

# Northumbria Research Link

Citation: Shaw, Katy (2020) Common People: Breaking the Class Ceiling in UK Publishing. *Creative Industries Journal*, 13 (3). pp. 214-227. ISSN 1751-0694

Published by: Taylor & Francis

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17510694.2019.1707521>  
<<https://doi.org/10.1080/17510694.2019.1707521>>

This version was downloaded from Northumbria Research Link:  
<http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/41796/>

Northumbria University has developed Northumbria Research Link (NRL) to enable users to access the University's research output. Copyright © and moral rights for items on NRL are retained by the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. Single copies of full items can be reproduced, displayed or performed, and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided the authors, title and full bibliographic details are given, as well as a hyperlink and/or URL to the original metadata page. The content must not be changed in any way. Full items must not be sold commercially in any format or medium without formal permission of the copyright holder. The full policy is available online: <http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/policies.html>

This document may differ from the final, published version of the research and has been made available online in accordance with publisher policies. To read and/or cite from the published version of the research, please visit the publisher's website (a subscription may be required.)



**Northumbria  
University**  
NEWCASTLE



**UniversityLibrary**

# **Common People: Breaking The Class Ceiling in UK Publishing**

## **Abstract**

The United Kingdom has just one percent of the world's population but is the largest exporter of books in the world. As a thriving creative industry, UK publishing also makes a significant indirect economic contribution to the British economy via immediately adjacent sectors including retail, printing and marketing. However, the under-representation of British working class writers in UK publishing has been identified as a major social and economic challenge by major publishers and the British government. In 2018 Arts Council England funded the first ever writing development programme aimed at redressing the balance for British working class writers. This article evaluates the impact of this unique initiative on both creatives and the creative industries in the UK, as well as on wider industry awareness of the presence and impact of the class ceiling in UK publishing. It assesses for the first time the impact of a targeted class-based writing development programme on creatives and the creative industries in the UK, as well as on professional awareness of the challenge posed by the class ceiling in the wider UK creative industries today.

**Keywords:** writing; publishing; working class; literature; economic; creative.

**Disclosure statement:** No financial interest or benefit to the author has arisen from the direct applications of this research.

## **Common People: Breaking the Class Ceiling in UK Publishing**

The under-representation of British working class writers in the twenty-first century UK publishing industry has been identified by major publishers including Penguin and Hachette and the British government as a major social and economic challenge to the vitality of publishing and its contribution to the British creative economy today and in the future. In 2018 Arts Council England<sup>1</sup> funded the first ever writing development programme - Common People - aimed at redressing this balance and enhancing the visibility of British working class writers. The resultant Common People writing development programme was aimed at British working class writers wanting to enter the UK literary industry ran for twelve months from August 2018 to August 2019.

This article evaluates the impact of this unique initiative on both creatives and the creative industries in the UK, as well as on wider industry awareness of the presence and impact of the class ceiling in UK publishing today. It draws on evaluation evidence from the writers, mentors, writing agencies, literary agents, publishers and academics who took part in the programme and assesses for the first time the impact of a targeted class-based writing development programme on creatives and the creative industries in the UK, as well as on professional awareness of the challenge posed by the class ceiling in the wider UK creative industries today.

### **UK Publishing: A Creative Industry Success Story?**

The United Kingdom has just one percent of the world's population but is the largest exporter of books in the world. As the largest exporter of global physical books (2.9bn in export

---

<sup>1</sup> In the UK, Arts Council England (ACE) supports literature in England through NPOs (National Portfolio Organisations) like regional writing developments agencies (RWDAs), as well as through independent publishers.

revenue in 2016), Britain produces 17% percent of the world's total book exports and in 2015 the UK produced a 1.1bn UK trade surplus from physical books alone, compared to total UK trade deficit of 38.6bn (p.5). In gross value added (GVA) terms, the publishing industry directly contributed £3.2bn to the UK economy in 2016, or about 0.2% of economywide GVA. About two-thirds (£2.2bn) of this figure was generated by book publishing. Turnover was estimated at £5.1bn in 2016, with 75% from books.<sup>2</sup>

According to official government data, the Gross Value Added (GVA) for UK publishing in 2016 was estimated to be £11.6bn, which has risen from £10.3bn in 2010.<sup>3</sup> In the same year, publishing accounted for £3.2 billion of UK gross value added (GVA), £2.9 billion of exports and £545 million of investment. By 2017, publishing is estimated to have accounted for 192,000 jobs in the UK creative economy, almost 10 per cent of UK creative industries employment. As an industry, publishing is also twice as productive as the UK average, generating an average of £113,000 GVA per worker per year.

