A Teenage Takeover of Libraries

Text by Tony White

> "Are they trying to attack us, d'you think," Gareth asked, "or the library itself?"
> "Perhaps both," said the cat, calmly. "Either way, I think we ought to go upstairs and warn the others before they break down the doors."[1]

The provision and functioning of public libraries in the UK is a statutory duty for local authorities that is enshrined in law by the Public Libraries and Museums Act 1964, the key points of which are that local authorities should "Provide a comprehensive and efficient library service for all people that would like to use it", "Lend books and other printed material free of charge for those who live, work or study in the area", and "Promote the service"; with compliance overseen by the Secretary of State for Culture.[2]

There had of course been numerous public libraries in the UK prior to 1964, building upon legislation dating back to the Public Libraries Act 1850. There had also been a "public library movement"[3] in the centuries preceding that, with so-called "endowed libraries", and libraries "attached to mechanics' institutes and literary and philosophical societies, or subscription libraries".[4] But it was under the terms of the 1850 Act, subject to certain conditions (and despite concerns that creating such spaces might foment dissent as well as education), that local authorities were first enabled to raise money through taxation that could be spent on public library buildings and staff salaries; although not, initially, books.

These developments were augmented in the late 19th century by a wave of library building funded by private philanthropy, hence the great number of libraries named after Andrew Carnegie (1835–1919) – who funded the construction of some 660 public libraries in the UK and Ireland,

and many more in Europe and the United States of America – and to a lesser extent Henry Tate (1819–1899), who, in addition to the gallery now known as Tate Britain, funded the building of a number of public libraries across South London.

Subsequent legislation created further periods of significant expansion and building, especially following the first and second World Wars, and from the late 1950s onwards, broadening the range of provision so that, for example, "Children's services were ever-more important, while larger libraries offered facilities such as local studies and record libraries, and later computers".[5]

However, in spite of such successes and in the wake of the global economic crash of 2007–2008, public libraries in the UK have been one of the more visible targets for austerity-driven cuts in UK public expenditure. *The Future Libraries* report published in 2011 by the Local Government Group and the former Museums, Libraries and Archives Council provides a useful survey of thinking at that time, not least when it erroneously describes public library provision as an "elective" service[6] (rather than a statutory duty), speaks of "modernising libraries"[7] and rationalising them, of their "becoming more effective and sustainable",[8] citing a range of "recipes" and "ingredients" to achieve reform and change in order to save money. Such ideas and policy imperatives have helped shape dramatic changes to the public library network across the country, but few could argue that massive library closures are changes for the better.

At time of writing, hundreds of public libraries have been closed down with still others at risk of closure, or in the process of being transformed to within an inch of their functioning lives. Some authorities are experimenting with book-vending machines, and others with click-and-collect services or siting their loan collections in unstaffed or non-library premises. Even where individual libraries may have survived, many qualified staff have been laid off in favour of volunteers. Nationally, the number of libraries staffed by volunteers is increasing dramatically. Indeed, it has been suggested that this shift towards the voluntary sector

is the "main plank of government policy towards libraries".[9] Where there were 4,482 public libraries in the UK in 2009–10, by CIPFA's last count there were 3,850, and the rate of closures has been accelerating year on year.[10]

Ian Anstice of *Public Libraries News*, who collates and publishes details of many such closures, notes that:

> The overall word for libraries [that] are no longer directly operated by the council is heavily politicised. Local councils prefer to use the positive-sounding words 'divested' or 'community library' while campaigners prefer to use more negative words such as 'abandoned', 'DIY' or 'volunteer-run'. The catch-all word that is used by *Public Libraries News* is 'withdrawn from direct council control' or 'withdrawn' for short.[11]

In one of the most notorious examples of 'reform and change', Lambeth Council has pursued a policy of asset transfer – as outlined in their *Culture 2020* report of 2015 – that uses public health imperatives to justify the repurposing of library buildings (including a purpose-built Carnegie Library) into healthy-living centres: gyms with bookshelves.

