Long Overdue:

a [library pun] tour of the UK’s public libraries

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Chapter Order

1	**Oakwood**	**2000**	
2	History	4000	Cant, Warr, Salf, Manc, Winch
3	**Leeds Lending**	**2000**	
4	**Bradford**	**3000**	
5	**Leicester**	**4500**	
6	**Leeds Ref**	**2000**	
7	**NI**	**3800**	
7	**Shetland**	**5000**	**GROUP HAS READ UP TO HERE**
8	**Cramlington**	**3000**	
9	Prisons	3000	
10	Bethnal / Whitechapel	2000	

Norwich/Lowestoft	3000	
Essex	2000	
Dover	2000	
Sandwell	2000	
Scilly Isles	3000	
Brixton	2000	
Alston, Cumbria	2000	
Earlswood	2000	
Wakefield	2000	
Tod	2000	add in libraries now
Notts	2000	may not happen

British Lib/Camden	2000	may not use
Leeds refurb		have cut bit about going back now – so it could be a sort of homecoming chapter.
Glasgow		

Bucks (or Bolton)

Wales / Ray strike

Sophie and her dad (Manchester)

My RD work

Borrowing again, not owning – how it opened me up, met R, stopped drinking

Mum: ill, me leeds lib, uni ceremony, wheelchair

Possible chapter on how the Pudsey Library tning changed my ife in 2 ways

Biography

The library I went to as a child is in an old house near the edge of the city. It was built around 1900, like the house I was brought up in. It even looks like the house I was brought up in. Big Yorkshire sandstones. Sash windows. Three floors. A slated roof. The library still has a freshly mown lawn at the front and a small forest of overgrown shrubs inside its garden walls. It's pretty idyllic.

Oakwood Library, Leeds, is my first stop on a tour of dozens of libraries the length and breadth of the UK. It begins today. And when I say the length and breadth I mean the length and breadth. Over the next few months I will be going to libraries in Shetland, the Scilly Isles, County Fermanagh and Lowestoft, the four extreme points of the United Kingdom. I'll be going to libraries deep in inner cities and libraries a hundred miles away from inner cities; libraries flooded, burned and bombed; libraries just opened and libraries about to close. I'll meet library users and library workers on high streets, in prisons, in markets, in schools and aboard some of the hundreds of libraries that make their way around our islands on wheels.

But why bother? Why not use the inter-library loan service, where I can request any book anywhere in the UK for sixty pence?

Because, for once, I am not going to libraries for books. I am going to libraries to meet the people who borrow the books. And the people who lend the books. I wan to see if people feel about libraries the way I feel about libraries.

When I say the library of my childhood was pretty idyllic, I don't really mean the large spacious house it was built in, nor the rolling green lawn. I mean what was inside. Every library has the potential to be idyllic to the next person who walks through its doors. That is what I am going in search of. What libraries mean to people.

What libraries have done for people. And – most importantly – what libraries can do for people now. Now they are under threat.

I had not been inside Oakwood Library for nearly thirty years. I stopped going when I was ten. Then I walked past it for the next fifteen years of my life – on the way to school, on my way to sign on, on the way back from drinking in the city centre. The only time I entered its grounds was to use the convenient cover of its shrubs as a urinal, forgetting I had ever used it for books. Then I moved to another part of the city, driving straight past it in a hired Transit van, not giving it a second look.

But today I am back – and already in a strange mood. I never come back to the part of Leeds I was brought up in, the part of Leeds I spent my first twenty-five years. My parents not here any more. I have no local family. No friends. There is no reason for coming back. Until today.

I came by bus.

Out of the city centre, through a mile of warehouses, garage forecourts and carpet discount centres that used to be churches; past thousands of terraced houses, falling and rising with the contours of the foothills that surround Leeds. Past places I had some formative moments: the bus stop where I had my first kiss, the newsagents where I bought my first porn mag, the car park where I drove my first car. And there, up ahead, the pitch where I once scored ten goals in one game.

The bus has a different number on the front now. And a different operator. They've moved some of the bus stops. The roads are still the same roads, but the junctions have changed, roundabouts where crossroads were, traffic lights where give ways were. And there are new buildings. Buildings that look unnatural. Hard corners

and planes filling what was once open space. And some buildings are missing. Demolished. The touchstones for where I thought I was, gone.

But, as the bus approaches Oakwood, I can see familiar things: the sweet shop with the same front it had twenty years ago, the famous Art Deco chip shop (though I never understood what Art Deco meant), the supermarket that was Tesco, then Safeway and is now Morrison's; the small clock tower.

I get off the bus at the same spot I always got off the bus. My foot on the same paving stone.

The white-on-red library sign is the only signifier that the building I am approaching is not another of the area's well-kept, oversized private homes. The garden, with its flower beds and bushes, stinks of spring. It is May, like the Mays I remember from when I was seven, eight and nine. Warm air. Bees. The smell of cut grass from the park nearby.

Once I've made it over the crossroads, to the library gate, I stop. I have to take it in. This coming back. It's a shock.

The library's dark front is as familiar to me as would be the faces of my parents, suddenly seen walking down the path towards me. And they've been dead for fifteen years.

You can walk either clockwise or anti-clockwise around the lawn to reach Oakwood Library. A wide sweeping path that curves to the left through flower beds; or a narrow pavement in the shadow of tall bushes to the right. I go to the right. I always went to the right.

Approaching the flight of steps that go up to the library door, I see a mother and son coming the other way. The boy is five or six. The woman holds his hand above his head as he edges down the steps. He places his feet carefully. I move aside

to let them reach the bottom. Then, watching them from behind, I see the woman hand her son a pile of books. Thick and thin. Large and small. Paperback and hardback. He takes his personal library, grinning; holds them in front of himself and walks ahead of his mother like a standard bearer.

The boy was me thirty years ago. The thrill of a pile of books that would be mine for a week, my arms hurting from carrying them, but too proud to let them go. Books of stories. Books of facts and figures. Books of pictures and diagrams and charts.

There were lots of books. But one comes to mind clearly: *The Shell Book of Firsts*. Huge and yellow with the Shell logo embossed on the cover. I'd borrow it and renew it and renew it again, until I knew the first car, the first man in space, the first book. I loved that book. Like I loved other books. Books, that if I see the illustrations now, fill me with excitement and nostalgia. Books and libraries were a major part of my childhood.

But, when I was twelve, I stopped reading.

On entering Oakwood Library the first thing you see is a row of backs, bent over: people, eyes down, logged on. The library counter – to the right – is in the same place as it always was, in what would have been the reception room when this library was a house. But it is a new counter now. Light modern wood. A curvy shape. And lower, much lower, so the librarians can sit down and talk to you on the same level. Gone are the days of the librarian being perceived as an authority figure, a fierce shusher. They do not loom from above today. They sit opposite you. They are guides, not gatekeepers.

When I came here for books as a child, there was a flap that lifted up to allow the librarians to walk out from behind the old counter. Like the flaps you get in old pubs. If you went to the library counter with books to take out and the librarian wasn't there, you would wait for them to return. And when they returned they would, in one swift double-jointed movement, lift the counter, pass through, then turn to face you, while lowering the flap. Then they would take your books and thump-thump thump-thump thump-thump them with the date stamp.

The inside of the library brings back more memories. Its picture rails and floral cornices run round the rooms, broken by knocked-through doorways. The same mould as the cornice at home. Its sash windows are painted shut like the sash windows at home. Its fat radiator in the bay window like the fat radiator in our bay window. Oakwood Library is, apart from the counter, unchanged. The same built-in bookshelves, as solid as the walls. The same windows looking out onto the bushes and the road at the foot of the garden.

No-one looks at me standing in the doorway of Oakwood Library, caught in a thick treacle of memories, reeling with pleasure and unease. But then they don't know. They don't know I haven't been in here for decades. That I return with a pile of memories, stacked like books under my arm.

What would have happened next – when I came here with my mum?

Would I have let go of her hand and run into the children's section, leaving her to return the previous week's books? Or would she have made me hand the pile of returned books to the lady behind the counter – like a big boy – and wait for the lady to give me back my six light brown cardboard library tickets? Then would she have sent me to the children's section to choose alone? Or would she have come with me?

Walking into the children's section is overwhelming. A flood of memories. My mum showing me this, pointing out that, showing me how to use the library. And each memory is not only a memory of this library: it is a memory of my mum.

And I want more.

Amid the familiar smell of this library, its garden, its books, and regardless of my tingling spine, she is not here. Like she was not waving from the garden of the old house, just round the corner, that I walked past some minutes ago.

And I have to admit that I am searching round this library for something of her, not just the books and the building.

The new library counter? The librarian behind it?

Nothing.

The ramp between the children's book section and the adult section?

Nothing.

The view out onto the garden, the way the sun falls on the lawn?

Nothing.

The floor of the children's books section?

Empty today. But the clearest memory yet. I am sitting on the floor, half a dozen books removed from boxes full of picture flats. *Epaminondas*. *Thomas the Tank Engine*. *Babarpapa*. If I dared to sit down on the floor today – a thirty-nine year old – would it bring her back? Could I look up and see my mum on the other side of the room, standing in the doorway?

'Have you chosen your books yet, love?'

I'd nod and show her the books. She'd take them, hand me my coat and look at them as I put my coat on. Then we'd go to the counter. She'd make sure it was me who handed the books over – building my confidence. The librarian would take them

with my library tickets, smile down at me. Then that thump-thump, thump-thump, thump-thump, the librarian taking thin pieces of white card out of the front of the books, slipping them one by one into my library tickets. Six books handed down to me.

‘What do you say?’ my mum says.

‘Thank you,’ I say.

‘You’re welcome,’ says the librarian.

Something like that.

Then my hand in my mum’s, her holding it above my head as I edge down the steps at the front of the library. Then we’d go home. Or get in the car round the back of the supermarket. Me having read half a book by the time we got home.

I stopped reading at the age of twelve *because* I was twelve.

It was summer, maybe. The nights longer, I’d be out playing football until it was too dark to see the ball. Or playing my Atari computer game. Or cycling with three other ten year olds through the park until dusk. And when the nights drew in, maybe I’d lost the desire to read.

This is what boys do. Most of them are lost to libraries until they become parents themselves. If then.

But my parents never gave up.

Twelve, thirteen. They’d bring me back selections from the library. Books on cars and planes and soldiers. They’d even buy me books. On wild flower spotting and Star Wars and fishing. One Christmas *The Shell Book of Firsts*. My own copy.

Thirteen, fourteen. Books on football, cricket and tennis. But I wanted to play football, cricket and tennis, not read about it.

Fourteen, fifteen. Books on Alex Hurricane Higgins, Ultravox, strange guides on what it was like to be a boy growing up, full of pictures of stamens and petals.

And there were interventions from the rest of the family. Aunts brought books at Christmas. Grandparents sent book tokens. Friends of the family arrived from journeys abroad with books.

'Here's book I picked up for you.' As if they'd done it by chance. Unprompted.

But I had music to listen to. I had increasingly sophisticated computer games to play. And I was spending more and more time in my room, doing what boys often do in their rooms.

There are a lot of wise sayings. Like 'You can judge a civilisation by the way it treats its prisoners' or 'You can judge a society by the way it xxxxxxxxxx.' Another that I think I remember hearing – or that I have made up – is that 'You can judge a society by its libraries.'

Public libraries began in the UK around 1850. They were inspired by a handful of men who had big ideas about changing the world. We now have over four thousand libraries in the UK.

(Though, be on your guard, for this number is falling and could be about to plummet.)

The first public library to open in the UK was in Canterbury or Warrington or Salford or Winchester. Reading the history books, I wasn't sure. So that became the first thing I wanted to clear up.

History

This chapter will describe how free public lending libraries were made possible by social reformers and various characters, through trips to Warrington, Canterbury, Winchester and Salford. And maybe Manchester. Main purpose: a brief history of libraries. But using certain libraries' claims to be the first, a bit of detective work.

Child Development

When I was twelve, I refused to go to the library with my mum.

But it wasn't just the library I refused to go to with her. It was everywhere. I wouldn't go swimming with her. I wouldn't go to the supermarket anymore. I wouldn't sit on her knee. I would certainly not read the books that she thought I should be reading.

Books, for God's sake!

My mum kept my library tickets together with an elastic band in the kitchen drawer where she hoarded receipts and coupons. The tickets worked their way to the bottom of the drawer, eventually out of date.

My educational progress nosedived when I reached twelve. Not just because I wasn't using the library or reading: but because of everything. Teenager. Testosterone. Alcohol. Football. Girls. Bullying. Fear. Self loathing. Emptiness. Incommunicativeness.

Expectations were lowered.

I had always been reasonably able at school. My parents knew the value of education. My mum was a nursery school teacher, my dad trained probation officers. There were books in every room of the house. But once I hit high school I went to pieces. I was put in bottom or near-bottom sets for most subjects.

You can trace it by looking at my school reports.

Age thirteen.

'Thomas does as little as possible… he lacks initiative in English.'

Age fourteen.

‘Thomas seems not to be trying. His work is shoddy. It is difficult to tell whether he has given up, or doesn’t care, or finds the work difficult.’

Age fifteen.

‘Very slow in thought and work.’

The head of year ends one report: ‘With some exceptions, Thomas seems to have wasted his opportunities.’

Again, this is not an unusual story. In fact, it’s quite usual. Boy hates reading. Boy disengages. Boy becomes surly. Boy disappears.

I went on to do my O’ levels and got three. Not bad by national standards, but one short of the four needed to go on to do A’ levels. When I went home with my results my mum was busy doing the washing. I showed her. She was not happy. I had step- and half-siblings who had averaged nine O’ levels.

After leaving school I went on to do a BTEC National Diploma in Computer Studies at an FE college. I hated it. Really hated it. I didn’t understand a thing. I was bad at it. I knocked off and went to sit in the pub. After the BTEC I was unemployed for a couple of years. Nearly twenty and going nowhere.

And I didn’t care.

But the fact that I was not using libraries or reading or that I didn’t have a job or a future was not my mum’s main worry. Her main worry was the company I was keeping.

There was one thing that I did care about during this time. Football. Or, more precisely, Leeds United. Leeds United in the early Eighties were not a pleasant team to support. The fans were the best at being the worst. And I was mixing with them. In the pubs. In the stadiums. In furniture vans moving fifty or sixty fans to away games in Nottingham, Barnsley and Grimsby. I was there.

The people I mixed with were hooligans. Most of them ended up in prison. I didn't end up in prison because I was too scared of getting hit. So when it got violent, I stood back and watched. I liked to be just on the edge of it. But never in it.

My parents knew I was mixing in such circles.

I was coming home drunk, if I came home at all.

I was systematically stealing money from my dad's wallet and my mum's drawer to fund my drinking and travelling.

I threw stones at windows, breaking them.

I lit spray cans to burn things down.

I vandalised stations, signposts, cricket pavilions, golf greens, even the garden of our own house.

And why not?

Leeds United were shit. My life was shit. I was shit.

Then I started writing poetry. (You see, I'm bringing it back to libraries.)

I had a lot of time on my hands.

In the 1980s television used to stop at midnight. There was fuck all else to do. I was unemployed. I didn't need to get up in the morning. I had a lot of things to get off my chest. I had to do something while I was drinking my Safeways lager, £1 for four cans.

These are my excuses for becoming a poet.

I told one of my friends about the poetry. Not one of the Leeds United friends, someone I'd known longer. This friend read books. He said if I wanted to become a poet – because I was already thinking about arranging the publication of my first collection – I needed to read other poets.

This made good sense to me, but I didn't want to read my parents' poetry books. They were crap: they were my parents'.

So I went to the library.

But not Oakwood Library, where it was possible that someone had seen me pissing in their shrubs. Instead, I went to Leeds Central Library. I could be anonymous there.

'Can I borrow the car mum?'

'What for?'

'I want to go to the library in Leeds.'

She let me go.

Leeds Central Library is one of the most intimidating buildings in the city. It is one of a row of very important and very grand-looking civic buildings. The art gallery – with a Henry Moore nude sunbathing in front of it – on one side. The fancy Town Hall, with its row of stone lions on the other. These buildings were built to show off the city's wealth.

I remember how I felt going into the library for the first time. Terrified. The only civic buildings I'd had to go in as an adult were the dole office and the magistrates courts.

The inside was as intimidating as the outside. Marble pillars. Large stained glass windows. Sculpted stone arches. A huge clock. Huge windows and doors. It was all there.

But buildings – especially buildings with books in them – consistently intimidated me. It was the same with bookshops. I never went into Waterstone's because I did not belong there. I bought my books in WHSmith. I was more

comfortable there. If anyone asked me what the hell I was doing there, I could say I was there for a magazine, some stationary, an LP.

My first trip to Leeds Central Library was tentative. I found the poetry section, grabbed six books, handed them over with my library tickets (recovered from my mum's drawer) and left. My hands shook violently as I did all this. But soon I was back in the car. With my books. *The Oxford Anthology of English Verse*. T S Eliot. Wilfred Owen. Robert Graves.

I left by the side door.

After that, I never went in through the front door. I was more comfortable going in and out through the side door. I could avoid the frightening façade of the library. Down the side road it wasn't so intimidating. Also, I could avoid the front desk, the eye of the receptionist. Waiting for the question as to whether I could justify my presence in the library.

It became a regular activity. On Saturday mornings, after I'd finished my milk delivery job, I'd find myself at the Central Library in Leeds. The doors not yet open.

When the doors opened I was first in, beating the tramps and the strange old women, the bulge of six library tickets showing through my jeans.

Saturday mornings were the best because they were quiet. Most people were still in bed. And I didn't like other library users.

In time, as I became more confident in the library, my reading moved away from poetry. I liked fiction. And non-fiction. Once I knew what I was doing I'd take a list of subject areas and authors: natural disasters, the Holocaust, Stalin; Samuel Beckett, Albert Camus, Fyodor Dostoevsky. The task was the find as many books as I could in the first half-hour, to trawl all the sections for what I was looking for, studiously avoiding the assistance of the assistants. Once I had all the books I could

carry, I would return to the seat and table that I had claimed with my coat and notebook. There I would sort the wheat from the chaff. I could go through half of them scribbling quotes, references to other books, whole paragraphs. These books could go back on the shelves. The remaining books needed more attention.

Because I had six library tickets, I could only take out six books. This meant I had to make some serious choices. Once I'd make those choices, I'd note the full bibliographical details of the books I couldn't take – author, title, Dewey number – so that when I came back I could find them without needing to worry. Six thuds on the books I'd laid out for the librarian, open at the right page, the slip of card in each book exposed. Then they would put the slips into my tickets and – with their backs to me – place them in the vast expanse of trays containing tens of thousands of library cards from readers across the city. The books were now mine for three weeks. But I'd only need them for one.

I would walk out with them under my arm, utterly thrilled. I had three hours at home to look at them before heading off to the football, probably not calling in at the pub for a few pints, as I didn't have time.

Fiction was my real passion. Once I knew what I was doing.

I had reached a stage where I would only touch books by authors with foreign names – Balzac, Boll, Celine, Levi, Strindberg, Zola – and would check the dust jacket to make sure they weren't frauds. The likes of Barthelme, Dos Passos, Kosinski: mere Americans, not foreign enough.

I remember one book clearly. Crucified by with jealousy over a girl I was or wasn't seeing, I discovered Alain Robbe-Grillet. A slim hardback. John Calder & Co., publisher. *Jealousy*. Here was the answer to my problems.

I can remember seeing the book, its spine white on a shelf of darker spines. I can remember taking it off the shelf, to read a passage about a man thinking the same thought, round and round, modifying it, but never breaking away from it. I read the book several times. Trying to get my head round what it was supposed to be about. The repetition. The plain – thrillingly tedious – prose. It was the perfect book. A book that launched me into a necessary reading of the entire French Nouveau Roman oeuvre (Butor, Robbe-Grillet, Sarraute, Simon) and led me on to twenty other French writers. Years of reading starting with that word, *Jealousy*.

Jealousy was not there today. I had hoped to find it. To hold it again. As if it were a photograph or an old love letter. But – checking Samuel Beckett – I found a book that could have been one I read. *Murphy*. This was the real thing. A book – still here – that I would have read. Stamped out in 1987, it must be the one. I held it in my hand. Twenty years on.

Back in the library of my early adulthood, I feel more than I can see.

However many familiar books there are – or tables, pillars, windows – it is not these that are familiar, but the feeling inside me. The thrill. I feel like I did when I used to come here. I feel like I felt when I had read maybe only ten or twenty books as an adult reader. A thousand books ago. I am an archaeologist. A geneticist. Searching out clues to who I am. Somewhere is a book that led me to a hundred other books, to ways of thinking that I have had in my head ever since. Somewhere is a book that may have sparked an interest that has led me to making a dozen friends. Somewhere is book that inspired a journey to a city or a country thousands of miles away. And my mind is spinning. I never realised – more used now to three-for-twos and the smell of cappuccinos – that my life, large parts of my life, began here in this library.

I walk over to the non-fiction sections. To see if they have my book about Leeds United, published five years ago. They don't. But it doesn't matter because I've just caught sight of the literary criticism section. It's thrilling. I must have read half the books in that section. And I had completely forgotten about it.

As I became increasingly interested in certain foreign novelists I wanted to know more about their lives. The biography section, I remember, was full of books about film stars and long-dead politicians. Not for me. I didn't know where in a library I could find books about writers, so I decided to look at every shelf. Then I would know where *everything* was. So one Saturday morning I spent two hours going round each shelf, making notes. Mapping the library. Until I found Literature.

Literature: that was it.

Books about Beckett and Dostoevsky, Camus and Flaubert. Genet. Grass. Sartre. All of them. And from this section, as well as reading about how Camus was killed in a car crash tragically young and how Dostoevsky drew a lot of his inspiration for Raskolnikov from his own life, I read about literary schools like naturalism and realism. I found books telling me what books my heroes loved. Then I looked out those books. My reading horizons exploded again. Every week I'd need more and more books. I had a hundred questions. And the answer to most of my questions were in Leeds Central Lending Library.

One of the great finds in the Literature section of the library was Dadaism. It was a good theory for me. I liked the meaninglessness of it. The fingers up-ness of it. The book was of Thames & Hudson's World of Art series. It was when I came across that book – reading it cover to cover in a weekend less than a year after I'd read no more than half a dozen books by choice in my life – that I found out about upstairs.

Children's Books

Bradford is surprisingly large. Population two-hundred-and-fifty-thousand, it sits in the foothills of the Pennines. Hills rise from the city centre towards Ilkley to the north, Haworth to the west and Leeds to the east. The hills keep it in shadow in the mornings and evenings. It also lives in the shadow of Leeds. People go shopping in Leeds, get jobs in Leeds, go clubbing in Leeds. Bradford is known for being the home of race riots, Peter Sutcliffe and the setting for *Rita, Sue and Bob Too*. It has a hard edge.

But Bradford was once the richest city in the UK: if you measure wealth by the number of millionaires in residence. Built on wool trading, it had some spectacular buildings, civic pride and civic money. In the sixties the civic pride ripped down half of what were considered old fashioned buildings, to make way for the new.

But now they are blowing up those oversized concrete boxes and leaving space to see the few decent buildings that were not torn down. The Midland Hotel. The City Hall. The Wool Exchange. These are beautiful buildings. The Wool Exchange, for example, were it in London, would attract millions of visitors a year.

But one concrete box remains on the outskirts of the centre: the Central Library.

I used to work in the Central Library. On the seventh floor. I was the city's Reader in Residence. Bradford was one of the first libraries in the UK to spend time on reader development. Reader development is about encouraging people who don't read to read; and people who do read to read more broadly. The philosophy is that reading is a creative act. If you have been in a reading group, have browsed a library book display or been to an author event in a library, you too have been developed.

One of the target groups for reader development is boys aged ten and above. The evidence suggests they don't read. a lot of them, anyway. So libraries buy books for these boys, they have displays and reading groups for them. They also bring in sportspeople, authors and poets to talk to them. To inspire them.