As a creative industry, UK publishing does not stand alone, but rather operates with, and significantly contributes to, the success and vitality of other UK creative industries. The financial ripple effect of UK publishing highlights the indirect economic contribution made by the sector to immediately adjacent sectors including the retail, printing and marketing that go on to further enhance the economic contribution of the sector to the overall British economy. With significant physical and digital income, and a key role in promoting culture and wellbeing, the UK literary industry feeds the wider creative industry sector in the twenty-first century.

---

<sup>2</sup> Frontier Economics, 'Report: Publishing's Contribution to the Wider Creative Industries', *The Publishers Association*, July 2018 < <https://publishers.org.uk/influence/value-of-uk-publishing/>>

<sup>3</sup> DCMS, 'Sector Economic Estimates: July 2018 and November 2017: Creative Industries Economic Estimates, *Government Publishing* <[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/649980/Independent\\_Review\\_of\\_the\\_Creative\\_Industries.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/649980/Independent_Review_of_the_Creative_Industries.pdf)>

The UK publishing industry is one of the country's most successful in terms of the breadth, depth and quality of the content it publishes, the multiple ways in which it brings that content to market and exports it across the world. By providing the source material for other British creative industries, the publishing sector helps to reduce the risk and increase the success of other creative productions. A report for the UK Publishers Association by Frontier Economics estimates that UK creative productions that originated as books generated 44 per cent more in UK film box office revenue (and 53 per cent more globally); 58 per cent higher viewership of 'high-end' TV productions; and nearly three times more ticket sales for theatre productions.<sup>4</sup> However, publishing is also the least diverse creative industry operating in the UK today.

### **The Class Ceiling in UK Writing and Publishing**

Publishing stands out in wider debates about diversity within the UK's creative industries because it remains one of the worst sectors in terms of social mobility and structural inequalities. 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.<sup>5</sup> Yet, the way we configure social class in the twenty-first century is more complicated than ever.

Sociologist Mike Savage developed the work of Bourdieu to draw in social, cultural and economic capital and created a model of class distinction that did not simply draw upon parental professions or employment inequality. His new model posed a different way of

---

<sup>4</sup> Frontier Economics, 'Report: Publishing's Contribution to the Wider Creative Industries', *The Publishers Association*, July 2018 < <https://publishers.org.uk/influence/value-of-uk-publishing/> >

<sup>5</sup> See also Bennett et al., 2008; Dorling, 2011; Hills, 2010; Wilkinson and Pickett, 2008.

understanding the persistence and the renewing of divisions between social class in the UK today. His ‘new model of class offers a powerful way of comprehending the persistence, yet also the remaking of social class divisions in contemporary Britain’.<sup>6</sup> 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. Developing some of the key areas outlined by Thomas Piketty in his polemic *Capital in the 21st Century* (2014), 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’. 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.

In recent years, the cultural sector and other UK creative industries have begun to generate new data that can help them develop awareness and understanding of the barriers that could be leading to the underrepresentation of working class writers in the contemporary UK publishing industry. In 2017, ACE commissioned its *Literature in the 21st Century: Understanding Models of Support for Literary Fiction* report. The report aimed to explore the

---

<sup>6</sup> Mike Savage et al, ‘A New Model of Social Class? Findings from the BBC’s Great British Class Survey Experiment’, *Sociology* 47(2) 219–250; p.246.

extent to which new support models for working class writers are emerging, and whether they are being taken up by writers in practice (p.3).<sup>7</sup> The findings of the report were stark and it concludes that UK literary fiction is still dominated by ‘insider networks’ that are ‘so established that the reality of breaking into these areas still proves impossible for many writers’ (p.3). The report 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 future (p.36).