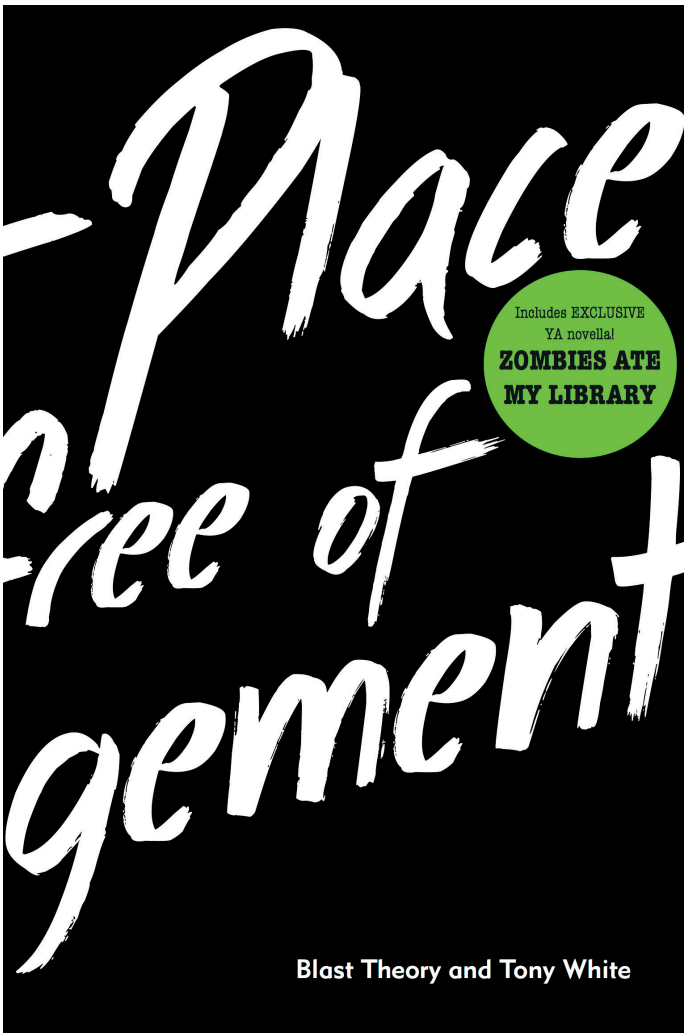
As might be expected in the face of such drastic cuts to public services, numerous local and national campaign groups have arisen, voicing their opposition with petitions on social and other media, in demonstrations, and in council meetings, as well as in some cases taking more direct action. In one of the most high-profile examples, library users occupied the Carnegie Library in the London Borough of Lambeth, on the day that it was due to be closed down[12]. The occupation was maintained for nine days, and I was proud to be one of 220 authors who signed a letter to the press[13] in support of it. I signed because I thought I had a pretty good idea of the vital work that libraries do. I wanted them to continue doing this work, and to be cherished for it. Yet here were people having to step in to try to protect a fundamental civic amenity from its apparently disinterested guardians; wasn't this the role of the Secretary of State? Never mind the 19th-century fears about public

libraries fomenting unrest, it now seemed that speaking up for their very existence had become an act of dissent. I already knew how important libraries had been to me in my own life. Our local library was a vital part of my childhood in Farnham, Surrey, just as Hackney Library had been to me a generation later, when I was a young parent in London. The letter protesting the closure of the Carnegie and other Lambeth libraries noted that "closing libraries hurts the youngest and oldest, the weakest and most vulnerable [...] The Carnegie library has endured for 110 years – why should we be the generation that fails to pass it on?"[14] It would emerge later that it was costing Lambeth Council more to keep the Carnegie Library securely closed than it would have done to leave it open, staffed and fully functioning as before.[15]

It was against this nationwide backdrop of sweeping cuts and closures that I collaborated with the multi-award-winning artists' group Blast Theory, and with young people and librarians in the West Midlands, to create an artwork in and about public libraries called *A Place Free of Judgement*.

The title of the project – coined by Blast Theory volunteer, University of Surrey student Mairead Garland, during an early site visit – offers a way into what I believe are some of the broader societal benefits of public libraries: that they offer a universal public space that is open to all, and free to anyone that chooses to use it. To paraphrase Richard Stallman's formulation,[16] libraries are free as in free speech and as in free beer. Free, that is, in the sense both of being *gratis* (free of charge) and *libre* (having freedom).[17]

For many people, the local public library is about more than simply borrowing books. It may also be a place to read the newspapers, to do homework, to meet people at a knitting circle or a reading group, to borrow toys, or simply to sit in the warm. The fundamental importance of a readily accessible public space that costs nothing to use cannot be overestimated.



Front cover of A Place Free of Judgement

In the words of John Palfrey:

> Libraries function as essential equalizing institutions in our society. For as long as a library exists in most communities, staffed with trained librarians, it remains true that individuals' access to our shared culture is not dictated by however much money they have. For many citizens, libraries are the one place where the information they need to be engaged in civic life is truly available for free.[18]

It is too easy to assume that libraries have not responded to, or are no longer needed in, the digital age. Or that the internet has changed behaviours to such an extent that we don't need to visit a library to access information: why go to a library when every café offers free Wi-Fi, or you can simply look everything up from your home? Such assumptions are not borne out in practice, where in 2016 14% of UK households did not have an internet connection.[19] And while public library visits are down in figures released in April 2017 as part of Carnegie UK Trust's *Shining a Light report*[20], the figures also show that "1 in 2 people across the UK and Ireland continue to use libraries".[21] Furthermore, it is not yet clear how any reduction in use relates to the significant numerical reduction in the number of libraries, or to current volatilities created by staffing, opening hours and location changes.

