhabi-book-fair-impac-award-444374.html>

Thompson, L. (2006) 'Using popular black fiction subgenres to develop or expand African American user populations of rural, undersized and traditional public libraries'. *Bookmobile and Outreach Services*, 9(1): 41-61.

Tso, H.M.(2007) *Social Inclusion and Public Libraries: is the Ability to Empathise an Essential Attribute for Community Librarians to Better Serve their Ethnic Minority Users?* University of Sheffield: Department of Information Studies, Masters Dissertation.

Tyerman, K. (1996) 'Getting things in focus: The use of focus groups in Brent Libraries'. *Library Management*, 17(2):36-39.

Usherwood, B., & Toyne, J. (2002) 'The value and impact of reading imaginative literature'. *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 34 (1), 33-41.

Van Riel, R. (2002) *EMERALD Black and Asian specialist project group report*. Unpublished report: Opening the Book Ltd., 15 April.

Van Riel, R. (2003) *How to use 'What do you like to read? – an evaluation report'*. Unpublished document: Opening the Book Ltd.

Williams, B.T. (1999) 'A state of perpetual wandering: diaspora and Black British writers'. *Jouvert: a Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 3(3).