The report notes that only 6% of respondents thought the UK publishing industry was ‘very diverse’; in contrast 56% believed it was ‘not diverse at all’ (p.34). Highlighting a ‘significant and widespread’ awareness that ‘class and geography create serious obstacles for authors seeking publication’ (p.35) the report quotes author Kit de Waal’s claim that ‘the further you are from the network, the more hurdles there are to overcome’ (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. Since ‘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), the report concludes that there is ‘undoubtedly, a need for more support and new models of support’ and ‘that we are returning to a position where only the best-off writers can support themselves should be a source of deep concern’ (p.52).

---

<sup>7</sup> Arts Council England, *Literature in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Understanding Models of Support for Literary Fiction*, 2017 <<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Literature%20in%20the%2021st%20Century%20report.pdf>>

In 2019 ALCS (UK Authors' Earnings and Contracts Society) also raised concerns that writing could become an elitist profession that ran the risk of pricing out working class authors. It commissioned a survey of 50,000 British writers and found that the nominal average (mean) earnings of writers had stagnated, changing from £16,531 in 2006 to £16,809 in 2014 to £16,096 in 2018. This drop of over 12 years of 49 percent occurred during a period of time in which the UK creative industries reached £100bn GVA and have grown at nearly twice the rate of the economy since 2010.<sup>8</sup> The ACLS report shows that the highest-earning 10% of writers take home about 70% of total earnings in the profession, but the majority of writers need a second job to survive.

In response to this new research, a range of initiatives were launched to address the issues highlighted. Working class British writer Kit de Waal began to speak up about the lack of opportunity for working-class writers in 2017 and used some of the advance from her first book to establish a writing scholarship for people from disadvantaged backgrounds at Birkbeck University in 2018. ACE offered seed funding to initiatives like the Good Literary Agency, an agency committed to only representing writers from marginal groups, and publishers like Penguin experimented with diversity schemes for staff recruitment including 'Write Now'. Elsewhere in print, *Know Your Place*—a collection of poetry, fiction and memoir—was published by regional UK publisher Dead Ink in 2017 featuring essays about the working class, by the working class. While many recognised these steps taken to address the problem, others urged for even greater reform and new approaches to ensure that the UK publishing industry is representative of all socio-economic backgrounds, and not just those from the middle and upper classes.

---

<sup>8</sup> DCMS, 'Sectors Economic Estimates 2017: GVA, Department for Digital, Media, Culture and Sport', *Government Publishing*, 28 November 2018, p.1.



In the wider UK creative industries, recent years have seen the BBC relocate many of its staff and services to Salford, while both Channel 4 and Sky have moved their HQ sites to Leeds. 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 the UK's capital city. Against context of seedbed moves to address the problem of the class ceiling in publishing, the Common People project sought to build on these effective interventions to create the first coordinated and fully funded programme of writing and professional development for new working class authors in the UK.

### **Common People: A Case Study Creative Industry Intervention**

The Common People programme was conceived as a vehicle to address this recognised under representation of British working class writers in the UK publishing and literary industries. The programme marked the first joint bid for ACE (Arts Council England) funding from all 8 UK RWDAs (regional writing development agencies). For the first time, all national RWDAs joined together in an act of strategic commitment and capacity to address an area of concern across their specific regions. Their funding bid was also supported by major UK literary agencies and UK publisher Unbound. The collaborative nature of the bid was consciously designed to reflect the shared challenge of the class ceiling in UK publishing.

Common People was designed to identify new unpublished writers and create opportunities for them to get their voices heard and their words in commercial print. The project was comprised of two distinct elements: a printed anthology profiling new working class voices in literature; and an accompanying writing development programme for the aspiring new authors. The first part of the project, an edited collection of new British working class writing—*Common People: An Anthology*—was published by UK press Unbound in 2018.