The Leadership for Libraries Task Force set up by the UK Government's Department for Culture, Media and Sport (which at the time of writing is conducting a consultation on its draft report *Libraries Deliver: Ambition for Public Libraries in England 2016–2021*) suggests that digital literacy is currently one of the seven key purposes of the public libraries network in the UK, together with reading and literacy, health and wellbeing, economic growth, culture and creativity, communities and learning.[22] The draft report suggests that libraries already offer "improved digital skills, reduced digital exclusion, increased usage of government services online [and] access to high-speed broadband".[23] Ambitions for the next five years include that digital literacy is "recognised as a core skill" and that libraries be "seen as spaces where the community comes together to co-create and make things".[2]

Billed as "a teenage takeover of libraries", *A Place Free of Judgement* used the networked and digital infrastructural capacity of public libraries precisely to 'co-create' and to broadcast a new kind of live artwork. On 29th October 2016, over the course of nine hours from 3:00pm to midnight, young people took control of their local libraries in Telford, Cannock and Worcester. They set out to re-imagine libraries, storytelling and their place in the world, performing live to a worldwide audience via an interactive live-stream that broadcast non-stop from each library in turn.

Publicised locally and nationally through a print, press and online campaign with questions posed on social media ("Did a library change your life?"), *A Place Free of Judgement* attracted online audiences from the West Midlands and far beyond.

Audiences logging in on the night might find themselves in the middle of a game of hide-and-seek taking place between the shelf stacks of a darkened library, or being told about infamous library sackings in antiquity. In Telford and Wrekin's flagship new-build Telford Southwater

Library (built in partnership with the University of Wolverhampton) people ran up and down the escalators and played records, even though the building was still open to the public. As the performance progressed and the live-stream passed to the next library, the young people seemed to grow in confidence. In Cannock there was a ceremonial handover of the keys to the building, followed by shout-outs to library campaigners around the country. There were expressions of solidarity and a sharing of URLs and Twitter handles. In Worcester there was ukulele playing and singing, and tall tales about increasingly outlandish family members. It was by turns awkward and assured, absurd and affecting, and always flowing onwards.

But this live-stream was also interactive, and the online audience was continually and directly addressed and challenged. Questions were posed, which developed through the night in parallel with the stories that were unfolding. The audience could message in their responses via a text-based chat interface, and those responses were discussed and enjoyed, and challenged again. The best of them were transcribed onto cards that were then hidden in books on the shelf stacks, for future library users to find.

My own contribution to the project had included unexpectedly writing a novella called *Zombies Ate My Library*, and as well as my reading an excerpt from the novella in live events at the libraries, the story was also broadcast in its entirety through a series of short, pre-recorded readings that were interspersed throughout the nine-hour live-stream.

I saw *Zombies Ate My Library* as an opportunity to tell a story that could focus and refract the larger themes and ideas emerging in the artwork, as well as reflecting the context of "swingeing cuts"[25] in which it was being produced; drawing out possible resonances between this teenage takeover and, say, the occupation of Carnegie Library. In particular, the novella remixes the bureaucratic and euphemistic policy documents that Lewisham and Lambeth Councils have used to justify their library closures, transforming these into a satirical message of resistance.

Zombies Ate My Library was launched in book form several months later, in February 2017, when project partners, participants and a public audience gathered back in Telford's Southwater Library for a knowledge-sharing day about the project.

During an animated and positive Q&A session, one of the audience asked a deceptively simple question: "Couldn't we just use the title *A Place Free of Judgement* for everything we do with young people from now on?" The question was taken as a compliment and a kind of affirmation; testament perhaps to the apparently casually seamless quality of the live-streamed event itself. Perhaps this could be a way for libraries to take something away from the project and to continue the good work?

Well, maybe. But it is important to note that the success of *A Place Free of Judgement* was not a product of what it was called, but of the approach, and of the longer-term partnerships and collaborations that produced it. There had also been a collective willingness to take risks, to trust both experienced artists *and* young people, and to push the technological capacity of the participating libraries as far as it could go, exploring how existing digital infrastructure could be used to create a distributed creative space alongside the more day-to-day digital offering of networked computers, a well-functioning website, e-book and audiobook lending, and so on. Putting young people in control of interactive, live-streaming technology enabled us to subvert expectation and to extend the libraries' physical public space, connecting young people, libraries and audiences in a new way, and testing the qualities of engagement that this might bring.