Barbara drives us out of the Central Library car park in her blue three-door Peugeot. She's in her fifties, a grandmother, a row of children's toys wedged on her dashboard. Barbara supervises the mobile and housebound service.

We come out at the front of the library, edge across three lanes of none-to-nose traffic and do a three-hundred-and-sixty degree turn to head back up Manchester Road.

Craig is in the passenger seat. Craig was a stand up comedian in his twenties. A gravedigger in his thirties. Now, in his forties, he is a poet.

Up the hill to the M62. The hill where J B Priestley set the opening scene from *Good Companions.* The hill where I lived for six months with a girl called Emma at a time of great crisis in my life. Six lanes of tarmac. We're going to Low Moor to meet up with the mobile library.

I look at the city where I worked for six years. as a bookseller, then in the library. While I was here I wrote my first novel. *Vigilante*. But don't go rushing to Amazon to buy it. It's not out quite yet. In essence it's about a young man who lives with a girl called Emma at a time of great crisis in his life.

Craig tells me that Low Moor is an estate. I'm expecting a shit hole, packs of Pit Bulls and kids running amuck. *Rita, Sue and Bob Too* for the twenty-first century. Craig is going to do a turn. He's going to reach out to young people. Boys. A series of events he's doing on the mobile libraries.

Barbara tells me about the mobile libraries. Bradford has two. One that does the rural outposts. One that does the estates. Those they can get into.

‘We’ve given up on going right into some of the estates,’ says Barbara. ‘You get kids throwing stones at the library. So we park round the edges.’

The mobiles run 9am to 8pm six days a week. They stop at x sites, to a set timetable, serving x people, issuing x books. The rural bus stops at individual farms on its way from village to village.

‘And there’s three vans. Smaller vans,’ Barbara says. ‘They do the housebound service. Forty-five runs a week between them, eighteen people per run. People who can’t get up or get out. We draw up a profile of what they like to read, put a box together and they can choose. A visit every three weeks. We talk to them while they choose their books.’

‘Tell him about the old lady,’ Craig says.

Barbara shakes her head.

‘They leave their books on the doorsteps sometimes, right?’ Craig says, eager. ‘They left this lady’s books. Came back a week later and the books were still there. They had a look inside. Worried about her. And she’d snuffed it. A pile of unread books at her back door.’

Craig Bradley has written several books of poems. Now he travels the north to sell the idea of reading in schools, detention centres and libraries. He’s six foot, built like his farming grandfather. His complexion is ruddy. His eyes quick, all-seeing. His hair unruly. He wears a grin. And he never shuts up.

‘I’ll put the kids into teams,’ Craig says. ‘Talk about books, reading, book covers, characters. About what they like. What they don’t like. Something like that. I dunno. We’ll see what they like. What they’re like.’

There have been posters and flyers around Low Moor and on the library. *Storyteller, Craig Bradley appearing at the mobile library, Low Moor. Bring your kids.*

He did one in Cullingworth last week. It went well. Fifteen kids and their parents. An hour long session.

We come off the main road and work our way into an estate. To the left a row of garages, to the right a pair of new build houses in front of a terrace of old build. There's a children's slide on the back patio, a fat Tom sunning itself in the stifling heat. No kids on the rec. It's August, the middle of the holidays, and half of Bradford is at sea, it seems. A throwback to the Wakes Week, when all the factories would shut and most of the workers would go to Blackpool, known then as Bradford-on-Sea.

We park and almost immediately he book bus arrives, slowing down and overshooting the cul-de-sac where we're parked. The reversing mobile library is huge, half filling the cul-de-sac.

'This one's stopping in April,' Barbara says. She's a bit embarrassed about it. 'We're getting a new one. With the Internet. Brand new. It's a shame you can't see that one.'

A man opens the mobile library up from inside and comes down the three metal steps. Heavy set. Strong. Cropped ginger hair. A goatee. Aidan used to be a Para. He fought in the Falklands and did tours of Northern Ireland. Now he's got two weeks left on the mobile library before he heads off on a ten month sabbatical. To be a bodyguard in Iraq. Until then he drives this mobile library.

His colleague, Brian, does ten hours on the mobiles each week. He used to be in engineering, but got laid off and went to college to do Sociology. Then an agency got him a job with the mobile libraries and housebound service. He loves it.

‘Ten hours a week. Gets me out from under the wife’s feet.’

These are the staff of the mobile library. The inside of the library is a bit like a long motorhome or caravan which has been fitted with shelves and stacked with books. There’s a window and two skylights, two seats in the front, boxes of books all over. And a bar – or counter. It’s carpeted.

Brian has a sword and a sheath. He’s wearing a multi-coloured hat with dreadlocks dangling down. They’re pushing The Reading Voyage, a national project encouraging over a million children to read up to six books over the summer holidays.

Aidan’s got a gun. A plastic pirate gun that fires suction caps. He fires suckers at the books in the crime fiction section. One sticks to a book spine. Stephen King’s *It*.

‘That,’ he says, ‘is how you choose books.’

The library open for trading, three lads – Preston, Jack and Sam – are up the steps and surrounding Aidan. They’re aged nine or ten. Short blonde or brown hair. Gangly boyish bodies. Sharp eyes. Smiling. They know Aidan. They like Aidan. He tells them things. Yes, they want to do the Reading Voyage. Yes, they want pirate’s hats. Aidan hands them each sheet.

‘Write a story about being a pirate,’ Aidan says.

Preston, Jack and Sam sit down on the floor of the library and start writing.

Outside Barbara and Brian call out to kids on bikes and kids on the rec to come over. There’s a poet, they say. But the kids ride off.

Craig leaves the lads to write. Aidan’s done his job for him. Done in seconds what it takes some writers an hour to achieve. If they can. To get three lads to sit down in a library on a brilliant summer holiday afternoon and write a story.

After twenty minutes Craig has to interrupt them to do his stuff.

‘What do you like doing?’ he kneels down with them on the floor.

‘I like quad bikes,’ Preston says quickly. ‘I’m third best in the championship.’

‘Third best?’ says Craig.

‘I like football,’ says Jack.

‘Football?’ Craig says. ‘Bradford City?’

‘How did you know that?’

‘You live here, don’t you?’

‘I like boxing,’ Preston cuts in again.

‘Doing it or watching it?’

‘Doing it. Both. My dad’s a kick boxer.’

‘What books do you like?’ Craig says.

‘I like adventure books,’ Preston says.

‘I like *Horrible Histories*,’ Sam says.

‘I like adventure. Spies. Action.’ Preston again.

‘What’s *Horrible Histories,* Sam?’ says Craig.

‘They’re like history books. But they’re funny. And sometimes you learn.’

‘Sometimes you learn? That’s good.’

‘They’re all cartoons and that.’

Craig pulls a book off the shelves. He knows the shelves now. They’re his tools. ‘Like this?’ he says.

‘Give it here,’ Preston says, snatching the book off Craig.

The book is called *Murderous Maths*.

‘I’m gonna read that,’ says Sam, giving it a covetous look.

‘Who’s read this?’ says Craig, holding up *A Kestrel for a Knave,* a book he keeps in his bag and brings out every time he does a session like this.

‘I have,’ says Preston.

‘I… I’ve got the DVD,’ says Jack.

‘What’s it about?’ Craig says.

‘This lad. He’s got a bird. I’m not sure what kind,’ says Jack.

‘A kestrel,’ says Sam.

‘And his brother kills it. He’s a paperboy. I’m a paperboy,’ Jack says.

Craig asks Sam to read a bit. He reads it slowly, stumbling over words.

‘Nice one, Sam,’ Craig says. ‘But what about you? Have you done your own story?’

‘Not much,’ says Sam.

None of them want to show their stories.

Craig changes tack. ‘So, this Reading Voyage, then? It’s about pirates. What does a pirate say?’

The lads make noises. Quiet. The impetus is lost.

‘What do they say?’ Craig says again, looking at Preston.

‘Arghh, Jim lad,’ Preston says in a wavering voice. And beams when Craig nods and smiles.

‘That’s it. Say it louder.’

` ‘ARRGGGHH. JIM LAD,’ Preston shouts.

Then Jack says it. ‘ARRGGGHH. JIM LAD,’

‘Say it together,’ Craig says.

‘AARRRGG, JIM LAAAAAD.’

The lady choosing celebrity biographies at driver’s end of the bus looks round surprised, then smiles.

‘Do you know who Jim Lad is?’ Craig says.

No reply.

‘He’s from this.’ Craig pulls another book out of his bag. ‘*Treasure Island*. This book is about pirates and all that. Have you read it?’

‘I’ve seen the DVD,’ Sam says quietly.

Craig reads a poem out. He wrote it on the bus from Huddersfield. ‘When I come to end of each line,’ he says, ‘shout out “ARRGGGHH. JIM LAD”.’

While they’re doing the poem, the lady gets out biographies on Des O’Connor, Diana and Max Bygraves. Aidan sorts her ticket out – the old card variety – and she goes down the steps grinning.

‘I wanna read a poem out,’ Preston says, on his feet, excited by shouting in the mobile library.

‘Okay,’ says Craig. ‘Here’s a book on pirate poems. Read one from here.’

Preston snatches the book, chooses a page.

‘Hang on. Hang on,’ Craig says. ‘Here’s how you do it. You like boxing, don’t you?’

Preston nods.

‘Right. Stand up. Pretend you’re going into the ring. Hold the book up in your left hand. And get your feet right. It starts with your feet. Read it slowly. Make each word count. Like each punch counts.’

Preston performs the poem. Hesitant at first, then louder, as Craig nods and coaches.

‘I wanna read one,’ says Jack.

‘I do,’ says Sam.

And each of them performs a poem to the empty book bus.

Outside the bus, Aidan and Brian are chatting. Barbara's trying to round up more kids. But there's no-one else. The three of them climb onto the bus.

'When are we getting a story?' says Jack.

'I've just told you one. And you've told me some,' Craig says. 'Poems are stories.'

'Can we go now?' Jack says. 'I have to be home at five-thirty.'

'Course you can,' Craig says.

Barbara drives us back into Bradford.

I take Craig for a coffee. He leans back on the chair, exhales and grins. He talks about the three lads: Preston, Sam and Jack. He speculates about them. Who they are? What they'll do when they're older?

'So, why do you do it?' I say.

'Why do I do it? This sort of thing? Cause I wish someone had done it to me when I was ten.'

'Done what?'

'Got me into reading. Put an author in front of me and said "You can do this".' He leans forward. 'I love being a writer. You want to show them what it's like to be a writer. You want them to see you're not just a name on a book, not some airy fairy type. But a bloke who likes football and fish and chips and going for a walk in the park. And you see a kid in a class or a library who makes out he's not interested in the beginning and at the end you say what do you want to be when you leave school and he says "I want to write books". And you say, What about. And he says "About detectives". And that's it. He's got his ideas. And you tell him: You can do it. Don't let anyone say you can't. Just do it.'

Craig is a fast talker once he's going. His eyes light up. He is always full of nervous energy, but never seems nervous. We're in the National Museum of Photography Film and Television. The café. A set of thirty tables around a swish counter, lots of plate glass. A giant magnifying glass is rotating slowly over Craig's shoulder. Craig's got a coffee. I've got a coke. There are a lot of children sat with parents in the café – and running around on the upper floor, laughing. It's the holidays.

'I was in Halifax the other day,' Craig says. 'And this kid comes up to me and says "Why are you reading?" Not what are you reading? But why are you reading? And I suppose it's a fair question. Because I like it. That's why.'

I cut in. 'Does it always go so well? I mean do these sessions in libraries end up okay?'

'It depends on the group of kids you get, doesn't it? They have to shut up and give you a chance. And this lot did today. But sometimes it's like doing stand up in Newcastle on a Saturday night. You haven't got a prayer. But if you can get them to shut up, get them to listen, find out what they're into, you can get them enthused about books.'

'Why should they be enthused about books?'

'Cause it's books. It's reading.' Craig looks at me like I'm stupid. 'Some of them come up at the end and they want to shake your hand. Some of them want an autograph. And I think, You should get David Beckham's autograph, but not mine. But kids might never forget meeting a real writer. How many real writers did you meet when you were a kid?'

'None.'

‘Fancy having me as a memory that you never forget for the rest of your life.’ Craig pauses – but not long enough for another question. ‘You do get apathy from some parents. I go on some rough estates. Well rough. And the parents drop the kids off and go for a fag.’ He grins. ‘Or some crack. And I’m from those places. That’s where I grew up. I’m working class. People don’t think I am. They think you’re a posh tosser being a writer. But I’m not. And I never will be. The mum and dads sometimes look at you like you’re a weirdo.’

‘What’s the point of libraries?’

‘Bloody hell. You’re getting your money’s worth here.’ Craig stops to think. For a second. ‘Let’s start at the beginning. To get people to read. To get people who read to read more. New types of books. To enlighten. To entertain. To educate. To enthuse. To make you happy.’

‘What do you make of mobile libraries?’

‘Funny you should ask that. My mate got run over by a mobile library once. He went “Arrrggghhh.” And they went “Shhhhhhhhhh”.’

Craig nods to someone walking by.

‘They’re fantastic, aren’t they? Mobile libraries. I think they’re fantastic. Look, some of Calderdale Libraries are getting shut down. The smaller ones, the branches. There’s about five or six.”

‘Why?’ I say. I’m struggling to keep him on the subject. He’s off on one of his tangents.

“Money. There was a bad headline in the Halifax Courier – so they had to go. £3.32 TO ISSUE A BOOK HORROR. That’s bollocks, of course. That’s just that particular library. A small one. I mean, Central Library does really well. Really well. But in Holland! In Holland they charge you £100 a year just to be a member. And

they've got more books, better books, newer books. And you can see it here. CDs, DVD's, computers are nudging books into a corner.'

'How do you feel about that?' I say, having forgotten what my original question was.

'Not great. I mean, I love CDs and videos. But it's a different art form, isn't it? Libraries need to be more like bookshops, don't they? But tell the person buying leather sofas that. Say, well get rid of all the DVDs, we need a reading room here. Well, Hmmm, how much is that going to pull in a year?'

'How does it compare then?'

'What?'

'Being a writer to grave digging.'

'This is far more fulfilling,' Craig grins, allowing himself a comic pause. 'But seriously. It's more important, isn't it? Reading. Writing. But I read loads in grave digging. Certain books work well in cemeteries.'

Social Sciences

My father-in-law was once a boy like Preston, Jack or Sam. Now he's a storyteller. But not officially. Officially he is an Alpine enthusiast, Doctor of Politics and armchair football pundit. But, above everything, as far as I can see, he likes to tell a good story.

His best story is from when he was doing his national service. 1961. Set in a world waiting for another war.

'The big fear was the Russians,' he says. 'That they would have a break-out and would get to the Atlantic Seaboard before we could react. They were building up unbelievable tank weaponry. Literally thousands of them. And the tanks were going to smash through.'

My father-in-law is driving through the streets of Leicester. He's picked me up from the central station and we are two miles out of the centre. Heading for the Saffron Lane housing estate where – with his family – he was moved as part of slum clearances in the mid 1930s. Now he drives a huge Mondeo. It has electric windows and air conditioning. There's a blanket on the back seat. Along with a up-to-date road atlas.

We're going to see the library that changed his life.

'Now, that's all very well,' he says, going back to the Russians. 'But there are several giant rivers flowing north to south in Europe. Rivers are a major obstacle for tanks of course. You blow the bridges and you stop them in their tracks. They've got to put up bailey bridge. So, the Russians came up with a new idea. Which is to go across the riverbed – underwater. They had ways of adjusting the tanks so that they could drive underwater. It's to do with fuel, exhausts, seals on engines, that make it

possible to drive. Now they had to be trained to do that. I was involved in this. I had a stopwatch and I was listening in to the tone of the voice of the commander in Russian and I was interested in how worried he appeared to be. He was trying to reassure them all the time. “You’re okay. You’re okay. Don’t worry.” But they were clearly at the bottom of some tank full of water. They were going through this operation. And he was always saying “Check all your exits” when they came out, you see. And I worked it out. I said to the chap – my line manager – I think there’s something going on in terms of training. Underwater. And it turned out that that’s what it was. Because then we found out exactly where this was going on. There was a part of the River Elbe where they saw tanks disappearing. So that was very significant. Because, if they had been able to perfect that technique, blowing bridges would have been irrelevant because they could go where they liked. They could just drive straight through the rivers.’

He’s taken a left, choosing the street corner he was knocked down on as an eight year old. We’re on the Saffron Lane Housing Estate now. Neat two floor, semis. Small gardens. Picket fences. Stained brown or painted. Bins with house numbers daubed in white.

‘And it started that day at the library?’ I say. I’m referring to another of his stories, trying to push a connection between the library and the day my father-in-law saved the West.

‘It certainly started it. It stayed with me all my life. And it determined my national service career. Led to me being there, listening in. And not just that, but my later career, where I taught Russian and German at Grammar Schools, then UCE.’

We are within the concentric circles of the estate now. Off the main road. Heading for the library. At the centre of the estate there are huge playing fields, an unexpected expanse in the middle of hundreds of small houses.

‘We would play football or cricket all day there,’ my father-in-law says. ‘When we were eight, nine, ten, eleven. Breaking to rush home for lunch. All day. The score would be 32-28. Something like that.’

He is seventy now. Short and stocky. An old man, technically. But fitter than me. He climbs dozens of mountains a year, breaks fingers, rips tendons, strains his knees searching for alpine plants in Turkey and Spain each summer.

All the original Boot houses – named after the man who designed them – have gone now, replaced by new two-floor homes. But all to the same road plan. My father-in-law is sure none of the originals are left.

‘But there’s the working men’s club,’ he says. ‘Still there. And the shops. And the place my mother used to work – on the flat frame, hosiery – when my father was in India. In the war.’

We drive on. Through the concentric circles, skirting the centre.

‘Look,’ he says. We slow down. ‘See that blue plaque? That was Joe Orton’s house. His brother was in our Colin’s class at school. And here…’ We’ve taken a left. ‘Here is Gordon Winterton’s house. Rosie Winterton’s father. The Labour minister. And over the back Brian Maloney’s house. Brilliant scholar. He became a professor of Italian.’

The estate is throwing up an amazing list of characters. And their famous addresses.

He stops the car, pulling the handbrake tight on his large air conditioned Ford Mondeo. More neat rows of two storey new council houses. Front lawns concreted

over, running wild or cultivated. The sun belting down. An old man sat in a chair at the front of his house. Two girls, all bare hips and tight stomachs, pushing a buggy. We've been driving round for ten minutes. And now we're in front of 89 Marriot Road, the address where he lived between the ages of three and fourteen. The people here would say he had a posh voice now. But he occasionally slips back into something like theirs.

The 89 he lived in has gone. This is a new version. An upgrade.

He sits in the car staring at the house. Then at the houses around it.

Two women are coming down the street. One in her thirties, dark hair, short. One in her mid-teens, tall, thin, but very pregnant.

I always feel uncomfortable just standing somewhere where people could say, What are you doing? But my father-in-law is spellbound.

He starts reeling off memories. That there were no cars then. That they kept rabbits and chickens they kept in the back garden. That after they moved here he didn't see his dad for four-and-a-half years, away with the war. The Anderson shelter. The wail of the air raid siren coming from the top of the library. He is smiling and telling a dozen stories at once, turning round to take everything in.

The two women have been eyeing us as they come down the road. They walk quickly across the paved over garden of number 89.

My father in law is off after them.

'Hello? Hello? Sorry.'

'Yeah.' The woman looks at him, defensive. The girl is looking over our heads, down the street.

'We were just talking,' he beams. 'I used to live here.'

'Oh right.'

There's a man lurking behind the front door of number 89, watching.

'Now when was it? 1936 to 19… 1947. It was the old Boot houses then, of course. But number 89. We had…'

'I have to go an have my breakfast,' the woman says, turns her back on my father-in-law. The girl follows her. The front door opens and closes in seconds.

'Okay. Thank you,' my father-in-law says. His face drops. We watch them go in behind the door, the man still standing, half hidden.

'They didn't give a tinkers, did they?' my father-in-law says.

We climb back into his car.

'I used to come down this little hill. Jumping in all the puddles of ice.'

We have to drive at least a mile and a half to reach the library. Round a one-way system that confuses my father-in-law more that it would most people, because he knows the way the roads used to run. He'd be able to walk to the library from number 89 in two minutes. Now – in a car – it takes five.

Negotiating the one way system, coming back on ourselves, we pass a group of youths twice. They linger in the road, crossing slowly, forcing us slow down. Young men with cold stares and an easy nonchalance. They shout at each other, grinning.

My father in law parks his car alongside the library.

Leaning against the back fire exit there's three lads in baseball caps. The two girls and two lads he'd had to slow down to avoid hitting as they crossed the road continue their journey, past the library, jostling, calling out.

Southfields Drive Library is all circles. Circular windows. Circular walls. A circular turret on the top. We walk round the front. Away from the youths. I wonder what my father-in-law makes of them, their truculence and menace.

‘There was a revolving door,’ he says. ‘And we used hang around here and wait for the man to go inside then we’d chuck lumps of earth in. Chuck them in and run. Then the man would come out. But I would have been about six year old when I started to use the library for the purposes it was intended.’

Southfields Library is a masterpiece of design that seems to be all about space. Space to walk between light wood bookshelves. Space above the shelves to think in. Space at each side of the lending areas to sit down and read, or use the computers, or sit with your child and choose books.

Entering through a heavy wooden door you are in that space. Ahead of you are a dozen huge wooden shelves splaying out like bicycle spokes towards the other book shelves that surround the room’s perfect circle. From where you stand on entering you can see all the shelves.

To the left is the source of a noise that is filling the library: a dozen mothers and pushchair-children singing.

To the right, several computer screens, most of them busy. Two fourteen year old girls, dressed for summer, looking up holidays on the internet. A mum, the same age as the two girls, with a small boy on her knee, writing a cv. A couple, late teens reading Guardian online, sitting together on one swivel chair, grinning.

In the main hall of the library a pair of mothers with pushchairs look at books. An old couple reach to the top shelf for books on guitars. A younger man, in a wide-brimmed hat, sits on a sofa, looking at a Monet book, a bank of Yellow Pages volumes behind him. All under a huge shaft of sunlight projected onto the floor, coming though the circular window above and a dozen ten foot rectangular windows spaced evenly round the barrel of the main building.

Behind the counter are two librarians. An older woman in a summer dress, a younger woman in a tee shirt.

Southfields Library was built in the late nineteen-thirties, based on Stockholm's main library. It was built with Leicester brick in a series of circles. It was designed not just as a library, but a centre for communal activity. It was created for the estate. The councillors deciding that the new community needed such a resource. One of the councillors responsible was quoted in the 1936 Leicester Mercury:

> *I might say that this library will also have a hall where it is proposed to have lectures and similar meetings. We want these buildings not merely to be regarded as places where books can be obtained but as centres of culture where people can meet, discuss and learn things.*

The library won the Institute of British Architecture Award bronze medal 'for design and execution'. An example of excellence sat on the edge of Leicester's first housing estate, built just before World War Two began.

The singing has stopped, replaced by the chatter of a dozen mothers and their kids.

'I went up there,' my father-in-law says, in a library whisper, pointing at the library counter. 'I filled in a card.' He stops again. 'That's when I told them I went to a public school. This scruffy lad, possibly wearing a vest, because we didn't wear shirts in the summer. And I looked up at the counter. And she smiled and said "Are you sure you go to a public school?" I said I went to Marriot Road School. And I thought it was a public school. You know, literally.'

He points to the computer terminals.

‘I would go up there and sit down. There were some nice tables. And you could browse. Just pick up things and read. I did a lot of homework up there.’

‘Why?’

‘It was warm.’

We introduce ourselves to the librarians, Kath and Chris. Middle-aged women. Friendly. They remind my father-in-law of the friendly middle-aged middle-class women who used to serve him over fifty years ago. Back then, they were creatures from another world. Now he’s married to one.

And for the first time he seems moved – to be back here. He is full of enthusiasm. And stories. Reeling them off. One from him. One from the librarian. She has lived on the estate all her life. Born and bred. Her brother went to Cambridge like my father-in-law. Did they know each other?