Publishing new fiction and non-fiction, poetry and short stories by sixteen previously unpublished British working class writers alongside new work by sixteen established British working class authors (including Louise Doughty, Jill Dawson, Alex Wheatle, Stuart Maconie, Tony Walsh, Malorie Blackman and Daljit Nagra). All writers involved in the anthology (new and established) were paid the same standard flat-rate fee of £250 for their work. The combination of new and recognised names was designed to make readers look again at use established writers who they may not have realised come from working class origins, as well as to open up opportunities to engage readers with new British working class writers from across the country. The printed collection *Common People* (2018) was funded by an innovative crowd sourcing campaign. Incentivising prospective readers with the choice of an e book or hardback, signed copies, a compiled reading list of Kit's working class classics, anthology original art work prints and even the offer of Kit coming to give a talk about the project, independent Northern publisher Unbound hit its target for publication in just 8 weeks on 21 Feb 2018 with over 750 contributions. The anthology eventually reached a point of being 115% funded with 876 individual contributions of varying amounts.

The second part of the project, the Common People Regional Working Class Writer Development Programme, enabled the emerging writers to effectively use the publication to make a step-change in their creative careers. In order to ensure that the emerging writers could develop their creative career as a result of publication, the year-long writing development programmes included one-to-one mentoring, two professional development days and support for costs incurred alongside publication (for instance, meetings with potential agents or publishers, PR activities and events). The writers were also given free access to writer development activities being run by the seven writer development agencies during this period, including writer conferences and New Writing North's industry networking event in London during the Summer of 2019.

## Breaking the Class Ceiling

At the start of the project the participating writers from working class backgrounds were subject to a 360 degree report on their relationship with the writing industry, including their publication record, their industry profile and income from writing. During the course of the project the impact of the mentoring, attendance at 'development days' and other support was recorded through questionnaires and a personal record drawn up by the writers themselves, documenting their experiences on the programme. Each writing development agency also kept a record of any activity associated with the project (for instance press coverage and appearance at literature events). At the close of the project a second 360 degree report was produced by each writer development agency to identify the change in situation brought about by participation on the project. This included personal statements from the emerging writers and also evidence of publication, public and industry awareness and future opportunities available.

Despite its status as a relatively small-scale (£30k funding in total) and targeted intervention, the impacts of the Common People project have been significant. The main output of the strategic intervention was the *Common People* (2018) writing anthology. The collection received a positive critical response on release and trended across social media on the hashtag #commonpeople. Critics praised the way the collection 'shines a light on the huge diversity of people in the United Kingdom and celebrates 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'.<sup>9</sup> Cited as an 'important

---

<sup>9</sup> Juno Baker, 'Book Review: Common People', *Litro*, September 2018 <<https://www.litro.co.uk/2019/05/book-review-common-people-edited-by-kit-de-waal/>>

collection' by the Guardian, this new literary work raised awareness in readers and industry about the role and representation of social class in contemporary British literature and society.<sup>10</sup>

However, it is the Common People writing development programme that has created the most significant impact in terms of addressing the explicit aim of the project to address identified barriers to working class authors accessing and being represented within the UK literary and creative industries. An evaluation of the writing development programme analysed responses from all seventeen new working class writers involved in the Common People writing development programme (twelve through a one-to-one interview, eleven through an evaluation survey and six through both methods, according to writer availability and willingness to participate). The 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. All seventeen new writers described their status as either newly published (18%) or emerging (82%) as a writer, with many now citing having agents or publishing contracts as measurable indicators of their personal sense of progress and as a direct result of Common People anthology publishing and writing development programme training, networking opportunities and mentoring.

83% of the Common People writing development programme graduating authora 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. One Common People emerging author reflects that:

---

<sup>10</sup> James Smart, 'Common People: A Valuable Anthology of Working Class Writing', *The Guardian*, 23 May 2019 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/may/23/common-people-anthology-working-class-writers-review>>

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 the *Common People* collection 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.

75% of participants state that their level of industry knowledge is 'much better or better' as a result of taking part in the programme. One new writer reports that '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.'

By engaging in a coordinated promotion campaign across literature and cultural events throughout the UK, the Common People project exposed the new writers featured in the anthology to rare and vital experience of participating in live literature events, interviews and media work. Guided throughout by professional mentors and supported to travel and speak by ACE project funding, the new authors collectively appeared at panels on working class writing at Newcastle Writers Conference, Hay Festival, Southbank Festival, Latitude, Deershed and Bronte Festival of Women's Writing. The social media response to their appearance at these events was unprecedented and further raised the profile of both the anthology, the new writers featured in it and the issue of class in UK publishing as a pressing national challenge. The programme was featured in industry events nationally, including at

London Book Fair, and in industry publications, including *The Bookseller* and *Arts Professional*.<sup>11</sup>

The evaluation suggests that the most significant impact of taking part in the Common People writing development programme for the new writers was the opportunity for finding and engaging in peer support and community-building as a profoundly two-way process. 92% 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 constituted by the seventeen Common People participants across the twelve month programme. One new author reflects that

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. Meeting the rest of the common people has been a terrific experience. The established writers are very kind and helpful at events and the emerging writers have provided extensive support primarily through a Twitter group. 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.

83% assert that their confidence is ‘much better or better’ as a result of taking part, while 75% of participants claim that their writing practice has been significantly improved. Asked to rank the most impactful elements of the writing development programme, participants

---

<sup>11</sup> In doing so, the programme also contributed significantly to developing Arts Council England's Creative Case For Diversity.

ranked in the following order: mentoring, professional development and RWDA workshops and events.

For the participating RWDAs, the Common People programme marked the first time that all seven RWDAs had come together to collaboratively tackle a nationwide issue. Evaluation data from the agencies reflects that all seven organisations would now use this as a sustainable model for future working and enhanced communication and connectivity within the writing industry in the UK. 100% of respondents from RWDAs said that taking part in the Common People programme had benefitted their business. 100% also thought that the programme had worked well, and 100% would like to engage in future collaborative national-level bidding and/or activities with other regional writing development agencies. The identified benefits to regional writing development agencies from taking part in Common People included leveraging of press focus to create national coverage for regional writing; raising the profile of regional writing development agencies and activities; efficiencies through collaborating on marketing, events; sharing resources within the sector—such as the New Writing North London Talent Party and Pitching Workshop—and opening these to Common People participants to enhance impact.

For the mentors who guided the emerging working class writers throughout the project, the impacts were twofold. Many mentors reflect 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. Some mentors used their evaluation feedback to outline how the programme had made them aware of the need for new models of sustainable development to encourage new talent.

In the mentors' 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.

One mentor reflects that: ‘I thoroughly enjoyed working with my mentee and having the opportunity to show them that, with talent and hard work, anything is possible - that publishing is open to all, not just those with contacts and a certain privileged background. I have also had the opportunity to reflect on my own process and journey to publication while exploring these areas with my mentee.’

The Common People project has also informed future UK government policy. Directors of the project were called to give witness evidence at the third oral evidence session of an inquiry into the class ceiling in the creative sector evidence in UK Parliament on 13 May 2019 before the Performers’ Alliance All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG).<sup>12</sup> The Performers' Alliance APPG provides a forum in Parliament for arts/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). 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. Members of the APPG facilitated the enquiry discussion with Tracy Brabin MP (chairing), alongside Giles Watling MP and the Earl of Clancarty. Discussions centred on the evaluation results of the Common People project, 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.

In Scotland, the evaluation data from the Common People project was presented to the Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, the Head of Creative Scotland and the Lead for

---

<sup>12</sup> Dave O’Brien, ‘Why class is far bigger problem in publishing than you might think’, *The Bookseller*, 27 March 2019 <<https://www.thebookseller.com/blogs/why-class-far-bigger-problem-publishing-you-think-979436#>>



Arts Council England at the 2019 Edinburgh Book Festival conference ‘Northern Lights’, a collaborative project between the Edinburgh International Book Festival and Bradford Literature Festival 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. Speaking in response to the Common People project impacts at the Edinburgh International Book Festival in 2018, Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon reflected that:

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. Resisting the gravitational pull of London and the South East in publishing and literature is fundamental. 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. This matters because story as a nation is incomplete going forwards unless we represent the full range of diversity in society in publishing and literature.