Then he’s talking about his mother. His mother who lived at 89 down the road. Who brought him and his three siblings up on his father’s war pay and her needle work. His mother who died two years ago – in Leicester Infirmary – aged eighty-five. I was outside the room as she died. He went in. I stayed with his pregnant daughter, my wife. After she had died he came out of the room all ‘Right, this is what we need to do. Here’s what’s going to happen next.’ He’s always full of purpose. But, occasionally he’ll draw out a memory of her.

Like in the car a few minutes ago. ‘My home was good. My mother was a reader and she got me into books. But the whole atmosphere of the estate was that you didn’t go to sixth form, let alone university. So everything was geared for me to probably go into the same company as my dad. First as a carpenter, then – my old man’s idea was – as a clerk of the works.’

He pauses to gaze around the library.

‘Two merders and a luv story,’ he says to the librarians. He’s telling the story about coming up to the library to get his mum’s books. ‘She used to send me up here. Age eight or nine. I used to come to the counter, look up. And the librarian used to find them for me. Ruby M Ayres.’

‘We still stock her,’ one of the librarians says, smiling. ‘Over there.’

My father in law smiles too, looks across at the shelf indicated.

‘And the result was,’ he says. ‘She used to read the same ones again and again.’

Then he points to one of the tall wooden shelves.

‘That’s the place. You used to have the foreign language novels there?’

The librarian shrugs. ‘I don’t know.’

‘R M Ballantine,’ he says. ‘He had a whole series of fiction that I used to read again and again. Like *Coral Island*. You know, those kinds of book. But there was one book called *The Gorilla Hunters* by Ballantine. R M Ballantine. And I loved it. Read it half a dozen times. And I found that up there they had a series of French books. And one was a *Les Chasseurs de Gorilles*. By Ballantine again. And I took it out. I’m probably about nine or ten. I sat there on the carpet with the French bit on one side and the English on the other. And I looked across to see how French and English were different.’

‘Had you been taught French?’

‘No. I just was very interested. In what the words meant.’

‘Did it start you off?’ I say. ‘Your career in languages, I mean.’

‘You know, I think it could have. When I got to Grammar School I became very interested in languages. It’s almost certain that my love of languages dates from that time.’

I leave my father-in-law talking about the estate – the library, people who stayed, people who moved away – for a tour of the library. With Kath.

Attached to the three circles – the main library, the children’s area and the online room – there is a hidden part of the library. Unless you’d seen an aerial plan of the library you wouldn’t know it was there. But it is.

We go into to the back. First through a kitchen with ‘Caretaker’ over the door.

‘This is the small meeting room,’ Kath says. She keeps walking through a box room with a table and six chairs. ‘And this is the large meeting room.’

It is another rounded space. A raised wooden stage at the front, wooden tiles stretching back to accommodate up to two hundred people. A huge round skylight again. At the back of the room there are two slots cut into the walls, a large projector in a room above.

‘We use it for dances, lectures, parties, Asian wedding receptions. And theatre groups come here. For the children.’ Kath walks backwards away from the centre of the room. ‘And this is where we had the séance.’

I stop and look at Kath. Ask her to repeat herself.

‘Séance,’ she says. ‘That’s right.’

Southfields Library, it turns out, is haunted.

‘It’s strange,’ Kath says. ‘Over this side I feel very uncomfortable. Very uncomfortable. And I have done ever since I started. When we had the séance we were in the middle here.’

We are standing in the centre of the room, directly under the skylight. The sun is heating the space, warm bands of light cast across the floor and the stage, like we're part of a production.

Kath steps back again and points. 'And it was about there the voices seemed to be coming from.'

'Voices?'

It had built up over the years. Staff saying they'd heard things, seen things, smelt things, didn't want to be left alone in the building. Then one of the staff met a psychic at some do and they set up a séance. To see what they could do about it.

'We sat round a table. I was sat here. The voices came from there. I'm not big into all this, you know. But I've got an open mind. Anyway, I heard these voices. Or a noise. Kind of between a sigh and a groan. Coming out of nowhere. And the table moved. Moved!' Kath says, pointing at the space where the table was.

'And it went cold. And we could smell things. Like joss sticks, I think. And the psychic people said there were these orbs. Sort of white spheres. They came up on camera. White shapes. Supposed to be early manifestations of ghosts. Anyway, they said there were three spirits. One angry. One laughing at us. And they gave us a name. Arnold. And no one could remember an Arnold working at the library. But a week later someone's uncle asked her how the séance had gone. And she told him. And he said he knew an Arnold. But Arnold as a surname, not a first name. One of two brothers from the estate who committed suicide.

Kath lifts a trap door just in front of the stage.

'They wanted us all to go down there. But I didn't. Do you want to go down?'

'What's it for?' I say.

'Storage'

‘I won’t.’

Kath leads me out of the large meeting room.

‘This is the bit I don’t like,’ Kath says. ‘Even before we knew about the ghosts. I always feel like I’m being watched round here.’

On the outskirts of Leicester there is a Borders bookshop. My father-in-law and I go there for lunch.

He suggested it. I thought we should try and find a library with a café, for the sake of the book, but I agreed it would be nice to go to Starbucks. He is keen. Very keen. He might like libraries, but it’s bookshops where he’s in his element now. Day trips with our family always take in bookshops in Stratford, Birmingham, Cotswold villages. If he can switch the agenda of any day to drop in on a bookshop he will. Crafting excellent reasons for driving miles out of our way. Often sending his wife off in one direction, hitting two or three bookshops quickly, then hiding his haul in the boot of the car.

He does it with great pleasure.

And once he’s there he will buy. If it’s not travel writing for himself, it’s ‘presents’ for his wife’s next birthday or Christmas. Or a pile of books for me. For my wife. And now for my daughter. My father-in-law is what bookshops classify as a heavy book buyer.

I sit in the Borders café with a man who is obsessed with books, whose life has been books, whose home is lined with books, often piled up as there is no room on the shelves, no more room *for* shelves. Apart from the bathroom and the kitchen each room in his house has a large collection. He is first and foremost a book owner.

So what does he think of libraries, seeing as he’s primarily a book owner?

‘They provide a facility which people wouldn’t normally provide for themselves,’ he says. ‘I buy a lot of books, yes. But, even so, I go into the library. I borrow. For instance, recently I got interested in geology, and the first thing I did was to go to Solihull Library and see what was on the shelves. I use it for research. It’s a resource.’

‘What about Alpines?’

My father-in-law lectures on Alpines, leads tours around Europe. Get him onto this subject and he’s more animated than ever.

‘Massively helpful,’ he says. ‘What I do is I go to Birmingham reference library. And I just see what has been published in my area. And I also want to see what is in the stack. And I am absolutely amazed at what they’ve got. For instance. I’d heard of one very important gardening periodical from 1830 to 1838. An eight-year run. That’s all. It was produced at a time when there were all sorts of theoreticians about the design of rock gardens and the beginnings of alpine gardens. And – to my amazement – it was there. Every copy. In the Birmingham stack! And they’ve got everything. From year dot. So, if I wanted to get into what was going on in 1894 when the term rock gardens started being used, I can look at all this stuff. Even now. I’m retired. In retirement, I’m still spending a whole day in the libraries. It’s wonderful resource. And it if was lost – well, it’s just unthinkable.’

It is hard to hear him above the sound of the coffee machines grinding and squirting. He casts his eyes over the balcony at the tens of thousands of new books shining in the light coming through the bookshop windows. He pauses briefly.

‘So libraries worked for you. As a boy?’ I say.

‘Massively.’

‘What do you think they should do now? What are they for?’

He doesn't pause. 'I think libraries have to continue what they did for me. Because, I'm afraid, you can't rely on the parents. I'm always anxious not to give the impression that I'm a snob, but I am deeply conscious that some parents have a very low horizon of expectation for their children. So I think you've got to meddle a bit there. Most parents assume that their kids will have a similar life to theirs. That's bad news for the kids. So I think, in a way, that libraries are a bit of social engineering going on. But they do it unobtrusively. That if there is a germ of interest there they will nurture it.'

'Did the libraries play a part in you being socially engineered?'

'Yes. They have the know how. They're the ones doing the research into what's turning the kids on now.'

My father-in-law stand up, gesturing that we should leave the café now. He can't resist the books anymore.

'I can't imagine a life without…' he pauses. 'A day going by without reading. It's a kind of benign addiction.'

His wife gets worried about the number of books in the house, he explains.

'And I say to her, this room is full of people. Not just any old people. It's a selection. I'm ready to sit at their feet. I trust them. And I'm terrifically grateful.'

Throughout the day I have tried to get him to say how he felt going back to Southfield Library. I know the feelings are there. When I went back to Oakwood Library I thought about my mum, felt feelings I'd not felt for thirty years. I wanted to get him to say the same. Directly. So I asked him again: how did it feel back in the library of his childhood?

‘Awe is a bit too strong,’ he says. ‘When I was… When we were yobs on the outside of the library and we used to chuck turf through the door, I was just an oik from the estate. But when I was in there it was really quite frightening.’

‘What was frightening?’

‘I had tremendous respect,’ he says. Then he pauses. My father-in-law doesn’t usually pause. His thoughts are normally organised and lucid, quick fire. ‘For these people who were very posh to me.’

‘Was that intimidating?’

‘Yes.’

‘What got you over it? Why didn’t you just turn round and go back to chucking mud through the door?’

‘The books,’ he says. ‘I can imagine I was slightly frightened by it. I always was when I moved out of my familiar world. You know, the expectations of the housing estate. And in a way the library didn’t just prepare me for books, but for other parts of society. The grammar school. There the teachers were all middle class. The library was a foretaste of how the privileged part of Leicester lived. Then there was the intelligence service. It was a widening of the horizon of expectations. I had got to this stage I wanted to read, to know more. This formative time influence the kind of person you were. It’s interesting to know how we become the people we are. All this is a result of breaking out of a really quite confined life.’

Education

Several long tables side by side beneath the carved wooden panels of a high ceiling. A huge space. A mezzanine level with ornate panelling round the balcony. Books shelved floor to ceiling. The creak of the floorboards as librarians and readers walk in monastic silence.

Nobody had told me about the reference library.

I was looking for something in the lending library, but its shelves were no longer satisfying me.

‘You’d be better upstairs,’ the librarian said.

‘Where?’ I said nervously, but proud I’d asked for a book for the first time.

‘The reference library.’

I had to walk up three flights of oversized stone steps to reach it, the walls, floor and ceiling lined with tens of thousands of tiny mosaic tiles placed one by one, perhaps, in the late nineteenth century.

Intimidating.

At the start of each flight of steps are lions and dogs carved in stone.

More intimidating.

And everything is illuminated by the huge ceiling window that casts a fierce light down into the chasm.

The first time the architecture nearly turned me away. This was about as alien to me as a building could be. The only time I’d experienced such an interior was attending the magistrates’ courts in the town hall next door.

Today I stop for breath at the top of the stairs. Going back.

I remember always doing this. Catching my breath. Thinking I would disturb the poised quiet of the library with my wheezing if I didn't wait and let it slow down.

Then inside. The heavy wooden doors. One marked IN and one OUT. I could tell you must never use the wrong one.

The reception desk for the reference library was directly opposite the two heavy doors. Once my breathing was right, I'd go in, head down, convinced an alarm would go off indicating to others that I did not belong here.

Today Leeds Reference Library is as busy as ever. There are less tramps. None. But there is a tall man with a bony face reading a Russian website, a young Chinese woman reading a Chinese newspaper. Most of the other users are using computers. Personal memory sticks slotted in. Writing prose, scanning the internet, answering emails. There are two men looking though reference books together. Both standing, still in their overcoats.

Sitting there today it is not hard to remember that period of my life. I was about twenty. I'd just started two A levels at night school – paid for by my part time Job Creation Scheme post at the RNIB Recording Centre for the Blind, where I helped record books onto tape for blind students.

My memory is stimulated by the smell of the books, by the sun coming in through the sky lights, by the blur of light around the blinds, by the noise from the street and the way voices echo back from the library floor. A unique sound that does more than anything to bring back the feelings I felt in this library over the years.

Once I'd settled down in my seat and become used to my place among the people already sitting at the long wooden tables, I got up to consult the banks of card indexes,

hundreds of tiny wooden drawers, brass-handled, each containing hundreds of cards, pierced at the bottom, a silver rod skewering them in place. Cam to Can. Dos to Dun. Sap to Sar. I leafed through, finding the cards that would locate the books that might answer my questions. Or at least reveal more questions to ask. And, finding something that first time, my heart skipped a beat and I reached for one of the library slips: title, author, Dewey number, ISBN. Then added my own details.

The first few times I went I was terrified. Each trip to the counter was a real effort of will. But, once I was established there, I went there every week for the three years leading up to my entry to university, the three years while I was at university and for several years afterwards. I studied there. I pursued obsessions with minor writers, artists and thinkers there. I chose the university course there. And I read about the brain tumour that was killing my father there.

With eight or nine slips filled in, I'd go to the counter. Then I'd listen to the librarian's footsteps on the stairs and on the floor above me. I'd glance up through the banisters on the mezzanine level to catch a glimpse of her calves quick-stepping the trail I had set; and gaze at the mezzanine balcony around the upper area of the reference library, the barrel ceiling, the mirror at each end, making the library three or more times as long as it was.

When the books were brought to me, I'd steal back to my seat, volumes of different shapes and weights and colours. In two hours I would have read about the exiled German Dadaist who built a room-sized column of personal objects in his Cumbria home, waiting for Hitler to burn himself out. I would have considered a theory that all language is music, that the words are not the essence, even the meaning, but that the meaning is in the flow, the rhythm, the undulations of the sound of those words. And I would have gathered these thoughts in notebooks and in the

folds of my mind. And they would stay with me to pluck from my memory years later.

Some days in the reference library, I would read entire novels or plays by favourite writers, which were unavailable to loan. Some days I would just trawl bibliographies for news of other books I might want to track down. Some days I wouldn't read at all. I would just sit there thinking. Thinking about the people who had sat at these long tables in Leeds. Who might have been here at my age? Alan Bennett? Tony Harrison? Arthur Ransome? Keith Waterhouse? Or thinking about the disasters I was taking part in. Love crises. Family deaths. Football. I went there before work and after work, at the weekend, before drinking, on my way to the football.

Other books in the reference library inspired journeys. They created a wanderlust. I wanted to go to Flaubert's Rouen, Dostoevsky's St Petersburg, Sartre's Paris, Goya's Madrid, Kafka's Prague, Beckett's Dublin. Every summer I'd buy an inter rail ticket and spend a month trailing round the literary heritage sites, art galleries and beaches of Europe. It was a passion. It began in travel books, biographies, art gallery guides and novels. It began in the library.

And other times I would look at the others users. Girls first of all. There were always one or two – and a couple of regulars. I would fantasise about getting to know them over an impressive obscurely manuscript. She'd need to read it too. So we'd share it, fall in love, have sex, etc.

Then there were the tramps. Using the library for warmth, a place to sleep and a place to read. As events unfolded at home, the reference library was becoming a place of refuge for me, as it was for them.

One afternoon I was sitting there. Thinking.

‘Are you alright?’

A boy – seventeen, eighteen – was standing over me. He’d been sitting with two girls at a table nearby.

I was shocked. You didn’t talk to other library users. ‘Yeah. Thanks,’ I said.

‘It’s just…’ he said, then thought better and left.

I knew immediately what he meant. I’d been blinking. And not just a flutter of my eyelashes. But hard, grinding, eye-ball-searing blinking. And twitching. And short sharp forward jerks of the head.

He’d thought I was having a fit, maybe.

The girls he was with tried their hardest not to look over.

I sat there paralysed, looking at the words on the surface of the page, reading nothing.

After a few minutes I studiously filled my bag and left.

I wish I could have explained to them. Put their minds at rest. This was just what I did when I was reading in the library. I couldn’t keep it all in, you see. All the things in my head. So I’d twitch and jerk and blink. That was how it was.

And, thinking back, I do not feel bad about that. In fact, I feel a pleasure remembering it.

It was around this time that something started to happen at home. There was something wrong with my dad.

I remember one scene clearly. I was studying on the kitchen table. He came down from working upstairs – to make a coffee. He asked me if I wanted one. I said yes. He screwed the brown lid off the top of the of the family size Nescafe jar and held it in his left hand, tilted on the kitchen top. He picked up a spoon in his right hand and went to put it in the jar, two cups waiting on the counter, the automatic

kettle already steaming, ready to click. But the spoon wouldn't go in the jar. I watched him try two or three times. Stop, puzzled. Then try again. Eventually he got the coffee out and made our drinks.

A month later he was having a brain scan.

A month after that a brain operation to see if the tumour the scan had found was benign or malignant.

The morning after that I was told. It was malignant. And the operation had gone wrong – and that my dad would be paralysed down one side for the last six months of his life.

I stopped working on the milk round.

I dropped my French O Level.

But I carried on with the A levels. He saw me complete three quarters of the course, using some of his books, some of the library's books. He knew I was getting 90% for my essays at that point. He was pleased. Maybe he was proud.

I was the only child living at home during those six months. My siblings and half-siblings were round a lot, of course. When they did I went to the library. Not just for the books any more. But for a place to think. A place without the stench of the Baby Powder we used to dust his bedclothes to stop him getting bedsores.

He knew I was getting interested in books. He'd seen me reading, asked me what I thought of this and that. He even thrust a copy of *The Outsider* by Camus into my hands one day. He probably thought it was a good bet: short, full of angst and violence. He was right.

I remember the year before he died there was a TV series called Great European Writers, or something like that. Melvyn Bragg had some involvement. We watched it together. I don't think I ever talked to him about it directly. Maybe I did. I

can’t remember. It was twenty years ago. One of the programmes was about Dostoevsky. It featured a dramatisation of fragments of *Notes from Underground*. Two days later he caught me reading a library book copy of it.

‘I thought you’d go for that,’ he said.

I’ll always remember that.

I don’t remember what I said back. Just what he said.

When he died I was a reader. I loved books. I was about to finish an A level in English Literature. For a decade all he’d seen of me was a truculent, sometimes nasty young man.

People who knew him have said to me that it must have made him feel good, seeing me emerge as a book lover, and probably emerge as a person.

That makes me feel good.

But it’s a shame I lost him then. He could have been a guide. Near the end he said that he envied me – because I had all the books in the world to discover, that it was all new to me.

Hundreds of books later, I know he was right.

I carried on visiting the reference library. Some days I was there from 9am to 5pm. I was studying hard now, chasing every known fact about Shakespeare, John Donne, Coleridge and Emily Bronte. And pursuing my obsession with Samuel Beckett.

Samuel Beckett – still alive in Paris for another year – was a special case for me. It was not so much his plays. *Waiting for Godot* left me cold. It was his prose. A series of about twelve short hardback novels; or collections of words. All published by Calder. I could not afford to buy them, so I went to the reference library to read them. It was like wading through mud. I had to read each line a dozen times. They

were like philosophical tracts. They were about the pointlessness of living. How the things people did were absurd. They were about emptiness. I loved them. They made me laugh. They gave me strength. When my dad was dying and I didn't know how to handle it, Samuel Beckett was there for me. In the library.

Later, used to the library now, confident, I was in there looking through the encyclopaedias and general reference section when I noticed a rack of magazines. University Prospectuses, it said.

This was the point where Leeds Central Library changed the course of my life.

I spent the next few hours dreaming which course I would go on if was that kind of person. I read about admissions. The welcome extended to mature students. I looked at English Literature courses. But they were intimidating. And not really my thing. Then I saw the brochure to Bulmershe College, Reading.

Modern European Literature. From Honore Balzac to Gunter Grass.

There was no question of me not being the kind of person who went to do this degree now.

He'd just be staring at the walls all day if he didn't have these books

I had been to Ireland only once before. But not on a stag night, or a fishing trip, or one of Leeds United's pre-season tours. It was with my mum. A few weeks after my dad died. And a few weeks before I left home to study at university, leaving her alone. We chose Dublin.

In theory we were there to immerse ourselves in books. I was about to start a degree in Modern European Literature. And was still obsessed with Samuel Beckett. I was into James Joyce too, having read *Dubliners* on my A level course. We'd also bought tickets for Wilde and Sylge plays. We were all set.

But really the holiday was about other things, not books. It was about my mum being my mum without my dad. And about my mum being my mum without me.

In 1989 we would never have dreamed of going to Northern Ireland. But sixteen years later I found myself passing through Belfast and onto the quiet roads towards County Fermanagh – on another kind of literary tour: to meet the most westerly book borrower in the United Kingdom. Or, at least, his daughter.

Heading west I listened to the news on Radio Four. It was strange being overseas but to still be able to John Humphreys and James Naughtie while driving on the left. The headlines that morning: the Tory conference in Blackpool , the sudden deterioration of George Best's health and the murder of a former UVF leader – on his doorstep in Belfast.

All I knew about Northern Ireland was news reports like this. A shooting. A bomb. A riot. A tub-thumping politician. A hunger strike. Most of the names on the road signs – Omagh, Armagh, Enniskillen, Portadown – were words I'd heard on the Nine O'Clock News in the eighties. Places of killing. They also reminded me of songs

from the eighties: *Last Night Another Soldier* by the Angelic Upstarts, *Alternative Ulster* by Stiff Little Fingers. And football fans singing *No Surrender to the IRA*. Of film pictures of grey Belfast streets lit up by petrol bombs. Of fortifications around police stations. Of armoured cars.

After the motorway west comes to an end thirty miles outside Belfast, there is a dual carriageway, then a single carriageway. And as you travel away from the capital you see fewer union flags on lampposts. Fewer trucks. Fewer people.

The light begins to filter from the east, revealing the winding road and taking me through small copses and low rounded hills. I see an owl watching the road from a fence post, small villages made up of low white houses, an upturned badger, a forest of conifers. A dead deer, its neck twisted. A sky of a thousands starlings forming parabolas in the sky above the road. And, as the sun comes up behind me, the world turning green and lush and beautiful.

And now the names on signposts are as unfamiliar to me as the others had been familiar. Lisbellow. Aghavea. Lisnaskea. Tamlaght. Names that make me feel like I am in a foreign country.

But I am still in the UK. And I am here to meet Ken.

Ken is in his fifties. He has a long grey ponytail and a long grey bushy beard. Underneath the hair he looks like an older, slimmed-down version of Liam Neeson. Handsome. Happy. Friendly. He comes round the back of the mobile library and shakes my hand, the other hand on my shoulder. Putting me at ease. I had been slightly nervous of meeting Ken because he'd been described by two people I'd met as 'a character'. I'd met so-called characters before. There are some in my family.

They can sometimes be trying. But with Ken I feel okay. He sits me down in the front of his mobile library. He offers me a banana. I offer him a cereal bar.

Ken is happy to take me to the most westerly point of the UK's library service: but wants to know why.

'I'm writing a travel book,' I say.

He nods and smiles. 'Have you written anything before?'

'A book about the Bradford wool trade,' I say. 'And one about Leeds United.'

'Ahh, Leeds United,' he says, waving to the man in the Land Rover who has just flashed him. And then we were talking football. Weaving our way westward. To the border of the UK and the Republic of Ireland. Within a few miles of the Atlantic Ocean.

The first place we stop – half an hour out of Enniskillen – is Tullyhommon. A village under a hill. Clusters of trees. Small houses painted blue, white and yellow. Like seaside terraces without a sea.

'We're right near the border here,' Ken says, pulling the handbrake hard and switching a button to lower the stairs at the back of the book bus.

Two men are waiting. Kev and Colm. Colm has arrived by car. A red VW with a Eire number plate. He is in his seventies, but thick set, robust, looking like a farmer. Kev is on foot. Late fifties. Red nose. Wisps of dark hair left among grey.

Ken gives me two rich tea biscuits.

'Give these to Jesse,' he says.

Kev's spaniel bounds up to me, feet on the chair. Jesse. She snatches the biscuits from me, then darts out of the library, across the road.