At a national level, the findings of the Common People project were invited for presentation at the Convention of the North in 2019 by the UK government’s Department for the Northern Powerhouse. The project has been profiled on BBC Front Row, the Creative Industries Podcast and national industry publication *The Bookseller*. Looking ahead, the Common People directors have been called to give evidence on results of the programme at the new All Party Parliamentary Group for Diversity in the Creative Industries in 2020. This new group aims to identify and tackle obstacles to diversity in the creative sector to diversity in

recruitment, retention and development processes. As a long-overdue platform to establish effective practices for the creative sector in its approach to diverse talent, the group will provide recommendations for government policy formation that can help facilitate change.<sup>13</sup>

A new culture of awareness and visibility around working class writing in Britain has also grown in the wake of Common People. A 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’.<sup>14</sup> Other writing development programmes aimed at working class writers have also proliferated, including The Writers’ Plan writing development programme for working class writers and the Working Class Writers Collective. Funding for further research into social class, writing and publishing has also been secured via a collaborative doctoral award at Northumbria University, UK 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.

A significant creative industry impact was created through the project publisher, Unbound. As the lead publisher in the Common People project and the publisher of the *Common People* (2018) collection, Unbound used crowdfunding as a specific way of bringing the new book to market quickly. The crowdfunding model circumvented traditional models of publishing and, significantly, many of the usual barriers identified by British working class authors and profiled an alternative funding method for breaking down barriers that prevent the profiling of working class writing in the UK. Unbound also identified several

---

<sup>13</sup> Ed Vaizey, ‘Increasing Inclusivity in the Creative Industries’, *The Guardian*, 21 July 2019  
<<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jul/21/increasing-diversity-in-the-creative-industries>>

<sup>14</sup> Heloise Wood, ‘Working Class Writers Festival Planned’, *The Bookseller*, 14 August 2018  
<<https://www.thebookseller.com/news/working-class-writers-festival-planned-2020-845751>>

key areas of impact on their business as a result of their participation in the Common People project. The regional publisher reported enhanced brand awareness and public profile as a result of taking part in the project and proposed Common People as a case study for the decentralisation of UK publishing by showing since it showed what can be achieved by a publisher with a regional base. Unbound argue that the impact of a small-scale project like Common People on UK writing and publishing suggests the potential of what could be achieved by further leveraging a regional approach to project development and talent pipelines from the region to the London-centric publishing industry. The most significant was transforming cultural industry practice in programming live literature events by pairing an established author with a counterpart new author on panels.

### **Common People, Publishing Futures**

2020 marks a new vital time and role for UK creative industries, and especially for publishing. In a post-Brexit Britain, the publishing sector has a critical role in defining the role of the country both within the EU and beyond. Now is a time to protect and grow the social and economic impacts created by UK publishing and the vital relationships it enjoys with education and the UK university sector that enable R&D and creative knowledge exchange. For this success to continue and develop, UK publishing must prioritise cultural inclusion, enhance the diversity of writers it publishes, and so find and share new stories about Britain today to ensure the contribution made by publishing to the health and wealth of the UK continues to develop.

Finding solutions to the economic, social and cultural challenges created by a lack of diversity in the UK publishing and literary industries is key to promoting the future prosperity and sustainable growth of all UK creative industries for the good of society and the economy at home and overseas. The current lack of diversity in UK publishing not only

means that our creative industries are at risk of becoming irrelevant and losing their dominant market position. Creative inclusion matters because it impacts on a range of policy areas from human rights, education, health and well-being, and economic development. The case of creative diversity is of both economic and social value. The challenge of cultural inclusion for the creative industries is therefore a question of how to better understand and access creatives and customers through an integrated approach to access and representation.

At the time of writing in 2019 the UK literary and publishing industries are still the least socially diverse of all the UK's creative industries, including film, television and advertising. While there are some positive developments happening outside the M25: the Northern Fiction Alliance, a coming together of several independent publishers headed up by Manchester-based Comma Press, has challenged the dominance of the major London houses. Only one of the 'big five' publishers (Penguin Random House, Macmillan, Hachette, HarperCollins and Simon & Schuster) Hachette, has plans to open an office outside the capital city.

This article has evaluated the Common People project data and recommends as a result joint action by UK industry and UK government to unlock further growth, particularly outside the highest concentration areas of the South East and London, and investment in careers programmes and development schemes that open up creative jobs to individuals of all backgrounds. It recommends that this is achieved by:

- ✓ Targeted investment and collaborative working by RWDAs locally and ACE nationally to establish longer term mentoring schemes for self-identifying new working class writers;

- ✓ Ring-fenced funding for peer support and community-building among new working class British writers to create a culture of writing founded on communication, connectivity, sustainability and well-being;
- ✓ New publishing and wider creative industry standards to ensure compulsory unconscious bias training for gate-keeper roles within the UK literary and publishing industries;
- ✓ Enhanced funding and support for regional literary awards and shortlists that profile working class writers;
- ✓ Future collaborative bidding from regional writing agencies to create capacity and models of best practice for interventions in addressing the under-representation of marginal groups in the creative industries;
- ✓ Closer working between HEIs, industry and arts organisations to generate new knowledge and inform policy making around issues of the class ceiling in the UK literary and publishing industries, and the UK creative industries more widely.

The Common People project findings suggest how such a vision for change might be articulated, co-owned and implemented. By investing in diversity as a core part of UK publishing business, it shows how structural change and cultural change become possible through connected working between incentivised stakeholders across government, industry and the third sector. Addressing social class barriers within the UK literary and publishing industries 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. When we stop staging diversity as an event and start embedding it in creative industry best practice we can develop more financially equitable relationships between all key players in the literary and publishing ecosystems of the UK. As the evaluation evidence suggests, diversity is good not only for fairness and equality but its economic case is also imperative for longer term quality, profit and competitiveness.

Literature has a significant role in opening our minds to new ideas and perspectives—it offers us perspective and 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. The Common People project has generated a body of evidence that demonstrates how a single intervention founded on collaborative principles 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). Its major finding is that regional and geographical disparities compounded by socioeconomic inequalities are limiting the output of UK publishing and therefore the representative potential of the UK creative industries today.

## References

Arts Council England, *Literature in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Understanding Models of Support for Literary Fiction*, 2017 <<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Literature%20in%20the%2021st%20Century%20report.pdf>>

Juno Baker, 'Book Review: Common People', *Litro*, September 2018 <<https://www.litro.co.uk/2019/05/book-review-common-people-edited-by-kit-de-waal/>>

Dave O'Brien, 'Why class is far bigger problem in publishing than you might think', *The Bookseller*, 27 March 2019 <<https://www.thebookseller.com/blogs/why-class-far-bigger-problem-publishing-you-think-979436#>>

DCMS, 'Sector Economic Estimates: July 2018 and November 2017: Creative Industries Economic Estimates', *Government Publishing*  
<[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/649980/Independent\\_Review\\_of\\_the\\_Creative\\_Industries.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/649980/Independent_Review_of_the_Creative_Industries.pdf)>

DCMS, 'Sectors Economic Estimates 2017: GVA, Department for Digital, Media, Culture and Sport', *Government Publishing*, 28 November 2018, p.1.

Frontier Economics, 'Report: Publishing's Contribution to the Wider Creative Industries', *The Publishers Association*, July 2018 <<https://publishers.org.uk/influence/value-of-uk-publishing/>>

Mike Savage et al, 'A New Model of Social Class? Findings from the BBC's Great British Class Survey Experiment', *Sociology* 47(2) 219–250; p.246.

James Smart, 'Common People: A Valuable Anthology of Working Class Writing', *The Guardian*, 23 May 2019 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/may/23/common-people-anthology-working-class-writers-review>>

Ed Vaizey, 'Increasing Inclusivity in the Creative Industries', *The Guardian*, 21 July 2019 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jul/21/increasing-diversity-in-the-creative-industries>>

Heloise Wood, 'Working Class Writers Festival Planned', *The Bookseller*, 14 August 2018 <<https://www.thebookseller.com/news/working-class-writers-festival-planned-2020-845751>>