Colm puts six westerns on the small counter that stands between the driver seat and the book shelves. Ken brings six more westerns down from a shelf. Colm nods approval. They do this every month.

Kev brings back a book about football in Ireland and a WW2 history.

‘Oh look,’ Ken says. ‘Jesse’s crapping on Eric's lawn.’

Ken asks Kev what he wants this time. Has he tried this or that? Would he like some fiction? What else does he like to read?

Jesse is back, nosing for another biscuit.

Nuala follows Jesse onto the bus. Early sixties. Grey hair. Sharp sparkling eyes and a grin. And after Colm’s used westerns, taking all six.

‘Talk to Tom,’ Ken tells her. ‘He’s writing a book.’

‘A book?’

‘About libraries,’ I say. ‘Why people use them. What books they take out.’ I want to know what this western thing is. With her and Colm.

‘They’re for my father,’ she says. ‘He’s eighty-eight and deaf. I don’t know what he'd do without them. He reads from nine to five. He can't watch the television because of his ears. I have to explain it all. So he reads all day – when I’m not there. Only these westerns. Nothing else. I've tried him with everything else. First the newspaper, then these books. One a day. He has double vision in one eye.’ She screws one eye up. ‘So he has to read with this eye.’ She smiles. ‘He’d just be staring at the walls all day if he didn't have these books.’

Ken nods an smiles. He used to play rugby with Nuala’s dad.

Kev and Colm and Nuala are crowding Ken now. Ken stands behind the small wooden counter like a barman at the local. He throws biscuits into the air for Jesse to

catch. She leaps and twists and turns, missing only one, for which Ken apologies to her. Then he taps codes into his computer, zaps the barcodes on books.

Later, just before we leave, two women board the library. One with a bag of eight books to return. She chooses four crime books: Jake Arnott, P D James, W J Burley, Colin Dexter.

The other woman is dressed in a blue pullover, a white shirt collar poking out from underneath. She has an English accent. She takes a dry stone walling book Ken has brought for her specially, a book on decorating and a collection of Irish love poems. She asks about a family history book she has requested. Ken admits he's had trouble getting hold of it.

Finally, a smart man comes on board. A Pringle jumper. An army moustache. Combed grey hair. This is Eric who lives opposite. Kev and Jesse leave. Eric returns a Mario Puzo and a Dean Koontz. He takes out a book on the rivers of Ireland.

Ken gives the last two ladies a lift down on the hydraulic stair lift, one by one. They giggle as they are carried down.

Ken has two degrees: Engineering from Manchester and a Dip Ed from Bath. We're driving again.

'But I could never get a job,' he continues. 'They said cut your hair. And I wouldn't cut my hair.'

He was born in Enniskillen. Moved to England to study. Met his English wife in Bath. They lived in communes in Farnham and Hertfordshire. Then he was left a small house in County Fermanagh, the place his mother was born. So he moved back with his wife and mother. Did the house up. Settled back here.

He waves to a man leaning from a tractor coming the other way.

Ken tells me that he was offered a job on the mobile library because he was a Protestant. His third cousin, who worked on the council, sorted it for him.

‘If I’d have known how things worked,’ he says. ‘I’d not have accepted it.’

He fills in the background. How the local councils were dominated by Protestants. All the best jobs went to Protestants. With only one in twenty council employees being Catholic. Even though the population was half-and-half.

‘But it's different now,’ Ken says. ‘Westminster set the boards up. Got rid of the powers of the local councils.’

Five regional boards control the libraries now, with a brief to employ fifty per cent Catholic, fifty per cent Protestant.

‘When I started I was just the driver. I wasn't allowed to do the books. The librarian I drove around didn't even let me shelve them. She was afraid for her job. So I just drove and read. I read hundreds of books. Sat here. That was my job. Bliss. But now it's just me.’

Ken’s mobile library mission is to increase issues. But this is not just a new directive he’s pursuing since the introduction of computers that mean libraries can count – and be measured by – the number of books they issue. He’s been doing it for years. He started dropping in at schools, wary that mobiles had been cut in the neighbouring counties of Derry and Tyrone. He chose new places to stop. Based on demand, off his regular timetable. And he stops at individual houses and farms. The bosses said that he shouldn't do individuals: it would start everyone wanting such a service. But he does it anyway. There are farms miles from anywhere. Old people who’d never get to Enniskillen Library, twenty miles away.

Over the years, Ken has trebled the issues from the mobile library.

Ken shifts down a gear to slow at his first house call. A woman who loves reading. But a man is waiting in the garden and waves him on.

‘His wife’s not been well,’ Ken says, looking worried.

There’s no one outside the second house call. But there is a huge bag of books on the doorstep of the cottage, bushes and vines growing over the door and around the windows. Tubs of flowers still in bloom. It’s the only property for a mile either way. Ken is quick, choosing romances mostly. ‘But she's not averse to the odd thriller,’ he adds. He chooses books she hasn’t read. Ten books. He says it gives her a choice. And gets the issues up. He leaps out of the back of the library and returns quickly with twenty returns.

We are driving down the side of a huge loch. Lake xxxxx, the largest in Europe. There are clusters of trees on islands in the middle of the water. A large white house on the edge at the other side of the lake. Each house or farm has a boat, upturned or a canopy thrown over it. On the other side of the lake is a ridge of low mountains, swathes of conifers and native trees. The sky is bright, but cloudy. Ken moves the bus right and left, on the narrow road, then turns sharply up a track to a farm, where an Airedale waits impatiently.

Another house call.

Vincent gets on with the Airedale. It bounds the length of the bus in two strides. It wants biscuits. Ken gives me the nod. The Airedale noses my hands, its strong whiff all over me.

Vincent could be a ravaged-looking thirty or a young-looking fifty five. He’s got carrot red hair. A thin, sinewy body. He has his hands in his pockets; shy in the mobile library.

‘This is Tom,’ Ken says. ‘He’s from England. He’s writing a book.’

‘Is it a good craic in England?’ Vincent says.

I say it is. But that it's beautiful here.

‘Chelsea,’ he says.

‘Is that who you support?’

‘No. United,’ he says.

Vincent works on the farm for the owners. Ken told me about them on the way up the track. A woman and her mother. ‘Quite well off,’ he says. ‘For round here.’

Vincent takes a couple of books and Ken follows him into the house with a selection of romances for Rhona, the younger of the two women.

‘Won’t be a minute.’

I look out across the loch. There's a boat moving slowly over the water. And a pair of large birds high above the slope down to the shore.

‘We’re having lunch,’ Ken says, coming back, dumping half a dozen Mills & Boons on his counter.

Out of the library. Over gravel and up the steps. A glimpse of an old woman in the window, a blanket on her knee. Then into a small room. The old woman at one end, a bible on the window ledge next to her. A large cabinet at the other end crowding a doorway into a kitchen. A small fire crackling wood next to a computer, online. And the Airedale, watching.

‘You must come from a cold country,’ Rhona says, glancing at my tee-shirt. She is anything between fifty and sixty. A halo of curly grey hair around her tanned brown face. Her mother smiles from the other end of the room.

‘Yorkshire,’ I say. ‘Like your dog.’

‘You like my dog?’ Rhona shouts.

‘I do.’

‘You’re okay with Rhona if you like her dog,’ Ken says.

‘He likes it cold too,’ Rhona says. ‘Always wants the door open in the kitchen. I have to wear a coat indoors.’

She goes into the kitchen. Brings back sandwiches and a lump of cheese.

‘Tea or coffee?’

‘Tea please,’ I say.

She brings me a cup of coffee.

‘Tom’s writing a book,’ Ken says. ‘About libraries.’

‘Nobody’s reading these days,’ Rhona says. ‘Look at the offers in newspapers. I ordered a pair of boots from the Daily Mail. Boots for the farm. And where you used to have a coupon to fill in, now it’s just a telephone number. They don’t expect people to be able to read or to fill in a form these days. Nobody’s reading.’

Rhona’s mother smiles, but says very little.

‘So, you work for the libraries, Rhona says.

‘Yes.’

‘I’ve told my daughter she should work for libraries. She’s quiet. She’d like it. To look at me you wouldn’t think I’d like this rubbish,' she adds, pointing at the pile of romances Ken has brought for her.

We drive on, climbing. The terrain changes. It's darker, browner, higher. You can see the mountains to the south.

‘Yeats is buried on the other side of those,’ Ken says.

‘How far is the sea?’

‘A few miles.’

This is as far west as the UK goes. Beleek. We're visiting two schools.

When I told my wife we'd been to Beleek, she said I should have got her some pottery. Beleek is famous for its pottery.

We wait outside the first school. There are thirty or so children playing out. The girls skipping. Most of the boys playing with a football on a basket ball court. Kicking it, then a bouncing it; then one of them has picked it up, punting it to a teammate. Gaelic football. One team in red jumpers. One in white shirts. Two green cones at either end for goals.

No one comes to the library.

'I should go and have a word,' Ken says. 'Tell the head I'm here. But it's break time. They should get the kids to come to me in lesson time. They're not going to come in break time: that's their time. There's a schools mobile. That's only for the teachers, though. So I come and see the kids. They need to use the library. See what there is available. Choose themselves.'

We watch the school. The game goes on. I try to work out the rules.

Nobody comes.

'So, if you had to say, what this library is for,' I say. 'What would you say?' It's a bit of a stupid question, but it came out before I could stop myself.

'What's it for?' Ken looks at me like I'm stupid. This is not the first or last time someone I am talking to for this book will look at me like that. 'It's for these people,' eh says. 'For the community.'

'But don't you worry. About numbers. I mean, how many customers have you had today? Twenty?'

'But it's not about numbers,' Ken says. 'It's about the community. If I didn't come out here, how would these people get books? Nuala's dad? Rhona and her

mother? The kids? There's always pressures to cut the service. Cut those that don't perform. But you can't bow to those pressures. The bosses can't just bow to numbers. This is about the community.'

Finally, Ken has a customer. Kayleigh. A small girl – five years old, dark hair in ringlets, tiny glasses, eyes cast down – and her grandmother. As her grandmother looks for books for her, the girl scratches her finger across one of the books, making a zipping sound. She is wearing a little purple top, a grey skirt. She sits on the floor of the mobile library, leafing through a board book, chatting to herself.

Eventually, with the help of her grandmother, she chooses eight or nine books. She puts them on the counter, now at eye level with them. 'We'll get you to do the books, shall we?' Ken says.

The little girl stands on a chair and zaps the barcodes as Ken holds the books up for her. She is smiling.

'It'd be a very good example if you took a book now,' Ken says to Kayleigh's grandmother. 'Can I join you up?' He shows her the sections. She nods and starts to look along the shelves as a mother and daughter get on. The girl, about eight, is in a yellow shirt and blue jumper. Kayleigh shows her the books she's chosen. Kayleigh's grandmother chooses a Barbara Taylor Bradford novel and Ken uses the computer to make her a member.

'The library comes here every Saturday,' Ken says. 'Ten until twelve-thirty.'

Beleek is a small market town. We go to a second school through the high street, clogged with delivery lorries and parked cars. The buildings on the main street are all

low, nothing more than two stories. And all painted bright colours: yellow, purple, sky blue, white.

At the second school they're playing soccer.

‘This is the Protestant school,’ Ken says, seeing me watching. ‘Soccer here. Gaelic at the Catholic. The one we just came from.’

Three girls jump on the bus. Followed closely by another. They’re all between seven and ten.

‘Where are the boys today?’ Ken asks.

‘Playing footie.’

The girls queue. Ken serves them one by one. ‘Hello Neela… Hello Robena… Hello Sally…’

He lets them serve themselves. They know what they’re doing. They’ve done this before.

Travel

Manchester airport at five in the morning, it is cold and dark outside.

As it's late May, the holiday-makers are gathering, the summer season picking up. They're drinking their pre-flight pints, trawling the duty free shops, readying to head to Mallorca, Tenerife and more exotic destinations, south.

But I am going north. To a place nearer the Arctic Circle than Manchester. I am going to a place where killer whales roam the seas, where puffins cluster on wind-eroded rocks and where the most northern public library access point can be found: a mobile library driven by a woman called Annette.

The plane heads over Yorkshire, its reservoirs and farms clustered among its hills. Over Leeds, towards the east coast. On the plane three people are reading. I take down an inventory: Robert Ludlum, Patricia Cornwell, Dan Brown. (There is no escaping Dan Brown.) As the plane heads north, I watch the coast, looking out for cities and costal villages that I know. Sunderland. Newcastle. Seahouses. St Abbs Head. Mapping the UK from thirty thousand feet.

We land in Aberdeen to switch aircraft. Aberdeen airport is busy. From the lounge I watch helicopters ferrying what look like oil rig workers in and out; and a mock air crash – one charred helicopter and one burning plane, about the size of the one I'm in – being tended to by two fire crews.

The second plane has propellers. I wasn't aware planes had propellers anymore. From the moment it ferries up the runway to the moment we touch down, the noise of the propellers is constant, my skull vibrating., and I am reminded of the WW2 war films I used to watch as a kid.

I'm not a great flyer.

From the air – Aberdeen giving way to choppy water – I see an oil tanker, and, as the plane banks left, an orange oil rig. And I remember that I need to ask if the most northerly library service point is not in fact on an island, but an oil rig. And if that counts. To the left the mountains are covered in snow. In May. And before we are out of sight of mainland Scotland, a cluster of flat green shapes in the water, barely above sea level: the Orkney Islands.

The plane flies on north for half an hour, then begins to descend.

It is quite alarming to arrive here. The plane approaches from the south, to a narrow head of land called Sumburgh Head. As you descend, you can't see the islands or the airport. Just the sea. You go down and down until the spray from the waves – carved into shapes by the wind that is also tossing the plane – hits the window you are staring out of. The wheels drop and with them your stomach. Then you are over a tilted mass of rock, dropping right to left, covered in a carpet of pale green. The plane loops round and lands north to south, the wing tip nearly dipping into the sea. It shudders on the short runway. The propellers relent.

'Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Shetland.'

Shetland is never put in the right places on maps, usually dragged south and west and placed in an inset, so the scale of the map doesn't have to be reduced. Shetland is also called the wrong thing by outsiders. *The Shetlands* is not right. It is *Shetland*. No plural. Because it is so far from the UK mainland, it is probable that the Romans never reached Shetland. They made it to Orkney, but no further. That is why the influence of the Vikings is still a major part of the Shetland culture. Its main trades are fishing, knitwear, crofting and, more recently, oil.

I had my preconceptions about Shetland. I told myself to stop it: but they were there all the same. Just like some people in the south of England have absurd ideas about the north of England. I was worried mostly that I would not be able to find fruit. Or anything vegetarian. That the hotels would be shacks.

I have landed on the most southerly of the more than a hundred Shetland islands, fifteen of them inhabited. It is known as Mainland to those who live here. I drove my rented Renault Clio through a scenery that – although it said in the guide books would look alien – reminded me of the very tops of Pennine Yorkshire where I live, how it would look October to February. The land was green and yellow and purple, in the faintest shades, lit by a pale sun. I passed buildings with turf roofs, small ponies tethered at the roadside and great excavations of peat, brown lines scored down hillsides. And above everything clouds moving at speed through a massive sky.

At first, driving north from the airport you can see the sea on both sides. A strange feeling if you're not used to it. Then the land builds and the hills rise, some with huge satellite dishes or wind farms on top. Along the coast, in small inlets, there are clusters of half a dozen to twenty houses, sheltered from the wind. And tiny ink-black lochs with choppy waters.

I made good time driving the length of mainland, so had the chance to check out one of its key features before I caught my ferry: Sullom Voe oil terminal, on the north west coast. Between Shetland's principal town of Lerwick, which I circumnavigated, and Sullom Voe, there is pretty much nothing, except a few abandoned buildings. Or shells of what used to be buildings. The oil terminal is well away from the population. And was once the site of one the islands' many imaginative library services, both on land and out on the water: Shetland has a history of taking books to its well-spread and often itinerant population.

‘Where you live shouldn’t disadvantage your access to books,’ Shetland chief librarian would tell me the next day. ‘It just needs more ingenuity,’

Shetland has a great history of getting books to people in its furthest corners. It’s like a microcosm of the UK’s library service, making sure no one is disadvantaged by where they live.

Before 1974 books were distributed to the libraries around the islands in large sealed wooden boxes. The ferries only took passengers – not vehicles – so the books were delivered with other goods and driven to the libraries from the port. But in 1974 Shetland began to run car ferries. From then the mobile library could reach not just Yell and Unst, but the smaller islands like Whallasey, Bressay and Fetlar too. And Skerries.

Earlier back in 1915, soon after the library service started up on Shetland, it became supported by the Carnegie UK Trust – as a pilot scheme to test rural library services that also ran in Orkney, Lewis and Staffordshire. By 1916 there were 47 service points across the islands. A library within a few miles of every Shetlander. Now there are x, Annette and her colleagues reaching the rest by bus. And ferry.

The late 1970s was a time of great change in Shetland.

Why?

Oil.

And oil – in Shetland – means Sullom Voe.

Sullom Voe is the terminal that receives oil piped in from the North Sea oil fields, then fills up the oil tankers that come to collect it. The building of the terminal was an enormous task. The quantity of earth to be moved, a major challenge for the

engineers. The pipelines too. Seven thousand men were flown in to do the work. They worked twelve hours on, twelve hours off. A huge accommodation area was created. Not only did this accommodation area include Europe's longest bar, it also had a library. The chief librarian of the time – John Hunter – made a agreement with the construction company to supply library books for the 7000 men. Sullom Voe paid for a librarian, an assistant and premises. A service was set up to match the shift times. Thousands of books were made available. As the building of the terminal progressed two huge accommodation ships were used to house more workers. A library was set up on these too.

But there is nothing left now. No accommodation. No bar. No library.

Approaching Sullom Voe there is a road sign, the familiar red triangle with a picture in the middle, warning you of what might be on the road. But at Sullom Voe the picture is not of a cow, skipping children or two bent-over old people, but of an otter.

I parked up and waited for an otter to cross the road.

I had ten minutes, but no otters came. Just oyster catchers pecking deep into the earth. And curlews hanging in the wind like birds of prey, screaming.

Eventually, I got out of the car to have a closer look at the rocks where the otters might be.

The wind pushed me hard against the car. I had to reset my feet to walk to the rocks, then to read the next sign that had caught my eye a hundred yards up the road. You couldn't miss the sign. It was about size of a house.

SULLOM VOE TERMINAL

You are now approaching a top tier major accident hazard site.

> Unless you have any business here at the terminal or construction jetty, you are advised to turn back at this lay-by.

The wind helped me into the car. I turned back, having seen no otters. Major accident sites make me nervous.

Three large islands create the seventy mile length of Shetland. Shetland to the south. Yell in the middle. Then Unst, the most northern island. To get from one to the next you have to travel on small car ferries. On the first ferry – Shetland to Yell – I got out of my hire car and hung over the edge of the ferry, to watch the sea. The other passengers stayed in their cars and vans. I was the tourist: the excited boy on a ferry with his car. They were off to work, making deliveries. They did this every day.

The sailing took twenty minutes. The spray from the front of the ferry caught the sun, creating a rainbow.

Yell is brown and yellow, made up of greenless grass. A main road cuts through the land, much like the excavated peat creates lines across the seemingly deserted island. Less than a thousand people live on Yell, half the number who lived here a century ago. Their villages are hidden from the road, on the coasts. The main road was built by the military, to allow swift access to the Early Warning Station to the north of Unst. It misses most habitation.

I saw three other vehicles on Yell. Two cars that I had already seen on the ferry, that drove off ahead of me. The third, a hearse coming the other way. One of the cars turned back, the driver asking me for directions. My car rocked from side to side as I was parked in the northerly lane, him in the southerly lane. We struggled to hear each others voices in the wind. I didn't know where he was going. But I knew

where I was going. To Gutcher at the top end of Yell. And the UK's most northern library reading group.

Gutcher is a tiny port that emerges as you come over the last hill on Yell. When I arrived the ferry was out, making its way across the heaving waves of Blue Mull Sound to Unst.

Gutcher has a handful of buildings, most of them prefabs. The bus stop has several breeze blocks sitting on top of it. A large static caravan is the last building before the water. It is both the tourist information centre (closed) and a public toilet. The caravan is surrounded by a circle of four-foot stakes. The stakes are attached to huge straps that look like giant seat belts. The straps loop over the caravan, holding it in place, should it become windy. More windy than this.

I walked down to the beach, eyeing the building I was going to enter. Another prefab. Huge gulls – that were probably skuas – hung in the air over the small port. A blue rowing boat with a red underbelly was upturned and tethered by three inch thick ropes, like it was an animal with a mind of its own. It rocked as if it was dreaming of being at sea.

The Wind Dog Café is a green and white prefab next to the tourist information centre. The sign on the door depicts a dog – the Wind Dog – that takes its name from the phrase used here to describe an incomplete rainbow.

There has been a library here for three years: the second most northern public library building in the UK.

Inside it is warm, making me realise it was quite cold outside. The space – about twenty by thirty foot – is laid out with several tables, each covered in a table

cloth depicting a heap of food: vegetables, pastas, fruit, pulses. The place is full of colour. The wooden walls painted brightly. In one corner there is a till and fridge for drinks. In another, several shelves of books and a curtained-off area. The library. The Wind Dog has large windows on either side. Through one you can see the building that used to be the Post Office, the upturned boat still rocking, and a hill rising, yellow-green. Through the other, a flock of waddling geese, grubbing like pigs, and a vast expanse of grey sea. From here you can monitor the ferry heading back from Unst, the last inhabited island in the UK.

The wind seems to be picking up outside, two yellow-headed black-tip-winged gulls struggling like badly flown kites.

I order a fried egg sandwich and a Coke, then sit down and scan the library's shelves. Books jump out because I am looking for them. Set on finding clichés, what I expect to find, not surprises. A collection of *Classic Sea Stories* edited by Barry Unsworth. *Heimskringla*, stories of Norse Gods. *The History of Shetland Football 1887-1987*. A book about the Shetland crafting community. But there is a lot more. Books on birds, otters, opera and Brazilian football. Books by George Orwell, J K Rowling, D H Lawrence, Douglas Coupland, Seamus Heaney. A children's section in boxes on the floor. And a reference library.

'There's one customer who reads that Shetland football book every time he comes in.' It's the guy with my Coke. His voice sounds South African. He introduces himself. Andy.

'He's a lorry driver,' Andy says. 'He reads a bit at a time, waiting for the ferry. His dad and granddad are in it. I'm Andy. I heard you were coming.'

Andy is a six-foot-something bald Zimbabwean in his thirties, a trained opera singer. He came to Shetland eight years ago to run a music school – but, although he

gives lessons all over the islands, his main occupation is the Wind Dog. He lives over the road in the old Post Office and has a diploma as a chef, which comes in handy, now he runs this café.

I quiz him about the library. Who uses a library in a café in a port with a population of under ten, near enough at the end of the road.

‘People from Unst and Yell,’ he says. ‘For books and for the internet.’

‘Is that what the curtained off area is for?’

‘That and the reference library,’ he says.

He shows me the reference library. Two five foot high shelves packed with dictionaries, encyclopaedias and medical reference books.’

‘And do people use it?’

‘Yes. Locals. Throughout the year. And when we’re cut off from the mainland. But not just people from Unst and Yell. Tourists too. We try get the tourists to use it.’

‘What for?’

‘Reference. Local information. Like if they’re on their way up to Hermaness,’ he says. ‘The nature reserve on Unst.’

‘And who chooses the books?’

‘The library send six boxes every six to eight weeks. A range of stuff. Plus anything anyone has ordered. Through me. Or on the internet direct. And books for the reading group.’

‘How does that work?’

‘A few of us. We read books and talk about them.’

‘What book are you reading this month?’

‘Not one book. We all read a different book. Last time? Nick Hornby, Joanna Trollope. Armistead Maupin. We’ve a box of twenty books to choose from each month. The café provides the food. We have events too. Book binding. Music. Storytelling.’

You can tell that Andy loves his library. He is a fan of libraries anyway: part of the reason why this outpost works. He uses the library in Hackney when he is in London. Visiting his husband.

‘I took out the entire collected work of Benjamin Britten,’ he says. For his work. ‘That would have cost thousands of pounds to buy.’

‘Does the café do well?’

‘It does. Especially in the spring. And summer. With tourists.’

‘How many is the most you’ve had in at once?’

‘Forty nine,’ he says.

In December 2005 Andy became a celebrity in Shetland, the first to take advantage of the new civil partnership laws at Shetland Town Hall in Lerwick. He married Andrew. The Shetland Times recorded it with a photograph and short article:

YELL COUPLE MAKE HISTORY.

‘A happy day for Andy Ross and Andrew Harrison of North Yell,’ it reads ‘after their civil partnership ceremony in the Town Hall on Wednesday.’

Andy is back in the kitchen making my fried egg sandwich, firing out an aria as he does so.

He has introduced me to Margaret, the ex-postmistress, a dark-haired woman in her sixties. Margaret runs a B&B in the old Post Office. Andy needed someone to

help run the café, so she came in with him. Before the Post Office she lived in the shore station across the water from the Muckle Fluga lighthouse, her husband one of the lighthouse keepers.

As Margaret is telling me all this, a woman comes in. Someone local, who's not been around for a while, from the way the conversation is going. She's early thirties. Dark hair. A wide smile. She looks like a sitcom actress I've seen – but I can't remember her name.

Margaret goes into the back to tell Andy she's here. Andy comes out. They kiss. They talk. I look again at the books, casually eavesdropping until their conversation turns to reading.

'Are you coming to the reading group this week?' Andy says.

'What's the book?' the woman says.

'Whatever you're reading.'

They talk about when it is. She says she'll try to come.

'So what are you reading now?' Andy asks.

'I've just started *Congo Journey*. Redmond O'Hanlon,' she says.

'Ah,' Andy says enthusiastically. 'I've just read his *Journey Through Borneo*. Did you think…'

The conversation goes on. I can see that the ferry is nearly in. I've eaten my fried egg sandwich. I pay Margaret at the till and head off, leaving the most northerly reading group in the UK to make its arrangements.

Then to Unst.

Unst has a population of 720. But it is dropping fast. Ever since the downsizing of the RAF base at Saxa Vord.

My plan was to head north immediately and meet up with the ultimate UK library service somewhere in a village in Unst, the mobile library. To meet the most northerly library users in the UK. But I was late. And the mobile library was early. As the ferry moved across Blue Mull Sound I became more sure that the van waiting to board at the other side was the mobile library. I had missed my chance. The library was on its way south and wouldn't return during my stay in Shetland. But at least I'd be able to talk to Annette, the driver I'd been set up with. If I was quick.

When the ferry front dropped down to allow cars off, I accelerated across the car park, stopped, jumped out and ran – with my notebook – to the back of the mobile library as it was moving off. I banged on the door. It stopped. A woman came to the back.

'Tom?'

'Annette?'

'Yes. Jump on. I have to get on the ferry.'

So I jump. Into the mobile library and onto the boat. Back to Yell.

Annette manoeuvres the mobile library onto the boat, then turned round on her seat. I am sitting in the middle of the mobile library, high shelves on either side of me, piles of books on the floor. Annette says she is sorry to have been unable to show me round Unst. I apologise for being late.

'How was your day?' she says.

'Good,' I say. I tell her about The Wind Dog. She eats there. I mention the man wanting directions. And the hearse.

'That was one of my customers,' she says. 'An old lady. It was the funeral today.'

Shetland introduced a mobile library service in 1964. A year later it had 1237 readers using it: nearly 10 % of the then Shetland population. Now it takes 10,000s books to 100s readers in villages and 15 of the islands every year.

I get straight to the point. I have fifteen minutes before the ferry gets to Yell and Annette heads south. Who, I ask, is the most northerly public library user in the UK? And what do they like to read?

'An old man. In Norwick,' Annette says. 'He used to be in the Merchant Navy He wants sea stories.'

'Is that it? Does he read anything else?'

'Nothing else. Just sea stories. He lives on his own. I spend hours researching catalogues – and Amazon – to find him new ones. He's one of a few readers who like that kind of thing. Former seamen. They all want sea stories.'

Unlike a lot of mobile library services that park up and offer books from one site in a part of a town or in a village, Annette does a door to door service. Most of her customers are middle-aged women, she says. Housewives or retired. They like Catherine Cookson, Lyn Andrews, Mills & Boon.

'It's a bit like a housebound service you'd get in other parts of the country,' she says.

'So, if they're housebound, do you do stuff for them? Other than the books.'

'I'm not supposed to. But you do, don't you? I let the dogs out…' She laughs.

'What?'

'There's this one woman. A regular. One day I went into her house. She gave me trouble as soon as I went through the door. She wasn't happy. But I wasn't sure why. Then she starts taking her clothes off!'

The ferry is nearly in Gutcher. I can see the sign of The Wind Dog. Soon Annette will be off the ferry, me staying on it to return to my hire car.

'Then she's showing me an ulcer on her leg,' Annette goes on. 'I said "Stop taking your clothes off, woman!" She asked me who I was. I told her. Library books. And she started laughing. She'd thought I was the district nurse.'

Most houses that Annette visits are far apart. She rarely delivers to one next to another, because there aren't that many that are next to each other.

'Do you stay and talk?' I ask. 'Like the housebound service?'

'I'd love to. And I do for a while. But there's a limited amount of time.'

We are at least half way across the water. I'm running out of time. 'Who is the second most northern library user?' I ask.

'A lady in Burrafirth,' she says. 'She likes crime. Eight to ten books each month. Patricia Cornwell. Val McDermid. Lorna is her name. Anne Cleeves. Kathy Reichs. Lesley Horton. Every time I come she has a booklist for me. She uses one of those crime book clubs to find out what the new books are, then gets them from us. She likes the more gory sort of crime.'

We talk about some customers. I feel embarrassed asking the obvious questions. Most northerly. Second most northerly. But these are the questions I want answers to.

'What about the weather? Do you ever get into trouble with the mobile library?'

'I have to stay over in Unst sometimes. In the Baltasound Hotel. If there's no ferry. If it's rough, I mean. The water is huge sometimes. And the van rusts if it gets too soaked on the crossing. Sometimes the ferries can't run.'

'Have there ever been accidents?'

‘Not really. One day all the books came off the shelves on the way to Skerries.’

‘Skerries?’

‘It’s a small island off the mainland. A two hour ferry. Eighty people live there. I spend a day there with the mobile. I can visit all my customers in a few hours.’

‘What’s it like?’

‘It’s very much a fishing community. There’s a school with one teacher and four children. And the nursery, with one child. The ferry goes there and back on a Friday. It’s the only day you can get in and out in one day. Some of the users will go on line before I come out and order ten to fifteen books. They know what they want. One woman out there orders thirty Mills & Boon books a month. A lot of these old ladies can’t sleep, so they read one book a day. It’s a lifeline for them. It really is.’

The ferry is nearly in. Annette is back in the driving seat.

‘Come and see me tomorrow,’ she says. ‘You’re in Lerwick, aren’t you?’

It seems everyone knows my movements.

We agree to meet again.

Back on Unst, I head for Baltasound. Half way up the island, where the hotel is.

The Baltasound Hotel is the only one on the island.

I’m driving across my third island in as many hours.

Unst is a series of low yellow-green hills. Some of the houses are lived in. Some ruined. The hotel at Baltasound is an old house. With a quadrant of shacks. I’m in the main shack. This is not like the city hotels I have to stay in sometimes. It’s

basic. Not overheated. Reasonably comfortable. But the view is the second best view I've ever had from a hotel. After Lake Como.

A bay or inlet. Low green hills either side, yachts on the water. Lots of space. Lots of sky. And something about the scenery that, although it was windy, was quiet, really quiet.

After I've checked in I drive up to Hermaness, a nature reserve. Through a couple of tiny villages, past a scowling hoody and a huge wooden Viking ship, grounded at the opening of an inlet. I am going to walk across Hermaness to see the lighthouse where Robert Louis Stevenson wrote *Treasure Island*, cliffs packed with Puffins and sea that stretches unbroken to the Arctic Circle.

The wind is up when I start my hike. The ground increasingly boggy, my trainers sink in the mud. It's bracing and beautiful. I feel happy. And then the birds come. Bonxies. Watching me at first. Then lunging at me. I have an idea what might happen next. I have been attacked by birds before. The birds hover above me. Wheeling over what might be their nests, then me again. Then they come down. No contact. But I don't fancy contact from birds that look like they have a wingspan to match mine. So – the great traveller I am – I turn back.

Anyway, it's dinner time at the Baltasound Hotel. Treasure Island will have to wait.

Dinner is good. Vegetarians *are* catered for. I drink two bottles of Simmer Dim beer in the restaurant as the Unst funeral party gathers to drown its sorrows.

That night I sleep an unbroken sleep of nine hours for the first time in three years.

The most northerly public library in the UK used to be at the RAF Early Warning Station, Saxa Vord, a mile from the northern edge of our last island. It was run by volunteers, RAF wives mostly. An airman was in charge during the week, when the library was for the RAF exclusively. But at the weekend the public could use it.

Then the RAF left Saxa Vord.

The next library south was in Unst's only school. Carol is the librarian at the school. She comes to the door to meet me. Aged forty or so, she walks with a stick. She has fair hair and a soft voice.

Carol asks me if I want a cup of tea and points to a seat. I sit down. As she is making the tea, I look round the shelves. The library is a medium sized room. The shelves are packed. As are the floor display units and spinners. I do my usual inventory of what stands out.

Jacqueline Wilson.

Anthony Horowitz.

Chris Ryan.

Garth Nix.

The fiction section is brilliant. Full of all the latest teenage novels. Ones that have only been out a few weeks. Books for boys and girls. Non-fiction is packed with books on tractors, cars, Celtic, Rangers, Newcastle.

On the floor there are boxes full of magazines. Top Gear magazine. Angling magazines. Sugar. Smash Hits. Shoot.

And – on the walls – a poster. Bart Simpson, reading.

This library is overwhelmingly a school library, all the stock aimed at the children. But recently – with the demise of the RAF library – the Shetland library service has offered books from the school. Out in the corridor are several sealed

cabinets. On Mondays – six until nine p.m. – they wheel the cabinets out into the main school hall and host a library. They offer books, CDs and books on tape. They also offer a free internet and an ordering service, where users can order books from Lerwick to be delivered to the school.

This new library opened two weeks before. Thirty people came to the opening, to see the speeches and drink the wine. The second Monday it was a wild night. Five people came: two for fiction, two for books on hobbies, one for a Spanish language tape.

'The hope is that we can run a successful temporary community library at the school,' says Carol. 'If everyone uses it, it'll prove a need. Then they'll build one. A permanent one. A proper community library for Unst. Users have already started asking what will happen to the library when the school is closed for six weeks over the summer. There's a huge need on Unst.'

Carol is from Unst. Her husband, Raymond, is too. Before she had the school librarian job she was working in Lerwick in an accounts agency, only coming home at the weekends to be with Raymond, who keeps animals. Then the job came up at the school and she jumped at it. As well as doing the job she's doing an HNC in Library Science and Information Studies. She wants to go on to become a chartered librarian.

It's the children that light Carol's fire. She tells me that she likes to take each child on their own. Think about what they are interested in. 'If you have an idea what they like you can get them into books,' she says. 'But you can't force it. That doesn't work.'

I'm nodding.

'What about boys?' I say.

‘Magazines,’ she says, pointing at the boxes on the floor. For the reluctant ones. ‘Sports. Trialling. Fishing. A lot of them go fishing with their dads. They come in here for their study period. They don’t realise it’s reading. Or farm machinery.’ She grins. ‘I issue tractor books every day.’

She runs a homemade reading scheme for the younger children. *Dive Into Reading*. The children keep a reading log. Title, author, what the book’s about and how many stars they give it. Once they’ve read six they get a certificate.

‘Some kids cheat,’ she says. ‘But lots go on to enjoy reading. The older ones don’t do reading schemes, though. It’s not cool.’

She uses role models for the younger ones. The class heroes. She targets the so-called cool kids, gets them to be seen with a book. ‘If it’s not cool to be seen with a book, they won’t do it.’

I ask about the old RAF library. What was it like?

‘Mostly war books,’ Carol says. ‘For the RAF. The RAF set it up. But Shetland Libraries supported it with stock.’

‘But it shut down?’

‘The RAF left. Now most of the houses up there are sold or for sale. You should take a look. At the library.’

‘Do you reckon they’ll let me in.’

‘They might. Go up to the camp and ask for Ian McKay. At the gate. He’ll look after you.’

I drive north. Through tiny clusters of houses. Bare moors. Drivers coming the other way wave to me. Every one of them. I wave back, happy. It is like when you’re

walking in quiet countryside. I try to imagine waving to people on the drive back from Manchester airport. They'd think I was a nutter. I'd probably get assaulted.

Unst was part of the WW2 radar defence system, set up to protect the UK from the Germans: The Chain Home Sites were set up just before the Battle of Britain, the network going right up the coast of the UK. In the 1950s the original radar station in Unst was replaced by Saxa Vord, the highest point of the island (?) at the very northern tip of the UK.

I drive through the last village. Haroldswick. It's quite big. Stone houses. Clusters of wooden buildings. Then, on the other side of the village, a single track climbing the hill to Saxa Vord. Across a boggy moor, the road weaving in and out of its folds.

Before I really get going there is another large sign:

ACCESS TO MOD PROPERTY.
NO UNAUTHORISED PERSONS PERMITTED.

I feel, again, like I shouldn't go. But then I remember that I have been told it is okay. I have the authorisation of the librarian. And that feels right.

I keep going.

The Early Warning Station must be hidden somewhere in the clouds. I drive with the window open. Silence. Apart from the odd curlew cry. The track is long, grey and wet. Black wires run uncovered along either side of the road. A few sheep move listlessly. The ground is yellow. The air smoky. And coming to what I thought was the top I see a break in the clouds. A lighthouse. Stevenson's lighthouse. Muckle Flugga. Then sea for hundreds of miles. North.

I drive on and finally come to a wire fenced-off area. A set of low buildings, most of them sheds with peeling paint. Communication masts. The dome of the early warning system is visible, then not. It looks like a rocket launch pad, after the rocket has left, all the clouds of fuel left in its wake. There are no cars, no people. No Ian McKay.

I go up to the guards' room and knock on the door. No answer. The gate is open. I could just walk round, I think, look for a sign saying library. The first sign I see does not say library. It says:

THIS IS A PROHIBITED PLACE WITHIN THE MEANING
OF THE OFFICIAL SECRETS ACT. UNAUTHORISED
PERSONS ENTERING THE AREA MAY BE ARRESTED
AND PROSECUTED.

Another rebuff. There is barbed wire. And another sign with an arrow pointing left: EWS. The clouds scud, carried on the wind, like the heather is burning. Their shadows pass swiftly over the dome and my car and me. It is eerie. I feel like I'm under the surface of the water. And the language of the sign has intimidated me. But I know I should go on. It'd make a great story for a book about libraries – to be prosecuted under the official secret's act. If I was allowed to say what I saw…

The next day – at seven in the evening – I'm in Lerwick's the central library. Fifteen readers, all women, here for their regular reading group meeting. Except this is one with a difference. They've special guests. The Marketing Director, Publicity Director and Art Director of Little Brown, a major UK publisher, all up from London.

The library – Shetland's main collection – is in an old church, it is one of the most beautiful libraries I've seen. At one end there's a five piece stained glass window. There's a main floor and a mezzanine that reaches half way across the length of the library. The mezzanine is the reference library. The main floor, lending. Fiction. Teenage. Music. Poetry. The library opened in 2002.

The special guests are here to find out what readers think about their books and their book covers. Part of a UK tour that is taking in Northern Ireland, south Wales and parts of England. Publishers want to know what readers want these days. It's a hard business and Little Brown are combing the length of the country – literally – to find out what readers want. No holds barred.

First on the agenda, a new book they're about to publish. All the reading group have read it, pre-publication. The publishers want their opinion.

Opinion comes immediately.

'Tea bags in Africa in the 1940s? I don't think so,' says one reader.

Laughter.

'It was depressing. A depressing book.'

More laughter. Then an intervention.

'But it had to be depressing. It was dealing with depressing issues. Anyway, I don't mind depressing.'

Muted laughter.

'Well I thought it was quite positive – not depressing at all.'

The reading group is getting stuck in. Like they do. They don't have any worries about directors of this-and-that. They have their opinions. The directors of this-and-that are pleased. They didn't come to Shetland to be told everything was rosy.

Next the group talk about book covers. Part of the reason for this group is to help Little Brown design a new cover for the paperback of that book. So far they've not seen the cover Little Brown have mocked up.

'It will need orange and red colours,' one member of the group says. 'To give it a sense of Africa.'

'Yes. Colourful. So you can get across the heat.'

The art director pulls out a possible cover. Some of the group smile.

But one says: 'That is just awful. It just screams black reader. African story.'

There's a pause.

'You didn't design it, did you?'

The designer swallows. Smiles.

'No.'

Much laughter.

'In that case,' another reader butts in. 'I cannot see any connection with the book at all. I was thinking sepia cover. This screams Alexander McCall Smith. It doesn't work.'

'You've got the wrong car on the cover.'

'What do you mean?' asks the marketing director.

'It's not the same car,' she says. 'As the one in the book.'

Then more opinion.

'The dresses are all wrong. You've got western cuts. Not the right clothes.'

'I think you could limit your readership with a cover like that.'

The debate goes on. Into the night. The publishers will leave Shetland early next morning with some firm opinions about what they publish and what it looks like. The readers of Shetland have done their job.

SHOW GROUP FROM HERE

Transport

Cramlington is in Northumberland, ten miles north of Newcastle. It is mid-February, the coldest day of the winter so far. Well below zero. The skies are bright blue and huge against frost-green fields, small woods and absence of hills.

You have to take the train through Newcastle, past the famous bridge, the river sending off a blinding reflection; past Newcastle United's Training Centre. There are six other people on the train. Two passengers are reading: one the *Independent*, the other a large hardback art book full of plates. But I can't see the cover.

The train slows and stops. I am the only passenger to get off at Cramlington. And nobody gets on. The station is just two platforms with a footbridge. A car park – and nearby streets – are full of commuter Golfs, Corsas and Fiestas. Plus a BMW, Toon Army car stickers on the rear window. Next to the station is a row of stone bungalows, a plaque saying AGED MINER WORKERS HOMES, EST 1900. behind them a dual carriageway leading to a roundabout.

Sue is standing in the car park. I grin and wave. She's the only person waiting. Sue has brown hair, a nice smile and a soft north east accent. She wears black trousers, a turquoise top, a big coat around it. She is in charge of the Home Library Service, Cramlington.

In the car on the way to Cramlington Library Sue asks me if I've been to Northumberland before. An opener before we get down to library talk. I reel off the memories I have been turning over in my mind during the journey north.

Fishing off Craster pier with my dad – the day we caught our first fish.

Camping by the beach at Beadnell with my parents – seals in the waves.

Listening to the 1980 European Cup Final in a car, stranded on Holy Island, the sea submerging the causeway. Trevor Francis. 1-0.

Being dive-bombed by birds on Farne Island, blood spots coming out of the holes in my head.

'People who know about Northumberland come back,' she says.

She's right.

Cramlington Library is unexpectedly huge. On one floor, it would cover half of a full-sized football pitch easily. It is new(ish), has great banks of fiction, DVDs, videos; rows of computer users; a book sale. Windows all around let in the winter light, sun steaming in from the south. About two dozen people are in the library, sitting, browsing, talking to the staff.

I'm introduced – 'This is Tom: he's writing a book about libraries' – and taken through to the staff room. They give me tea and biscuits. There are at least four biscuit tins in the staff room. Along with photos of children, dogs and rabbits.

Northumberland's Home Library Service is the new name for the Housebound Service. Sue explains to me how it sounds better – especially for users, who don't want to be labelled housebound. The service – from this branch library alone – serves fifty people once every four weeks; or more, if they need it. Northumberland is a huge county with thirty-five libraries and five mobiles.

Sue runs the home library service. But volunteers in Cramlington do most of the work.

'It's taking the library to people's homes – because they can't get out to come to the library. But it's more than that. Much more. The volunteers. They become friends with the people they visit. They spend time together.

To get the home library service, a reader will be referred to the library by carers, family, district nurses. Or they might ask to sign up themselves, aware their mobility is waning or about to end. An ongoing health issue. Recovery from an operation. The volunteer visits them in their homes, asks the reader what they like to read, then go back to Cramlington to choose some books.

Maggie is one of the volunteers. She is in her sixties, silver hair swept back off her face. She looks like a young version of Hannah Hauxwell. She's been involved for a few years, but not over the last few months. Her partner died in October. Her brother died just before Christmas. She's had a hard time sorting things out and wasn't able to volunteer for four months. But now she's back. Ready to take up where she left off.

I ask her how she got into volunteering with the libraries.

'I'm not new to libraries. My first job – at eighteen – was in libraries. in the city.'

'Newcastle?'

'Not the one they're knocking down now. The one they knocked down before that.' She laughs. 'I worked there until I met the love of my life and had my four children. After the kids were all here I went to go back to the library, for a job, but they wouldn't have me.'

'Really?'

'They had a policy. No married women.' She smiles. 'It was run by this old fossil of a man. His office was on the top floor. In an attic. It was very remote. He was very remote. No married women! One day I was asked to go up to his office. I was on my own in the department. It wouldn't normally have been a job for me. But, because I was the only one there, I took a message for him. In his office. And that the end I

said “Okay, Sir.” The next day my line manager took me aside and said this chap was disgusted with me. I asked why. She said he hated Americanisms. I’d said “Okay”. I was asked not to use the word again.’

Sue had arranged for me to visit three people with Maggie: Mrs Dexter, Mr Robson and Mr Dixon.

‘It’s a shame about Mr Dixon,’ Maggie tells me. We are in her car now. A smart boxy family carrier. ‘He was a fascinating man. Really fascinating. He was in submarines in the war. A lieutenant, I think. He used to paint. Beautiful pictures. And make huge model boats. And one model of the submarines he used to serve in. You should have seen them. He liked maritime books. Sea stories. That kind of thing.’ Maggie looks straight at me. ‘He died. Lovely man.’

We drive for less than a minute to visit our first home library user. Mrs Dexter.

The house is on a nice estate. Bungalows. Lots of space. Neat lawns. We pull up in her drive.

‘She’s stopped using her car now,’ Maggie says. ‘We can use her drive.’

Mrs Dexter is in her eighties. Her voice invites us into her living room, as she emerges from the kitchen using a wheel frame, closing the door behind her. She is tall, when standing. Her trousers are blue. Her white tee-shirt has blue embroidered flowers on it. She wears a brace on her left leg and foot.

Mrs Dexter’s living room is medium sized and warm. A gas fire comes on and off automatically, presumably fitted with a thermostat. There are no animals, but lots of flowers. An amaryllis in full bloom. A delicate purple orchid, flowering too. The sun casts shadows and bright light across her well-hoovered carpet. There are three photographs in frames. Grandchildren.

Mrs Dexter immediately gives up a pile of books to Maggie: Catherine Cookson, Jude Devereaux. Maeve Binchy.

‘What would you like this time?’ Maggie says.

‘Anything,’ she says. Then she looks at me, smiling. ‘I read practically everything. I’m either easy to please – or I’m stupid.’

The gas fire comes on again.

‘I don’t mind so long as it’s a good story,’ she says. ‘Not Mills & Boon. I like a bit of background.’

Since Mrs Dexter was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 2003, she has been unable to go to the library alone on her scooter in the bad weather. She uses the home library service in the winter only, scootering the half mile herself in the warmer months.

‘But books are something I would have difficult without,’ she says. ‘Especially in the winter. I have a neighbour who picks things up from the shops for me. But it’s different asking her to get me a pint of milk or a loaf of bread on her way round Sainsbury’s: different to asking her to go and get me some books, to take the time to choose the books that I would like to read. It’s not a two-minute thing. But sometimes I feel like I’m making an inconvenience of myself – asking the library to bring books to my house. But I wouldn’t see them otherwise. Not until the summer.’

‘It’s not an inconvenience, Mrs Dexter,’ Maggie says. ‘I like doing it.’

‘And there’s the added thing of having a natter,’ Mrs Dexter says. ‘That’s important too.’

There’s a knock at the door.

‘That’s my pills,’ Mrs Dexter says. ‘Would you…’

Maggie goes to the door and brings in a large paper chemist bag of drugs.

Then Maggie and Mrs Dexter get down to business. Mrs Dexter has a list of authors she'd like Maggie to fin for her: Rebecca Shaw, Joan Johnson, Audrey Howard, Sarah Challis.

Back in the car, Maggie is telling me about working in libraries in the 1950s. How the bosses used to sent her out of the library with a suitcase of books – to a row of cottages. 'I've been doing the home library service for half a century,' she laughs.

'I was eighteen,' she says. 'Most of the ladies were miner's wives, widows. They wanted Catherine Cookson. Books like that. They were very popular round here. Catherine Cookson country. They still are. I used to wheel the books down in the suitcase and take them to the ladies one by one. Just like now.' She pauses. 'You know, I haven't; thought about that for years. You're taking me down memory lane.'

We turn off a main road. Through an estate to Scarborough Court, an old people's home.

'It's a nice one, this,' Maggie says. 'It's funded by the Masons.'

'Who are we here to see?'

'Mr Robson.'

I think immediately of Bobby Robson, the last manager of Newcastle United, once of England, PSV Eindhoven, Ipswich, Porto, Barcelona. And Pop Robson. Bryan Robson. It's a big North East name.

In the lobby at Scarborough Court there is an oil painting of a man down a pit. He's kneeling, a lamp lighting up the blackness. And on a shelf under the picture there's a set of coal sculptures. Men with picks and shovels. Busts of men in miners' helmets. More mining motifs. Everywhere you go and every conversation you have, the mines come up. Underneath these homes and libraries and streets, there are

caverns dug out by men. No longer working, but present in the memory, like they are in the ground. I read somewhere that they don't just go under the ground, but under the sea.

We are led across a parquet floor, up a wide staircase, a reproduction oil painting of the Queen. Through a door. Along a corridor.

'That was where Mr Dixon was,' Maggie says. 'Lovely man.'

Mr Robson's door, opposite Mr Dixon's, is closed. Maggie knocks and goes straight in.

Mr Robson is sat in a brown upright chair, facing the doorway, not the television. His hands are together on his lap. His hair is silver and fine, combed over his forehead. He has watchful eyes. He is wearing a purple waistcoat, black trousers. There is a pair of glasses and a pen in his shirt pocket. He looks at us, confused.

'Hello. It's Maggie,' Maggie shouts. 'From the home library service.'

'Oh, hello.'

'This is Tom. He's a writer.'

Mr Robson looks at me, then Maggie.

'I've come to pick up your books.'

'Right.'

'Can we sit down?'

We stand for a moment. There's a large TV in the corner. Pictures of horses. An old clock. Another massive amaryllis in flower. A blown up photocopy of *Private Eye* on the table by the television. Along with a TV guide, large print too.

Mr Dixon smiles at me and pauses. 'You'd better have that one,' he says, pointing at a narrow wheelchair. 'You've got slimmer hips.'

I sit on the wheelchair. Maggie sits opposite Mr Robson on a chair.

There is an overwhelming smell of disinfectant.

‘Are these your books?’ Maggie says.

‘Yes.’

Maggie picks up the books. *The Map That Changed the World* by Simon Winchester. *Titanic Survivor* by Violet Jessop. A novel by Ngaio Marsh.

‘Now,’ says Maggie. ‘You like non-fiction. Not fiction. Is that right?’

‘I like whodunits,’ Mr Robson says, slightly indignant.

‘Right,’ Maggie takes out a pen. ‘What sort?’

‘Not the modern ones. Full of psychiatry nonsense. I chuck them aside. I prefer a good biography to them. But not all biographies. Some of them are bloody terrible.’

‘But you like this?’ Maggie holds up the Ngaio Marsh novel.

‘I’m not very pleased with that, no… but I’ll finish it, I suppose.’

Maggie makes a few notes.

I am starting to wonder if I am ill, My head’s all fuzzy and there’s a trademark heat in my throat. The beginning of a cold.

‘Is this library service useful?’ I ask.

‘I imagine it’s very useful,’ he says. ‘But she’s only been the once.’

Maggie explains that her partner became ill and died, just after she first came to see Mr Robson. She’s been unable to volunteer for months.

Mr Robson nods.

‘Do you get the *Private Eye* from the library?’ I say. ‘Blown up.’

‘What?’

I repeat myself.

‘No. My son-in-law does it for me,’ Mr Dixon says.

‘So you need large print?’ Maggie says, cutting in.

‘I do.’

Maggie makes a note.

‘It’s hard to find non-fiction in large print. But we’ll try.’

‘I like whodunits,’ Mr Robson says.

Maggie nods.

‘It’s my eyes,’ Mr Robson says. ‘When you get old your eyes deteriorate rapidly. You’ll see. Mine are deteriorating rapidly. I’m nearly blind. Old people lose their eyesight. And I’m one of the young ones in here. I’m eighty-three.’

I notice a pair of binoculars on the window ledge. And a guide to British birds. There are two small trees and a bank of grass outside his window. Then a dual carriageway.

‘Does your wife come to visit you in here, Mr Robson?’ Maggie asks.

‘She does. Five times a week. She comes in a taxi.’

Mr Robson’s only been in Scarborough Court for a few months.

‘She’s disabled. She couldn’t look after me once I came out of the hospital,’ he says,

‘And what job did you do, Mr Robson?’ Maggie again.

‘I was at RVI.’

‘What’s RVI?’ I ask.

‘The Royal Victoria Infirmary,’ he says. ‘I was a surgeon. My wife was an anaesthetist.’

Maggie asks Mr Robson some more questions about reading. she has a firm brief. Non-fiction and whodunits.

‘And you want large print?’

‘Yes.’

‘Have you tried using a magnifier?’ Maggie says.

‘I’ve tried… I don’t know about them.’

‘They’re good. I have a spare one at home. I bought it for… for someone else. But I can bring it in.’

‘A friend of mine was a bomber pilot,’ Mr Robson says. ‘He used a page magnifier.’

‘Shall I bring it in?’

‘Yes. I’ll try it. Thank you.’

We stand up to leave. Mr Robson carries on smiling, looking straight ahead.

‘If you need anything,’ Maggie says. ‘Any books. Just call me. I can usually come out in the next couple of days.’

‘Thank you.’

When we leave and I close the door to see the smile on Mr Robson’s drops quickly.

‘Cramlington is all mines. Or it was. Now the mine is a ski slope and a playground. It’s all service industries now. But the council has invested a lot in housing and schools People think it’s a new town. Not an old village at all. Do you know, back when it was all mining, the books didn’t used to last. We had a very high turnover. The books would get so dirty. Because of the coal dust off the readers, believe it or not.’

I am back with Sue. In her car. A bank of clouds has filled the sky for the sea.

‘They said it might snow later,’ Sue says.

‘You get it quite bad up here,’ I say, worrying about being stranded a hundred miles from home in a North Sea snowstorm feeling a definite fever coming on now.

‘Not like it used to be,’ Sue says.

We are driving to see Mrs Bradford. Mrs Bradford lives in Blyth, seven miles north of Cramlington. She wants to sign up for the home library service. But Sue is having trouble with the navigation. She circles a street on a photocopy map and asks me to navigate.

I take us on a roundabout route, past the ports, a row of wind turbines facing Holland.

‘You can see it’s a very poor area,’ Sue says. ‘Lots of unemployment. Very young people with children. There’s a lot of poverty.’ We drive past pairs of men walking the streets into an estate. I guide Sue past a football field, a sharp right, into a sheltered housing estate, twelve to fifteen bungalows for retired people.

The clouds are heavy now. Looming.

‘Mrs Bradford used to use the branch library here,’ Sue says. ‘But they’ve merged it with the school library – so it’s in the school. She doesn’t like that. And she’s given up driving. So she needs us. She says she’s got lots to say to you.’

We walk through the estate. Neat houses, neat fences, neat gardens. Extra rails in fixed every porch and doorway.

Sue carries her file. Mrs Bradford’s file.

‘I always feel like a social worker, doing this.’

The door opens. A lady in her eighties. Strong face. Clear eyes. Dark grey hair, curly. A blue-green cardigan with gold button. Black skirt. Tights. House shoes.

‘Come in. Come in.’

Mrs Bradford leads us through a hall way, three doors coming off it. The bedroom. The bathroom. We go into the sitting room. A sofa with matching armchair. And an orthopaedic chair. Small statues. Pictures on the walls. Warm.

‘Sit where you like.’

We sit. Sue rests her file on her knee. And then we’re talking about Leylandi. Mrs Bradford’s sitting room is dark. A row of tress or bushes is blocking the light. And she doesn’t have her light on.

As at Mrs Dexter’s, there are photos of grandchildren on the walls and on mantle pieces. The house is neat and tidy. She has a side table by her armchair – a TV remote, a telephone, a small pile of books.

Sue is doing her introductory patter. ‘As you can’t get to the library, we want to bring as much of the library to you as we can.’

Mrs Bradford nods, focusing on Sue’s mouth.

‘And to start, I need to get an idea what sort of books you like,’ Sue says.

‘Sorry?’

‘What sort of books do you like?’

Mrs Bradford nods. ‘I cannot stand Catherine Cookson,’ she says.

I laugh.

Mrs Bradford glances over at me, smiling.

‘Do you like romance?’ Sue says.

‘No I don’t.’ She pauses. ‘I used to read Barbara Taylor Bradford. But they’re very repetitive. Are you old enough to remember Pearl Buck?’

‘Yes.’

‘I was enchanted by her books. I always wanted to go to Egypt and China. I got to Egypt. Not China.’

‘Any other kind of fiction?’

‘I like a good detective story,’ Mrs Bradford smiles. ‘But not gangsters.’

Sue takes notes.

‘And not too much peculiar sex,’ Mrs Bradford says suddenly. ‘I’ve read some books. Well, if they were mine, I’d chuck them out. I had a book out once. There was a girl, two boys and a dog. And they were walking. This is the beginning of the novel. Then they started trying to get the dog to have sex with the girl. If I’d been in the old house – with the open fire – it’d have been on there. I’d have burned it and paid for it.’

‘I read a book once,’ I say. ‘It was the same. This girl – a child – was abducted on the streets and it described what two men did to her in their car. I was furious. I tore it up.’

Mrs Bradford nods. ‘It’s a natural thing, sex,’ she says. ‘It’s part of life. But…’

We all consider the exchange in silence.

‘I like Ian Rankin,’ Mrs Bradford says. ‘I used to like Maigret.’

Sue waits for a moment.

‘Anything else?’

‘I like a decent travel book.’

‘Like a story? Or travel guides?’

‘Like Bill Bryson. Something funny.’

‘Okay.’

‘Anything else?’

‘I sometimes get a recipe book.’

‘Do you like cookery?’

‘I do. But not these celebrity people. Oh no. I hate celebrity chefs.’

‘And would you like to borrow films? DVDs? Some music?’

‘No. I’ve got the television. That’s enough.’

‘Do you like large print or ordinary?’

‘Ordinary.’

‘Do you like paperback or hardback?’

‘I don’t like paperbacks. They fall to pieces.’

Sue explains the service to Mrs Bradford. A volunteer will come to see her once every four weeks. She can have up to twenty books time. The volunteer will get a feel for what she likes, chat to her, make suggestions. Any requests from other libraries are free. There are no fines. If she has any queries she can pass them on to her volunteer. They can take it from there.

Mrs Bradford smiles and says thank you.

‘Is there anything else?’ Sue says.

‘Just to say… I used to like the library,’ Mrs Bradford speaks clearly and slowly. ‘But it’s gone to pot since it moved to the school. And that’s finished for me. There’s very little for the public. I always feel like an intruder. In the school. I don’t know why they closed the little library.’ She pauses and looks up at the leylandi towering over her short garden.

‘And then I had to give up my driving. Well, I chose to. I was in a shop one day. I walked into some crates. Fell over. Was laid up for eighteen months. And I decided top stop driving. If I’m in a car. It’s too risky. It’s a shame about the little library. I’ve always used the library. My father used to go to the one in town. To the reading room. There were newspapers there. Nobody could afford newspapers in those days. I used to read them too. With my father. I was quite happy there. It was a

meeting place for the men. My father wasn't taken on after the 1924-1926 mine strike. But the pitmen weren't stupid. They wanted to learn. As I got older I used to meet my friends at the library. We'd get books and go on to the cinema.'

Mrs Bradford looks at Sue. 'But they're not like that now. Libraries.'

Crime

The prison library is medium sized. At one end low shelves of books and a desk: at the other a classroom, partitioned off by glass. Through the glass I can see a ring of twenty men. Category A. Some are leaning forward, hands clasped in front of them. Others leaning back, hands on the backs of their heads. They're waiting for us.

'What are some of them in for?' I asked James outside the prison walls. I am with James and two other writers, here to deliver a literary event.

'I'll tell you afterwards,' he says. 'If you still want to know.'

James has worked in this prison before. He knows some of the men who are coming to see us.

'Come on,' I say. 'Tell me.'

'You don't want to know.'

And I'm thinking: murderers, armed robbers, grand larcenists.

To get into the prison we had to walk half its circumference, round thirty foot dark high walls, topped by coils of barbed wire. The prison looks like a castle the from outside. You can see it from across the city. Fortifications. Towers. Impregnable walls. Tiny windows. It's made for keeping people in and out. Walking round the walls I could see cell windows in the upper floors. I imagined faces looking down on me.

To get in we didn't go through the massive wooden doors – again like something from a castle I might have visited as a kid. We went in through the

reception centre: a prefab-looking building that juts out of the stone walls: stone walls that on closer inspection looks like an cliff face.

Suddenly I was nervous. The atmosphere was edgy. The prison officers, behind an imposing desk, were surly and monosyllabic. There were lots of people around us. Coming in. Going out. This space felt almost haunted by its being the interface between freedom and captivity.

‘We don’t know anything about this.’ The prison guard. A middle-aged man with dark hair and lines around his mouth.

‘We’re writers,’ I say. ‘We’ve come to do a reading.’

‘This is a prison.’

‘In the library,’ I say.

‘Passport.’

I fumble in my bag, finding it, hoping I didn’t bring my daughter’s. He gestures at me, like I’m being too slow.

The guard nods.

‘Well no-one told us.’

Ahead of me several families are being frisked by male and female guards. I catch a woman’s eye and look away quickly. She looks agitated.

‘Put your right index finger on here.’ The guard pushes a small plastic box towards me, something not unlike what you’d have to slip your credit card into. A red light reads my finger print. I think about my civil liberties, but the look in the guard’s eye suggests I do exactly what he says. In fact, he’s probably got his crushing answer ready for me to say just that. Then it’s my left index finger. Then my right again.

‘Look into the camera.’

There's a surveillance camera on the wall. It moves to face me. I look up at it, trying to disguise my unease.

'Bag.'

I hand another guard my bag. They put it through a scanner.

At this point I could have made a joke about duty free allowances.

The librarian comes to meet us at this point. She is smiling, happy and welcoming. I can't tell you her name or tell you the name of the prison, otherwise this chapter would be illegal.

'Did you get in okay? No problems?' she says.

'Yes thanks,' we all say.

She leads us through a metal door. The rattle of her keys and the noise from the slam of the door just like the opening credits of *Porridge*.

Norman Stanley Foster…

Then along the inside of the thirty-foot high wall, numbers marked ten foot up on the concrete. 15. 16. 17. 18.

It wouldn't be accurate to say that I felt scared. I knew that the prison guards would protect us if anything happened. James had told me that. And the librarian was there too. But with all the doors shut behind me, the fences and walls, the small boxy spaces and corridors, I felt uneasy. I didn't event try to imagine what it would like to be an inmate.

We walked to the library. All the way prisoners were friendly. Mopping the floors, carrying laundry, working in the kitchen, they smiled and nodded, greeting us. And we greet them back.

I read signs on the way: What to do if someone has a drugs overdose. A warning about miniature handguns in circulation. Mug-shots of the particularly frightening prisoners.

And now we are in the library.

The prison library looks like any other library could. The only difference is that all the borrowers are men. In this prison.

We make our way into the room, some of the men stare into space, others nod half in acknowledgement.

The men. A short but muscular man with a hard stare, his head tipped back, eyes half closed. A tall man in a black tee-shirt with no hair. His face unmoving. A man with an eighties flat top, blonde-dyed hair, an orange complexion. He looks a bit like Joe Pesci. A young man in glasses. A beard not concealing a large scar across his throat. A short dark haired man, fifty-plus but still handsome, putting his hand out to shake mine.

And I'm thinking, again, What did they do?

This is a serious prison, I know. There are very notorious people in here. Prolific serial killers. Messianic murderers. Child abductors and killers. I'm pretty sure none of them are with us today. I'd know their faces like I know the faces of Tony Blair, Margaret Thatcher and John Major.

We sit down, ready to begin.

As we are officially introduced to the prisoners I notice for the first time a rumbling sound. It's more of a vibration than a sound. A generator or air conditioning, I expect. It reminds me of being on a ferry, like my feet are not on solid ground.

On the walls there are posters for a programme called Family Man, a photo of a tattooed man leaning over a little girl, his lips touching her hair, a book in front of them.

We talk about our book. It's called *Four Fathers*. Eight stories by four writers: two each, one about our relationship with our dad, the other about our relationship with our children. The story I read from is about the IVF my wife and I had, the invasive surgery I had to have: a testicle temporarily removed from the scrotum and sliced, in brief. (I'm only telling you this because it relates to what comes next.)

The men watch, talking sometimes, but listening most of the time.

After I've read, the oldest man, standing out at sixty plus among men in their twenties, uncrosses his legs and says my story reads like the memoirs of Joseph Mengle.'

The other three read and talk about their stories. And then we take questions.

One of the prison workers – the man who runs Family Man – asks what advice we would give to the men being away from their children, barely able to see them. How can they engage with them better?

I'm about to offer a pat answer about talking, hugging, reading, writing letters, etc. But a prisoner gets in first.

'You can't ask them that. How the hell should they know? They're out. They see their kids every bloody day.'

Other men murmur approval.

The Family Man man pushes me for an answer.

'He's right,' I say. 'I can't imagine it. How would I know?'

The Family Man man looks disappointed at me. I have to weigh it up. Say something potentially borne of my ignorance that might or might not help or shy away, unclear and unsure. In the end I shrug. My priority is to have the men like me.

We break for tea and biscuits.

The vocal prisoner comes up to me.

‘I had IVF with my wife,’ he said.

‘Right,’ I say, surprised, but not sure why.

‘I didn’t have all that done, though. I had the needle in my bollocks.’

‘Shit,’ I say. ‘I wouldn’t do that. That’s why they had to operate. I wouldn’t stay still. Did it work?’

‘Yes. First time.’

‘Well done. That’s great.’

‘I’ve never seen her outside. She was born a month after I came in here. A year ago.’

‘I’m sorry. That’s hard.’

‘I’m on closed visits too.’

‘What’s that?’

‘You can’t touch your kids.’

My eyes fill up. I mask it, say something dramatic, another swearword probably. ‘That’s awful,’ I say.

Another man comes to join us. After the unsucessful Q&A the prisoners are mobbing us all individually. This one’s mid-twenties. He’s tall with short black hair, good-looking and fit.

‘Have you ever tried to find your mum?’

Something else I’d talked about in the story. I’m adopted.

‘No.’

‘I did. I was adopted.’

‘Did you find her?’

‘I did.’

‘Shit,’ I say, aware that I am doing all this swearing because I think they’d like me more swearing. ‘What was she like.’

‘Good. I didn’t like her much. But it was good. She comes in to see me. Are you going to?’

‘Try to find her? No.’

‘Why not?’

I tell him I think my mum was my mum. I tell him my wife wants me to, but that I can’t be bothered.’

‘Yeah, right,’ he says.

‘I can’t.’

‘I can see it in your eyes,’ he says. ‘You’re scared.’

‘Am I?’ I’m not bothered he’s said this. I don’t think he’s right. I really believe I can’t be bothered.

‘You should do it,’ he says. ‘What about your little girl? She’ll want to know where you come from, where she comes from.’

‘I’ll tell her,’ I say. ‘From my mum and my dad.’

‘But that’s not blood. They’re not your blood.’

‘Do you think it’s so important?’

‘I do. You can’t deny it. You should think about it. You’re scared and you can’t admit you’re scared.’

We shake hands.

I take a break for the toilet. The toilet is a small room, six foot by three. While I'm in there there's a massive bang. An adjacent door being slammed and locked. For a second I think I'm being locked in. It feels horrible. Claustrophobic. And that's just for a second.

When I get back there's someone else who wants to talk. Short. Blonde dyed hair. The Joe Pesci look-alike I noticed at the start.

'Have you heard about Story Book Dads?' he says.

They all have something particular they want to talk about. They all know that there's only so much time, that they'll be led off back to their cells in a few minutes.

'No,' I say. Then I look at the Family Man posters. 'Is it that?'

'No. Something else. They get you to read a book out for your kids. The library. They tape it. Then you send it home for them to listen to.'

'That's brilliant,' I say. 'Have you done it?'

'For my daughter.'

'How old is she?'

'Six.'

'What's her name?'

'Cory,' he says, looking at the floor.

I nod, not sure what I should ask next.

'I choose a book in the library,' says Joe Pesci. 'Then they record me reading it. Then they take it away to record sound effects over it. Noises. I sent it to her for her birthday. *The Gruffalo*. She writes to me about it. I want to do it again. But they won't let me.

The librarian will tell me about Story Book Dads on the way out of the prison, when the men had been moved out to their cells. It's a big hit. They coach the dads to

read the story in an animated way, if they need it. Then they practice before the recording.

‘I’ve heard some great stories,’ she will say. ‘The first thing the kids do when they hear the tape is cry and get scared. Then they calm down. One girl keeps her dad’s CD under her pillow at night – so she doesn’t lose it. Another – a boy – took it into school and the teacher played it to the whole class. The men tell me these things. They come to me and beg me to do it again. “Please let me have another go. It’s really helping me with my kids.” But it’s limited. There isn’t the budget.’

‘That’s lovely,’ I say. And I mean it. I’m thinking how my daughter reacted when I did a video of me reading stories for her for when I went away with work for two weeks. My wife told me she watched it every night and told me what she had done that day. And that was just for two weeks. Not however long these men are in for.

I can’t imagine being away from my daughter for more than two weeks. Not even able to touch her.

‘It’s more than lovely,’ the librarian says, slightly irritated. ‘Look at the effect it can have on the relationship of the child and the man. That he can read her a bedtime story every night. So that when he comes out he’s not quite such an alien figure. It gives them a better chance of staying together as a family.’

She looks me in the eye.

‘There’s 125,000 kids in the UK with a parent in prison. Can you believe that? 50% of those families break down when the parent is released. Fifty percent! Story Book Dads can help reduce that. We have a reading group too.’

‘What do they read?’

‘*To Kill a Mockingbird*. *Football Factory*. It doesn’t matter as long as they enjoy it. All this builds confidence, helps the men to learn how to communicate better. It sets them up for when they’re on the outside. A better chance of a better family life. Less chance they’ll re-offend.’

‘So is the library used lot.’

‘Not by all the men. I try really hard. But a lot of them just think it’s for clever people. Or old people – they really think that. But once I get them in I can get them hooked. Then they can’t get enough of the books and they’re complaining to me al the time.’

Then the men have to go. The guards come for them. They troop off, friendly, every one of them coming to shake our hands.

We go out through the doors and cages and round the walls again.

We have our fingerprints scanned again.

Outside it is cold, but you can appreciate the space, the light around you.

As we leave a prison van arrives, with its blacked out windows. The kind you see leaving magistrates courts in cities every day of the week.

Talk to James/Joanne – his stories of working in the prison library, the procedures, what was good about it, what was bad

Parc: jean@cockel.freeserve.co.uk / 01656 300200 ext 4260 about books lent, stories, etc.

Bethnal Green

It's a cold day in Bethnal Green. I come out of the tube station and stop to look round at buildings and trees and people. Rain spits from clouds that are low and slow-moving over London. The roads are busy with cars, red buses, white vans, motorbikes, cycles, trucks. This street corner is familiar. I've been here before.

My first knowledge of London was Bethnal Green. My sister lived with an actor in a council flat here in the eighties. I came down to stay with her dozens of times. I was sixteen and I was allowed to drink cans at her place. She gave me cigarettes. She and the actor would take me to bars. But Bethnal Green was a scary place. I was from a reasonably posh part Leeds, so the apparent grim East End was a culture shock for me. Added to that, my sister was repeatedly burgled while she lived here. She was pretty sure it was her neighbours. They took the rings and necklaces my mum had left her. My sister moved soon after.

Bethnal Green Library is in a park, a large open space of green off Cambridge Heath Road. It is a wide building on two floors. Made of old red brick it has a balcony, pillars at the entrance and large well-proportioned windows. To the left of it there is a large fenced off area. The park entrance features a palm tree and rows of clipped rosemary bushes edging the borders filled with dormant roses. On the lawn – around a huge tree – there is a circle of crocuses, scattered like fallen fruit under its branches.

To approach the library you walk down a path, with trees on either side. An avenue. The path is lit by several old-style street lamps at night. I felt at peace in the garden. It was the opposite to everything I remembered Bethnal Green to be.

I stand – like I always do – in front of the library to get an idea of what it and its setting is like. Several people come by. Muslims in hats and robes. A white man on a bicycle. A woman in a headscarf pushing a buggy. I heard birdsong, look at a war memorial, watch a squirrel sitting in an old Hawthorne, its tail up as it stares across the park. The sun casts a pale February light across everything.

It's nice here. I'm surprised.

I go in.

The library entrance is beautiful. Polished wooden panelling on all the walls, but enough light coming in through the doors for it not to seem too dark. After a staircase on the left and two sets of double doors – locked – there are two entrances straight ahead into the library. One with an enamel IN sign screwed into place over the door, the other with OUT. On one side of the entrance area there is a large framed photo of hundreds, maybe a thousand, children stood in front of the library. The caption reads 'Photograph of some of the children users of the Public Library, taken September 1922.' Opposite the photograph is a plaque to mark the opening of the library: 13th October that same year. The children look smart and clean and excited.

There are not many users in the library today. No more than ten.

The staff are all busy, sorting books and papers. Helping customers to use the internet, find a book in the local studies section. Everything is working with a a quiet studied purpose – until Giles arrives.

There is a shout of 'Giles!' Then 'How lovely to see you!'

A man walks into the library, waving and smiling broadly. He has a full head of white hair and a white goatie beard. He wears a blue and white striped shirt and a brown tie, wool. A jacket and a pair of jeans. He looks like Simon Cowell. The four staff cluster round him.

I met Giles in Bethnal Green Library the previous summer, when he was running a series of author events to get children into the library during the six week holidays. I was one of the authors, doing a football quiz and penalty shoot out for ten-year-old Chelsea, Man U and Arsenal fans.

But Giles retired late last year and, as a result, I thought it was going to be difficult to track him down. It was him I wanted to show me round this library. He has worked this area for over thirty years. He knows what libraries used to be and what they have become, especially here in Tower Hamlets, where something of a revolution has been taking place. He also knows his history. And I wanted to scatter the chapter with references to the Kray Twins, Jack the Ripper and other grim East End stuff.

In the main area of the library there is a sense of calm, even with the adulation Giles is receiving. It doesn't feel that different to being in the park outside. I decide that the calm is something to do with the building. It is one of the finest old-style libraries in the UK. The ceiling is eggshell blue with white plaster decoration, garlands weaving like vines above the readers. Large windows in the ceiling let light down into the space. A crest at either end depicts a couple looking out over a stile, a dog at their feet. A view of Bethnal Green before London spread out and filled the space between here and Essex. There are four men's heads in plaster at one end of the library: Karl Marx. Charles Darwin, Wagner and William Morris.

I go over to Giles. He's happy to see me. He tells me I'm looking well. He asks about my family and hopes I've had a good journey down from the north. This is one nice man. As we sit down at a table towards the back of the library, one of the staff comes over and offers us tea. This is one nice library.

‘This part of Bethnal Green,’ Giles says, ‘has always been the centre of the community for the borough. It’s on the corner of Roman Road – the original road the Romans build coming east out of London, to Essex and the sea – and Cambridge Heath Road. So it’s an important spot. And a great site for the library.’

‘So was it built as a library?’ I assumed it was. It’s perfect for the job.

‘No. Not at all. Before it was the library it was a mental institution. They called it Bedlam.’

‘What?’

‘Bedlam.’

‘*The* Bedlam.’ I wonder if I’ve come across the library story to end all library stories. The ultimate madhouse that is now a branch library. But it’s not.

‘No. It was a local name,’ Giles says. ‘It had other local names too, I’m sure.’

Giles looks around the room, clearly happy to be back here among the deep shelves and ornate plasterwork.

‘Let’s look round. This is good, but upstairs…’

We go on a tour of the library. At the end of the main library space there is a wide wooden door. The kind of wide wooden door they don’t make any more. We go past to a rack of huge shelves, eighteen inches deep, where they used to keep the materials to make the books ready for the library. Before that part of librarianship was outsourced.

Giles opens an outside door. ‘This is the yard.’

It’s the enclosure I’d seen from outside, a tall wire fence with jagged metal and barbed wire on top.

‘I saw the fence from outside,’ I say.

‘It’s right in the middle of the estate. The library, I mean. There’s been some throwing of stones.’

Giles squints at the top floors of the flats over the fence.

‘Is I rough here?’ I say.

‘There have been some incidents in the park,’ he says. ‘Muggings and attempted rapes.’

‘Right,’ I say.

‘I remember once we had to frighten a person off. In the early stages of a rape. We reported it. But I doubt they got anybody.’

‘What happened?’

‘There was a commotion. Some of the library staff went out into the park. We scared him away. That could have been nasty.’

Giles takes me up a wide flight of stone stairs. There are huge circular sky lights to let the sunshine in. In addition the walls are not solid walls but glass partitions so that light makes its way everywhere; and I can’t help but think of it as a metaphor for what a library does, casting lights into people’s minds.

The walkways remind me of Leeds Library – tiles across the floor, orange and white.

‘It’s not like the floors in the Idea Stores,’ I say. Giles is going to take me to the nearby Idea Store after we’ve had a look round this library. The Idea Store is about as modern as a library can get. All primary colours and sheet glass windows.

‘No indeed,’ Giles says.

The walls curve. The architecture and design beautiful. There is a sense of something solid and permanent in this library. Of a building fashioned with love for

what was going to go inside. Then I remember what its real purpose was: a madhouse. I must stop trying to find fancy metaphors for the architecture of this place.

‘There’s space in here…’ Giles says, trying to lead me into a large hall. But we have to pass a corner to reach the space he wants me to see. The corner is tucked away. It’s all smashed windows and huge sheets of paint peeling off the walls.

‘There’s some beautiful peeling paint here,’ I say.

‘Yes. This part is not been kept up. And these windows ave been smashed from the estate over the wall.’

‘But do you spend thousands of pounds sorting this out or do you buy books?’ I ask, trying to put Giles at ease. I think he’s a bit embarrassed.

‘That is the choice,’ he says.

Giles leads me into the space he wanted me to see: the main hall. It is huge and could easily seat two hundred. The floor is parquet. There are beautiful windows. In all the space is a hundred foot by thirty foot, with a hollow wooden stage at one end. There’s a piano. A beautiful clock. Holes in the wall for a film projector. The coving and the ceiling is beautiful floral plasterwork. You can imagine Dickens doing one of his marathon readings in here.

‘In the past we held important functions here,’ Giles says.

The room feels good. That calm again. The light. The peace. The space.

‘It’s an ideal room for community use,’ he goes on. ‘The films they showed were advertised once a week. But gradually the numbers reduced.’

‘You could do stuff now,’ I say. ‘Get some big authors in. You’d pack it out.’

‘We would,’ Giles says, then corrects himself. ‘They would.’

He starts walking again, towards the end of the room. ‘Legend has it that there is a ghost – or ghosts – left over from the time it was an institution.’

I already knew this. He told me when I first came here I even asked him if he could arrange for me to stay in the library overnight.

‘Sightings?’

‘Some staff have claimed to see it in the evening hours.’

‘Like what?’

‘Sort of shivery shapes,’ Giles says. ‘And noises that can’t be accounted for. Wailing they said. Which you could associate with a mental institution, wouldn’t you?’

‘You would.’

‘But I’ve never had such an experience. Ghosts I mean,’ Giles says. I’ve never had an uneasy feeling here. In fact, quite the opposite. I’ve felt very at home here.’

‘Are you disappointed?’

Giles laughs. Then his face goes serious.

‘I think it’s a very individual thing,’ he says. ‘How you approach things in life. I think if you’re a little anxious or a little uneasy these things reach out to you somehow.’

Giles began his library career proper in the this library in 1975; after he’d passed his probation. He worked as a basic library assistant, learning the profession and doing his chartered librarianship while working in the library.

‘This was one of my happiest libraries,’ he says.

‘Was it different then?’

‘Oh yes,’ he says. ‘It was far more hierarchical. And the dress code was strict. Shirt and tie for men. And trousers were frowned up on ladies. You were dealing with the public. They expected it. You had to look your best.’

I think of the staff working here now. They're smart. But not 1975 smart.

'Giles travelled across from south west London to Bethnal Green throughout his career, as he did today to meet me. He was always asked why he did that: struggled across the whole city when he could have worked in leafy Richmond.

'I did it because I loved the people here. I loved the staff. I loved the place. The sense of community. People were so welcoming. I felt like I was part of the East End family. They made me part of it. But in other parts of London it's very cold. Like where I'm from. You barely know your neighbour. It's not – well it wasn't – like that here.'

Giles look across the hall, down towards the stage. He frowns.

'But the staff have changed here,' he says. 'In America you have got to have the professional qualifications to work in a library. And we've gone entirely in the opposite direction. They're advertising in particular for people *without* library qualifications. And I feel that is why our libraries are in decline.'

We are onto my pet subject: Libraries are on the slide! What the hell is going on? what can be done to save them?

'Why is it happening?' I say.

'It's partly because of the way it's set up,' Giles says. 'It's run by local authorities. And they're always under pressure financially. And libraries are expensive for staff and stock and premises. So they're always in line for the first cuts.'

'Do you think it's also because libraries are not seen as glamorous?' I say, leading him.

'I think you're right. We don't have the same cache as crime waves and anti-social behaviour. But, then again, you do notice that as soon as there's a threat to

close a local library that people are up in arms. Because, even if you they don't use it, they understand that it's a valuable community asset. So we've got that on our side. '

Giles sees the Libraries Act of 1964 as the problem. That it is forty years out of date.

'It's never been updated,' he says. 'And we've a very different world and a very different service now. The government aren't interested. None of the political parties are interested. And that is a great difference in the United States and other countries. In other countries they realise how important libraries are. And they behave accordingly.'

I run by Giles my view that libraries are forgotten in favour of x and y and z, but that if you a brilliant libraries you'd prevent x and y and z. I quote him the statistics about how reading and literacy there's less chance of mental illness and suicide and murder happening. And that all the attention is paid to things after they happen. A cure not prevention.'

He nods.

Outside the main hall there is a huge stained glass window on the right. The War Memorial. *This window erected by the inhabitants of Bethnal Green commemorates men and women of the borough in the great war and WW2.*

'This was one of the areas that was hit very badly in the second world war,' Giles says.

'Bombed?'

'Yes. Those doodlebug things. They came down. Did you see the plaque at the tube station? That was the site of the worst tube disaster. There was an air raid siren and in the stampede to get down hundreds were crushed. It was the worst single incident like that in the war.' Giles smiles. 'There's a lot of history here.'

There are three panels on the stained glass window: manhood, motherhood and peace.

Before the stairs there is another room, shut off. It's full of scraps of paper, trailing plants and dead petals.

'Was this the reference library?' I ask.

'It was. In the 1970s. A quite room where people could study and it was very well used.'

The room is beautiful. In the half sun natural light it shows off the even more ornate shelving than downstairs. The remaining heavy tomes and the creepers.

'It's not been kept very well,' Giles says.

'I imagine that's where the ghosts reside.'

'I wouldn't be at all surprised.'

On our way down the steps I ask the ultimate question. Seeing as Giles was so happy working here, seeing as he was so good at it, why did he retire?

'I would have gone on,' he says. 'But the changes have come so thick and fast. Well, they keep on cutting out posts. And I felt I couldn't offer my best work under that pressure. I could have gone on for another five years, but the changes are enormous and most of the new staff are agency staff, not qualified librarians. They cut the children's team down from four and a half posts just to me – and I thought that was a statement from the management that children were not so important. And after a while – with taking work home and putting all the hours in – I couldn't offer my best for the children of this borough. And I felt there was no point in making myself ill.'

'Do you miss it?'

'I do.'

‘What do you miss?’

‘Talking to the families, the children. I liked to make sure that everyone felt comfortable in the library. A lot of people didn’t realise what is available here and I made it my job to show everyone.’

Tears form in Giles’ eyes.

On our way out of the library Giles advises two members of the public. One on where to find history books, the other on how long she can use the internet for; and that, yes, it is free.

Giles takes me out of the park, to the noise of Cambridge Heath Road.
He tells me about Bethnal Green. Different to how it was when he was a younger man. Now there’s a large Bangladeshi population. Not so much of the white old population, who have moved outwards into Essex, he says. The noise of cars and vans mean we have to raise our voices to hear each other.

We’re on our way to the Idea Store, down the road. Something different. Something very different. And part of the changes that have driven Giles out of the library service. He shows me the flats, box after box of housing, all built post war after the bombing that flattened the area, when they needed to build housing very quickly.

The Idea Stores have been visited by professionals from all over the world. They’re modern and funky and a storming success. I’ve been to them. They’re great. My only objection is the name: there’s something shameful about dropping the name ‘library’.

But for Giles there’s more to worry about.

‘If I’m honest I think the conversion to Idea Stores has diluted the impact of the library. I mean, I agree with the idea. Merging libraries and adult education, creating a dynamic resource for the community. But the library loses out. The very idea of what a library is for.’

‘And the name?’

‘Yes, I’m unhappy about it. I am. I think that library is an internationally known term. And I feel it does devalue what I feel is at the core. I’ve nothing against computers ort the adult education. But the act of parliament days we should be providing ‘an adequate library service’ and the contention is what’s adequate.

‘But don’t you feel that those extra things bring it closer to being a community centre like what Bethnal Green could be?’

‘It does. But not in the right way. I think the staff now… their job is very different to the librarian’s job. And I don’t feel management have really grasped that.’

‘But the staff,’ I say. ‘They’re mostly young. And being young – and often as not Asian – like the kids who use the library, that would make it more accessible, easier to come in and not feel intimidated?’

We walk past a pub. The Blind Beggar.

‘This,’ Giles says, ‘is where the Kray Twins killed Jack ‘the Hat’ McVittie. And this, up ahead, is Whitechapel Waste. It used to be a marsh land. Now it’s the market.’

The first thing that hits me is the smell: the fish, the veg and the wet take me back, back to the market I went to with my mum, age ten. But it’s different here. The stalls are selling vegetables that I’ve never seen before. They’re pods and leaves and roots. Dark greens. Yellows. Blacks.

Above the market stalls – the red and blue and white stripes flapping in the wind – are the trees in front of the Royal London Hospital. There's no clear sprouting of leaves, but if you look at the trees as one you can see a haze of green, tiny shoots. Spring.

Most of the people walking up and down are Asian. Bangladesh, Giles tells me. But there are black, Somali, Chinese, more Asians with no headwear or the full face covered up.

The shops are busy too. A newsagents selling a rack of serious magazines: New Statesman, Prospect, News Africa.

'Hello boss.'

She's short, probably nearer a girl than a woman. She holds out a MacDonalds paper cup in one hand and small picture of a young boy in the other.

Her face is covered.

'Please money. For baby.'

'No. I'm sorry.' I try to be polite.

'Fifty pence please boss.'

'I haven't got any money,' I say, which is true. 'I'm sorry.'

She doesn't believe me. Her eyes drop to the floor and she goes off.

Then I see there's half a dozen of them. All about the same size, the same headscarf half concealing their faces. One goes up to a large black woman, who pushes past, shaking her head, turning to remonstrate with the girl who has already moved on to the next person.

I step back to see more than just one person. The whole scene is teaming with people. An old white woman pushing a shopping trolley. A black man reading a

newspaper, leaning against a wall. Five Chinese people each with a fan of DVD covers, but of films only in the cinema.

Giles comes for a coffee. I try to buy him lunch to say thank you. But he has to be off. On his way out, as well as being greeted by former colleagues, library users stop and talk to him. Where have you been? We haven't seen you?

Giles explains. He's retired. He doesn't work here any more.

[Need to add descriptions of library and its users – thread it through Sergio interview. Probably need to go and sit in the library and watch people – talk to a few of the punters.]

Sergio is the manager of the Idea Stores in Tower Hamlets. He looks as unlike the cliché of what a senior librarian could look like as could be possible: smart stylish trousers, a casual jacket and a blue and white striped shirt open at the neck. Nice shoes too.

Sergio is, of course, Italian. He knows what he's doing when it comes to his own appearance. And, it seems, the appearance of libraries.

We shake hands. He's happy to see me. Me him. We met three years before.

The first thing he does is thank me for the idea of the football game I gave him then. It's a basic idea: kids take part in a quiz about football reading, then, for every question they get right, they have a penalty to take against me, the writer. Last year I saw an Idea Store video: the Premiership Club, where hundreds of children take part in maths and literacy activities, all disguised as a football fans' club. They'd used my idea: the penalties. I'd tried not to be bitter about it: all ideas must be shared and not

exclusive, to reach as many kids as possible! But a tiny part of me resented it. Until Sergio acknowledged me. My ego stroked, we could get on.

So, this Idea Store: what was it all about?

Sergio smiles.

Library use in Tower Hamlets was low. Really low. With a national average of 50% of people using them, Tower Hamlets was at 20%. One in five people using libraries, rather than one in two. They had to do something about it. So they asked the public. Not just the 20% using the library - but the other 80% too. The public said that they wanted something that suited the needs of the modern day, that libraries were bound up in old fashioned practices. For example, the opening hours that mirrored the working day: useless to most people. Libraries hidden way in side streets in dilapidated old buildings: people were put off or didn't know where they were. All reasons people weren't using libraries.

'We used to have libraries tucked away in old Victorian buildings,' Sergio says. 'Tucked away in little side streets. But for Idea Stores we built libraries in prime locations on the high street, where people can combine the library with trips to the market, the bank, the post office, so it becomes part of their everyday life.'

'So, has it worked?'

'Issues are three or for times as many. Here in Whitechapel we get two or three thousand people a day – we used to get seven eight hundred in the previous library here. So now it's the busiest single library building in London, ahead of Westminster and Swiss Cottage, long-established libraries.'

The Idea Store has only been open eighteen months.

I ask Sergio about the design of the library. I tell him I've just been to Bethnal Green. What is the reason for the Idea Store – a building of glass and wood and metal, all open spaces, a vivid red floor. And why is it not called a library?

'First of all it is much more than a library. It's a mix. It's the adult learning centre. That is equally important. So we do provide learning – formal learning and informal learning.'

'So it's adult education.'

'It is. Adult education. Family learning. It could be anything. From computing to English language to literacy to creative arts, including dance and performing – we have a dance studio here, for example. And complimentary therapies. Massages. A huge range. And some of them are accredited. And all this is integrated. It's not just an add on. It's actually very much all one.'

I ask him about the community. So diverse. What do they do to cater for them?

'First of all we have removed the barriers. Sometimes traditional libraries have physical barriers and non-physical barriers that keep some people out. So, for example, there's lots of glass, people can see in to see what is going on.'

'And the colour,' I say, enthusiastic, wanting him to know I approve.

'Yes, the floor. By the way this is the same floor as they have at Liverpool. At Anfield Stadium.'

'Really?'

'Yes, I did some research there.' Sergio laughs, his face creasing.

'We remove the barriers to make it more inclusive. This is a prime example of social cohesion in practice. If you put a video camera in the library you can see people

from all walks of life, all ages, all ethnic, every single aspect of the community. And that makes us feel proud.

'We keep getting praise. People stop me every five minutes and say "Sergio, you must realise how important this is to be here now. How much it is changing people's lives."'

'Do you think it does? I mean really change people's lives. That's quite a bold claim.'

'It does. It did for me. Libraries. Libraries changed everything for me.'

'Go on.'

'I was about twelve. In Italy. I grew up in Italy.'

'Whereabouts?'

'In the north. Turin. And my mum was quite religious, so she raised me as a Catholic boy. And she used to force me to go to church every Sunday; but that meant less and less to me. Until one day I just stumbled upon the local library. Okay?'

'Yes.'

'And I go in there and say "Wow this is a bit different. I can borrow books." So gradually I grew out of being a church-goer and became a library-goer instead. Because, for me, all the answers I was looking for were more likely to be in the library than in the church. I mean I've got no disrespect for people, believers. And if it works for them absolutely fine: but for me it didn't work.'

'What did it do for you?'

'Books taking me to different places I'd never been before, not physically, but in my mind. And a love of reading which I have always taken with me.'

Sergio smiles. I smile.

‘So when this opportunity came along,’ he says. ‘I thought, wow this is the best of both worlds. It’s the learning bit combined with the library. And it’s about changing people’s quality of life. And here I am.’

Sergio looks around his library. A group of kids comes in under the eye of the two large security guards. The guards say hello to the kids, share a joke.

‘I remember my grandmother, I was at her farm,’ Sergio says. ‘And she called my mum over and said “I’m really concerned about Sergio”. Why? “I see all the time him sitting on the sofa with a book – and his posture is not good,” she said. “And I don’t think reading is good for him.” So it gives you an idea how important reading was in my family, eh? So I become a lover of books. I mean, working here. It’s impossible. I go past and a new display of books is calling take me take me, read me and I say “No, I’ve got some work to do”.

I’m about to thank him, but he wants to go on.

‘Look at those kids who came in just. We need to drop the barriers, so they come in from the market, come in off the street. As you can see there is not a single sign in here that says “Don’t do this.” We don’t have signs banning eating, drinking, using mobile phones. People are allowed to behave in a civilized manner and to be themselves. Just so long as they respect others. As long as they don’t shout into their phones.’

‘So that’s okay. No Shhhh?’

‘I see it in other places, other libraries, the shush culture is still there. The kids come to a library an they’re told to shush shush shush. But they’ve been all day shushing in school. When they come here they can be naturally boisterous, as long as it doesn’t go over the top. We respect people here, so long as they don’t come here

and start throwing cappuccinos about. Again, if we trust people to take a book home, they have coffee at home.'

Norfolk

Norwich's central library is on a hill in the heart of the city centre. To reach it, you need to walk through the back streets of the city, slowly up the hill, catching glimpses of the library and the cathedral next to it.

The library looks very different to how it would have looked to Chief Librarian, Hilary xxxxxx, before 1st August 1994. And different again to how it looked on 1st August. That day he saw a column of smoke and felt an eerie quiet over the city. Driving into work, he flicked his car radio on. Local radio was reporting that his flagship library – and all its invaluable contents – was on fire.

You expect somewhere like Norwich to be perfect, a nice medium sized English town, with nice buildings. But edging round the side streets, off the main shopping drag, there are abandoned shops, smashed windows, cheap DIY stores. It's like anywhere. Its nice bits and its not so nice bits.

But nearer the centre the scene does improve. Winding pedestrianised streets. Nice shops selling nice things – things that people want, but don't need. An old red brick building with ANGLIA TELEVISION in large plastic letters. *We're live from Norwich… it's the quiz of the week…*

It starts to rain in Norwich. Just a few drops at first. I can see the new library now, a palace of glass. Outside it they are setting up the UK touring *Earth from the Air* exhibition which I have already seen in Leeds and Birmingham. Huge images of colourful scenes from around the world. And a massive ice-rink sized map of the world – that you can walk on. A sign says 'Protect our world – please remove your shoes.'

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Norwich has a place in the nation's public library history. Although it can't compete with Warrington, Salford, et. al, it was in fact the first municipality to adopt the 1850 Libraries Act, but only the eleventh to have a modern rate-supported public library.

The Forum is the massive glass building that hosts the Norwich Millennium Library. Two brick towers flank an expanse of glass revealing the BBC's East radio and TV studios, a Pizza Express, the Tourist Information Centre and the library. Although it is raining a bit, there is sun too – and light pours into the Forum.

Inside there is a reverential quiet not unlike a cathedral. But it's more to do with it being 8.45 a.m. than reverence. People cluster on the two flights of shiny metal staircases either side of the library entrance. A couple in their forties talking in a foreign language. A dreadlocked white man, late twenties, leaning against the glass of the library frontage. An older man in his forties, wearing a vivid yellow fluorescent jacket. Another man in his twenties, with a neat little goatie beard.

By the time the library is about to open there are over thirty people waiting. Some are watching the people inside, willing them to open the library up. others are shifting from foot to foot. Others reading. A plasma screen is advertising services: DVD hire, Playstation game hire, a forthcoming author event with Stella Duffy.

The man in the fluorescent jacket has brought a bible out. He's reading it.

The users are peering in now. Forty of fifty of them. They are trying to catch the eye of the cleaner or the huddle of staff talking next to the main information counter. they are checking their watches.

It’s 08:59. Some of the sitting users are on their feet now, swinging bags over shoulders. Making their way closer to the door, where it’s cramped. The are thinking about getting a terminal, about getting on line, about booking the terminal for the whole day. Maybe.

Finally a smiling man opens the door. The users flood past him, most of them hitting the staircase, heading for the first floor.

The ground floor is dominated by DVDs, CDs and an Express section,w here you can find popular books quickly, then issue thm to your self. Books here are aimed at adults and teenagers, behind that area the chilren’s library, a row of portholes leading into a riot of primary colours: a red floor, with blue and yellow bookshelves and fixtires. He place is buzzing even though it’s early. A shcol class having arrived, six year olds in blue cardigans filing in two-by-two.

The huddle of staff disperse. One member of staff – a young woman in a red jumper – says hello to me. It feels nice.

I reflect on whether a library staff member has ever said hello to me in this way. I don’t remember.

From the first floor the Millennium Library is magnificent. If you stand at the entrance to the forst floor you can see over a hundfred people reading books, newspapers and magazines, orking on the internet, taking notes, browsing, tapping on laptops. It is desined to that when you enter you can see every stack of books and every reader, as if you are at the hub of a semi circle of spokes. Above and below you the plate glass walls means tha you can see everything going on, people studying in the business and local xxxx libraries above, people havin coffee downstairs and the whole of th city, fallin own the hills.

I'm here because of the fire. And because of the Millennium Library, of course. The Norfolk Heritage Centre is on the second floor. If I wanted to go back any further in the history of Norfolk that 1st August 1994 I might be out of luck. One of the books I will look at is a list of all the books and documents lost in the fire. It weighs about a stone and is bigger than a breeze block.

'I want to read about the fire in the old library,' I say.

Two young staff, both in their twenties, offer to help.

'And the new one too,' I say. 'How it came out of the ashes of the old one.'

'Like a phoenix,' the young woman says.

I nod.

They compile a list of books from the computer and the man goes to get them from out the back.

'There are some people still here who worked in the old library,' the young woman says. 'There's a lady called Anne. Her car was right next to the library building, but she was in London on a course, so they had to spray it all day to sop it exploding.'

The Norfolk Heritage Centre looks good. Although it lost thousands of invaluable and hundreds of irreplaceable books in the fire, the stock, some staff argue, is better than ever. After the fire there was an enormous outpouring of goodwill towards the library from the public. An outpouring of private book collections, attics and garages. The library were given much of the material that had been burned, but also much more. Things they'd never stocked.

As the young man is getting my books I gaze down into the library. It's a picture to behold. Dozens of people browsing books, reading newspapers and magazines, on line, querying staff.

The man returns with a pile of books. He's brought me the three books I asked for and two more. He takes them to table, puts them down and draws out a chair for me. I start to leaf through the books. I am reminded of using the reference library in Leeds, a pile of different shaped books, some of them bound in the library, smelling musty like old books do. Ready to trawl through them looking for what I know I want to know – and also what I don't know I want to know.

First the inquest into the fire.

The fire started in some faulty wiring in the American library, in the wall bookcases. It spread because of the flammability of the bookcases and the books and because detection and suppression measures were not in place. The fire service were there in two minutes, but I was too late. The fire was out of control, destroying ten's of thousands of items, from handwritten logs of xxxxxx to xxxxxxxxxxx [ask the expert chap]

> We are still very much in the shadow of the events of the 1 August – the biggest blow to the county's heritage since the fire at the Norwich Subscription? Library in 1898.

This is a speech – transcribed – by Clive Wilkins Jones, the xxxxxxxxxxxxx, made in 1994. He lists the losses in the fire: 30,000 books, 2,500 postcards, 15,000 photographs, 3,000 maps. But much survived. The microfilm and microfiche. Many of the maps.

> the wooden map cabinets were vaporised, but the metal cabinets did their jobs… happily the older maps were kept in the metal cabinets

He goes on to describe how a lot of the material was in peril not because it was burned, but because of the water used to put the fire out. anything water-damaged was freeze dried, so it could be recovered later.

Once I've read the books, Nick directs me to the microfilms, several decades worth of the Eastern Daily Press. I take the microfilm over to the microfilm reader. The first one is too small, or I'm using it wrong, as I can only see a part of one of the pages of the newspaper. So I move to another machine. It takes me a long time to get the film into the slot so I can wind it on. And then I do it's back to front. When you're failing at something it's easy to think someone is watching you. But if anyone was, they were doing it discreetly.

'WE HAVE LOST A PRICELESS PIECE OF NORFOLK'S HISTORY'

is the headline on the front page. Along with a picture of a fireman standing among charred ruins, black beams at all angles, like a sack of giant matchsticks, debris on the floor, pools of water.

The newspaper is mournful about the loss:. *What was hours earlier a treasurehouse of literature and knowledge – the legacy of generations to the people of Norfolk.* A third of a million books, country records dating back to the eleventh century, all potentially lost in an inferno of over a thousand degrees.

A local librarian writes in the newspaper:

When you work with local records over a period of time you come

> to realise that you are not just working with pieces of paper, you are working with the voices of the past. Through them you can travel back to times that have gone forever, glimpse an idea of people's lives, how they dressed, what they ate, what they cared about. As old folk die and their memories die with them, the only repositories of times past are in the libraries and archives.

The fire station received a call at 7.31 a.m. By 7.33 a.m. the first appliance was on scene. By 8.04 a.m. the fire service asked Anglia Water to increase water pressure in the mains so they could deal with the immensity of the fire. But by then the fire was out of control.

By the afternoon, when the fire was out, teams of librarians formed a human chain to load water-soaked documents onto a fleet of lorries, where they would be taken to Scotland to be freeze dried.

[need to talk to Clive Wilkins Jones 01603 774787]

My host is not Nicholas Parsons, but…

CATHERINE WYMER

Locality Manager of this region of Norfolk – she has one library (some may have 12 librariues)

She has dark hair, is about fifty, wears a red woven jacket andsmall black shiny earrings . she takes me to her office at the back of th library

Norwich Millennium is the top issuing library with xxxx. It is the second highest for library visits, with xxxxxx.

On the left as you come into the library there is an express section. It is one of the highest issuing areas. As is the children's area.

When we had the fire our director had the foresight not just to rebuild, with the insurance money. But we're going to look much further ahead and try to predict what library usage is going to be like. So we went through a planning stage and at the same time the Millennium Commission funding became available.

There are 91 public PCs, but not in ranks or suites, but they scatter them about among the books and magazines, so internet users can borrow books and vice versa.

'Although we're not just about borrowing books anymore. Because we have lots of other things, DVDs, videos, CDs, and we have a lot of online subscriptions. So we're very much a learning environment and that is what our main thrust is really, be it through books or other formats.'

The library doesn't own the forum, but is a tenant of the Forum Trust. They run their own events and the library coordinate with them.

She was faced first with the building burning… then with seeing the charred mess (see pics in paper)

X has been in Norwich Libraries since 1986. She was here on the day of the fire. ‘It was a horrible experience, really. I’d been working here for a few years before the fire – and it’s just awful to watch your workplace go up in flames. And obviously because it’s a library that has lots of very important local material – to see that to up in flames is soul destroying.’

‘Were you here?’

‘No, I was not due to work here that day. I wa haing a meeting sat Councty Hall, but someone called me and they’d heard it on the radio, so I came here straight away. There were lots of staff in quite a distraught state.’ She pauses to breathe, near to tears. ‘And te aftermath, seeing the building and all the flooded materials. There are things that couldn’t be replaced. … But in some ways the public responded marvellouswly well. We put out a plea for people to look in their attics for local history material and they ended up with a really good collection – in some ways better that what we had before. The Miiiennium funding allowed us to go o… we ha da local history sopecialist who went to auction to buy things which we would never have got before.’

What a lovely job.

What was lost?

Things in the stack were not destroyed. Some were smoke damaged and water damaged, but a lot of it was sent away to be dried out. Some key material was lost through [email man]. One of the main things was the Colman Collection,wbhich was gioven to the library by the Colman family (mustard?).

And now, of course, we have got it stored in an environment which is completely fire proof.

What was the public reaction like?

I think it really made them appreciate the library more. I think the public response was wonderful. And when the lending library was set up temporarily we had a very good response from people coming in to borrow books.

Why is your library the best issuer in the UK? What's the secret of their success?

'We wanted to encourage people to look on it as a social environment, rather than the traditional libraries which have been quiet with librarians going round saying be quiet, we didn't want that. but f course there are still people who do need quieter study – so we try and maintain the second floor as a quieter study area. So it suits a lot of people.

I think that one of the libraries huge roles is information. I think we could do with promoting it even more.

On my way out I notice something different. Next to the children's library there is another section The 2nd Air Division USAAF Memorial Library. Inside it is a medium sized library, at the centre several flags hung around a display of model aeroplanes, clocks displaying various US times, surrounded by books on American travel, American music, American railways, American life.

> This room is a living memorial to those Americans, of the second air division, United States Eight Air Force who lost their lives defending freedom 1942-1945. They gave their tomorrow for our today.

Underneath is a book listing the names of the men who died. It is as big as the book of item lost in the fire. It lists six-thousand-seven-hundred American men's names. All killed fighting Hitler in the air.

There is a framed letter on the wall:

> On the occasion of the dedication of this memorial, I would like to join in paying tribute to the six thousand members of the 2nd Air Division who sacrificed their lives in the defence of free men everywhere.

It is signed John F Kennedy.

It makes me think. I have found it easy to be anti-American what with the war in Iraq. But this library shifts an attitude. Which is the whole point of libraries.

At the end I notice silver model, a pheasant reflecting the light from outside and inside, about a polished as silver could be. In 1953 when a huge tidal surge threatened thousands of people in low-lying Norfolk, the 47th Bombardment Wing a Sculthorpe rushed to rescue hundreds of people. Still operating from the UK's airfields after the Second World War, the Americans wer eon hand to help. To say thank you the people of Norfolk presented them with a silver pheasant.

But this is the second pheasant. Fragments of the first lie at the feet of the new one, dull and charred pieces of wing and the cone of its tail-feathers.

The journey from Norwich east takes me through a landscape I don't know. The train tracks are on raised banks of land, that take trains above the flooded and semi-flooded fields and rivers , wide and narrow, spilling water onto the land. Pairs of swmas sit at a distancr from the next pairs od swans in the fllod fields, white dots across the green for miles. The train goes through woods and past swirling clouds of birds. I see what looks like swifts, although it's too early in late Febuary. And a woodcock, perhaps, drinking from a pool with some ducks. A heron. The trees are in blossom here – all white – unlike the trees back in Yorkshire. And with the sun slanting across the watery scene it feels like spring.

The idyll is completed by the bright white sails of a windmill, against the black body of its building.

It is windy in Lowestoft, the most easterly town in the UK. I was expecting Lowestoft not to be like the other three compass points of the UK. Shetland was barren and different. Fermanagh, open and eccentric. Scilly, xxxxxxxxxxxxxxx. But reaching Lowestoft is a journey with a difference. More strange land, different to what I know.

The main street in Lowestoft was very ordinary. Flat, straight, paved in straightforward paving. Low shops, concrete mostly. M&S. Boots. Sportsworld. Woolworths.

As with each of the points of the compass I wanted to see the sea. I made my way around the back of a Somerfield supermarket, across a dual carriageway. The building were a mix of old red brick and new, grey concrete. In one – a dog grooming

parlour – a spaniel wa being shorn. It stared out at me with a look of humiliation as one women held it down and the other took to it with electric clippers. Its eyes were sad.

The sea was down a long road through an industrial estate. You can't see it until you're right up against the sea defences. Everything is so flat. The sea is muddy brown. But I have found the most easterly point of the UK. I can look north, east and south and see just water.

The sea thumps against the sea defences. A modern windmill whirs up the coast, huge, its sails catching the sun with a sharp glistening.

And although this is not lassic sea side where I'd take my daughter for a day out, the taste of the salt on my lips, the big sky and the sound of the seagulls lifts my spirits.

Lowestoft library is large and modern. It is full of colour. Any library compared to the Millennium Library struggle, but Lowestoft looks good. First it is busy. Seond it is colourful. There is lots of space. Low shelves allow you to see across the whole librry and outside into the street.

There is a teenage section, called T Zone. A huge fllor for non-fiction and research upstairs, with a wall full of quotes about books. Over fifty computers, cmost in use. DVDs. Mgazines. And through the door, in the childrne's section a circle of twent or thirty mums and dads with three year lds, all shaking jingle bells and singing. Thir voices only coming through into the main library if someone opens the door to go in or come out of the chuildren's library.

Tracey Etheridge, Library Manager, Lowestoft

Tracey arrives at the café and shakes my hand. She's possibly the most glamorous librarian I have met on my travels. Late forties, she has a blonde bob. She's slim and tall and wears a pink cardigan over a black top.

An southern accent.

I want to know who uses this library a the extreme east of the UK. I've been into the houses the older users on the extreme west – and met their dogs. I've travelled to the most northerly library an reading group and met Shetlanders, passionate about romance and sea faing. Who uses libraries here?

'Everyone. Retired people. older suers. We have a quite lively groups of pre-teens who come in her every day after school.'

'what sort of lively?'

'Livekly the way tweleve year old boys are. mIt's quite starnege that we have a lot of young lads using it rather than girls.'

What do you think attractes them?

Computers she say, ithyout hesitating. And I think too having staff to talk to. To take an interst in them.

So you donlt just turf them out?

No.

We get quite a lot of late teens and early twenties using the internet.

I noticed that. you have a young clientl. Is that the make mup of the town?

No. It's an old town, really.

The internet has been the key to the library bringing in young people. I ask her she thinks it's positive.

Yes.

Did you design it to do that?

Yes

To make the library more accessible t had a refit. The plan was to open it up, break down the barriers. They worked with groups from across the community. They went into schools, talked to teenagers.

Is that where the T Zone comes from?

She looks sudeenly embarraed. 'That ooks a bnit bad now. We used to have sofas and chars. But it got trashed.'

'Trashed. A iot?'

'No. Over time. Through use.'

That's good. It was getting used.

They did a lot of worj with Surestart, drawing money in. they had a Surestart Commuitiy Librarian. Sh develop all the Baby Baopunce, Jo Jingles. She goes out into the community to tell people about the libray.

She's nervous. Her oice. Quick speaking.

The port used to be the main trade. But fishing is dead. There's bad unemployment. A lot of the people who live in Lowestoft are bussed out to work at Bernard Matthews nearby. And a Birds Eye factory. Optherwise shop and office jobs.

Very big Portuguese community. Big Polish. A lot of Indian /Pakistan men. Or a sea skipper certificate course in Lowestoft. They use the library, reading online newspapers form back home, borrowing books.

'I think a library is the first safe place you come to when you come to a new outny, when you don't speak the language.'

Why?

If you want to go somewhere with nou children and you donlt speak the langaug very well, then maybe the librry is he place to come where you wont have anyone making demands of you. We get a wide range of nationalisties coming to the family evenst. It's the first place they come to to learn English,.

Is that important tyo you? Attracting people like that, reaching out to these communities.

Yes. Very. We go out to meet them. To their community centres. To attract them to the library.

Wnhat is a library for?

Well I think it is to go out into the local community. But if you;'d as=ked me that question five yars ago, I probably wouldnt have said that. it's part of the whole refurb – it includes a culture change for us. And part of our remit was to go out and invite people to come to us. To keep the numbers up. because if you're relying on your old ladies to come in and borrow their mills and boon, they'll not last forever.

Before, we were only serving the same groups. We had a very traditional cunter service, a big and imposing enquiry desk with four people stood there facing you the minute you walked into the door. And that was… slightly off putting.

They also opened a reading group when they reopened. In the las yuear they've read:

X

Y

Z

She worked in libraries all her working life. She sated as a library assistant at this library doing shelving. Then took on jobs within libraries, spend time as an IT trainer within the library service when it all came in. But ten years ago she got the job as library manager.

What made you want to work in libraries?

If I'm hones it's because I was desperate to leave school and I wanted a job. But it's the people – the public and the ones I work with. You meet a wide range of people.

Her favourite par to the job is working with youth offending teams, to target some of the kids who have created problem in the library. She brings people in to talk to the kids. 'That's been the most satisfying part of the work.. t give people a chance. A lot of the kids I used to despair of, now they come into the library and give us no problems at all.

On way out the lad and lass come in again, looking over, edgy, smiling.

'How about them?'

‘Oh, I know them. I’ve got my eye on them.’

Dover

The day before I met Daren Kearl at Dover's Discovery Centre, the news headlines were all about Kent's council leader. The News at Ten and Newsnight covered the story: xxxx xxxx was the highest earner in the UK's councils, earning £230,000, forty thousand pounds more than Tony Blair. I half-noticed the story in my Dover hotel room as I watched ferries come in and out of the port through the fourth floor window. In addition, reports said, Kent has the most councillors on over £100,000. Ten of them.

The next day I went to see Daren. From the outside the library looks good, a huge round shape with a straight bit added on. with Dover Discovery Centre in large words above.

'How's it going?' I said when Daren shook my hand.

He looked gloomy. 'Well you've heard about the cuts,' he said.

'No.'

'Kent Council is cutting forty of the sixty qualified librarian posts.'

Daren has a wife and a four year old girl. He's forty-two. He studied librarianship at college. He's worked for Kent Libraries for nineteen years. after all that now he has to apply for one of the twenty remaining posts. He has a one in three chance of keeping a job. Otherwise he's out.

'But that's not the main problem,' Daren says, selfless. 'It's the service. The library service will be cut dreadfully,' he says. Each of those librarians has a role: community work, reference, outreach, reader development. They told us this news on World Book Day.'

Daren is pissed off, but smiling at the irony.

I came here to see the Discovery Centre – a modern exciting library built around – and over – a Roman fort. But it's hard to ask him to show me round. What with the gloom that I notice on his and his colleagues' faces.

'Shall I show you round?' he says.

'Yes please.'

The library is just one element of the Discovery Centre, although it is the largest. Other players include Kent Adult Education where they do everything from working with the group of hooded youths – who shouldered their way in a few minutes ago – to aromatherapy workshops. In all, they offer over a two thousand courses a year: mornings, afternoons, evenings and weekends. The Dover Museum is also a partners. A cinema, a theatre, a teenage area designed and named – The Curve – by teenagers, a nursery, a Basic Skill Centre; even a garden where readers can sit out and enjoy the sun. And there's a café. The outside of the library is glass. You can see across the town and into the garden. You can feel the sun.

The Discovery Centre was opened in 2003. It's purpose a brand new bigger library with eleven partners that would increase the number of issues and to explore new ways of providing library services. Working with all those partners.

Four years later the staff must think that laughable.

The stats on the impact since the Discovery Centre opened in the booklet Daren provides me with are, however, quite impressive. Visitors to the library up over 50% in two years. Active borrowers up 10%. Issues up 16.25%.

But there's something even mor impressive than that: Dover Discovery Centre is built over the remains of a Roman Fort and a church.

'That's brilliant,' I say, looking out of the children's library at the low walls sticking like a row of molars out of the ground.

Daren smiles. ‘It is. There’s more underneath the library.’

‘Can we see?’

‘Okay.’

There’s something about Roman forts for me. What better place to build a library?

Daren takes me down, under the library.

‘Is it haunted?’ I say.

‘No. Well, no signs. Dartford is. I was on Most Haunted Buildings last week. They’re having a comic relief sleepover there this week.’

The base of the library is built round the remains of the fort. It’s dark, but when your eyes grow used to the low lighting, you can see walls, rooms, two feet high rows of stones, some crumbling away for each other.

‘This is great,’ I say. Something is stirring inside me. Something I used to like as a kid. But I don’t know what. ‘Amazing to have your library built over this.’

‘I suppose so,’ Daren says.

‘How old are they?’

‘What?’

‘The ruins.’

‘AD 115,’ Daren says.

‘Nineteen hundred years old, then,’ I say.

‘Yes.’

We stand and look at the stones. I could stay there all day. But I start to feel embarrassed. Just looking at a heap of stones in the basement of a library.

‘Thanks,’ I say.

Daren takes me outside. Back into the adult lending library.

‘What are these?’

There are two dumpbins full of books. One of books in Farsi. One of books in Polish.

‘There are large Iranian and Polish communities here,’ Daren says.

‘How come Iranian?’

‘There’s a lot in Dover. I suppose it’s the persecution. More of them have a valid reason for wanting asylum. So more of them live here.’

A set of books is laid out, face out, for the Iranian readers. All in Farsi.

‘That librarian over there is Iranian. She’s great. She can talk to them in their own language. **[missed a trick here – need to interview her, maybe some of her clients].**

‘So what are you going to do?’ I say, as Daren takes me through the busy reference library, men leafing through old newspapers and tomes.

‘I’m looking for jobs. I had an interview at a university library. But I didn’t get it.’

‘It’s a shame you’d have to move into higher education,’ I say. ‘It’d be a loss.’

‘We haven’t got much choice.’

‘Did you know about the Council chief?’

‘No. What?’

‘Your council chief. He was on the news last night. he earns loads more than Tony Blair. He is the highest paid council official in the UK.’

‘Well that’s just great,’ Daren says. He stops to think for a second, then opens up. ‘Do you know what the big thing is now? They’re creating a new service, so that Kent people can watch their proceedings on TV. That costs xx million. And they’re cutting xx million from the library budget. Almost exactly the same figure. So that TV

channel is more important than libraries,' he says. 'I went to watch the council when they were talking about budgets for everything. All they did was read from a document. They'd not read it before. They didn't write it. They don't know what it's about. They don't know what they're destroying.'

And you'd think they would, being in Kent, home of Canterbury Library.

Outside the reference library several readers sit in the sun, leafing through the day's newspapers. Next to four men on the internet.

'This internet is slow, man,' one of the men turns to Daren.

'It is.'

'I've nearly used up my time and I haven't got what I need, it's s slow.'

'Have a word at the desk,' Daren says. 'They'll extend your time if you've been having problems.'

The man mutters something and looks away. Daren waits, then follows me away.

Overall – back in Daren's report – the customer satisfaction levels are high. But maybe not the staff's.