It is also worth noting that the title didn't only refer to the 'finished work' (i.e. the live-streamed performance that took place on 29th October), but to all of the prior process, the workshops etc. that preceded and produced it. *A Place Free of Judgement* is an evocative title, and during the development phase it provided a great talking point, but it was not a 'magic banner' in and of itself. The intense qualities of participation, transformation and creativity that we had all seen and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experienced on the night were continuous with, and a product of, the two years of discussion and collaboration that preceded them, including the six months of intensive workshops that Blast Theory and I devised in order to prepare the young people both collectively and individually to deliver a non-stop nine-hour performance to camera.

Initially, Blast Theory had been commissioned by Arts Connect (the Bridge organisation for the West Midlands, funded by Arts Council England) to take part in a creative planning process with members of the Association of Senior Children's and Education Librarians (ASCEL). Out of this, Blast Theory held a further consultation with a group of libraries in the West Midlands who had come together to try to find creative ways to engage young people in libraries.

Asked to come up with some creative ideas and solutions, Blast Theory ran some exercises with librarians and library staff, and came up with the idea of a teenage takeover that might shift perceptions of libraries and their possibilities. It was at this point that I was formally invited to join the project, working primarily with Ju Row Farr of Blast Theory. I had worked with Blast Theory before,[26] and as an author I am always looking for ways to collaborate beyond the traditional limits of the book publishing world, and to use technology in new ways to go where readers and audiences are. I produce mainly works of fiction, the consumption of which is obviously not constrained within normative spaces such as museums or galleries in the way that the work of a visual artist might be, so I don't see libraries per se as an unusual setting for an artwork. Furthermore, I don't see books simply as vessels containing literary content that is destined for private consumption, but am interested in how books and writing perform and are performed in the world, in public. Blast Theory are leaders in using interactivity, mobile technology and augmented reality to create new kinds of artistic experiences. For me, technology and collaboration are also a necessary means to augment the physical square footage of a book trade that with public library and bookshop closures continues to shrink. For all that these public spaces are supposedly protected by law, public libraries have never been more contested and threatened in the UK than they

are today. It seemed important to spend time in libraries, not as part of some dispassionate fact-finding mission, but in a spirit of friendship and solidarity, and to find new ways to animate and draw attention to these threatened public spaces.

Speaking at the knowledge-sharing day in Telford, Sue Goodwin of Arts Connect talked about the genesis of the project, describing how Arts Connect had themselves been looking for "a more unexpected encounter," so had inverted the usual expectations of prospective project partners by asking the library services to present to the artists, rather than the other way around. ASCEL shared Arts Connect's ambition, and had been looking to develop a creative planning process that could result in a "truly regional" project that would raise the profile of library services and communities. "We wanted," said Goodwin, "to empower library staff to become creative producers of ambitious artistic work."

This echoes an emerging trend, though one that is not without controversy. For example, in October 2016, Brian Ashley, Arts Council England's director for libraries, wrote that for the first time libraries would be eligible to apply to all of the Arts Council's funding programmes, noting that: "Libraries already deliver work as the result of Arts Council investment."[27] In March 2017 the Arts Council announced 30 recipients of a new Libraries Opportunities For Everyone Innovation Fund.[28] Distributing some £3.9m, the fund sets out to support innovative projects and to tackle disadvantage, to "fund new activities in libraries and reach people all over the country who might not usually use their local library service".[29] Press coverage of the awards was more critical, however, with authors including Patrick Gayle and Francesca Simon describing the scheme – perhaps unfairly – as "'a sop, a smokescreen and a whitewash' that does nothing to help the fundamental crisis facing the sector".[30] In other words, innovation funds are all very well, but even £3.9m is a drop in the ocean compared to the £25m funding that the public libraries network has lost in just the past year, the impacts of which were evident to me during the making of *A Place Free of Judgement*. It was genuinely heartbreaking, for example, to turn up to do an author event at a public library where many staff had been made redundant the day before, or where a regular and long-standing Saturday writing group was now at risk because the paid staff who were qualified to work with young people were no longer employed on Saturdays. This more pastoral role is a vital aspect of librarians' work, but one that I hadn't fully considered until I started work on *A Place Free of Judgement*.

Roosa Herranen was one of the young people who took part in *A Place Free of Judgement* at Worcester St John's Library. Speaking at the knowledge-exchange day in Telford a few months later, she gave some insight into what the project had been like for its younger participants, describing libraries as: "a familiar place. We all have pre-existing ideas of libraries. We have an idea in our heads of what a library's going to be like: a quiet space for studying, it's to borrow books, to have meetings in conference rooms, maybe, but it's definitely not what these young people made it." She continued: "When we weren't in front of the camera, we were watching the others on the computer and it was just amazing to see what everyone had come up with."

Further rich insights are captured in Dr Sue Challis's *A Place Free of Judgement Evaluation Report*, which was commissioned by Arts Connect as part of the project. Challis records anonymised feedback from many of the young people, as well as library staff and audiences, and observers who attended every stage of the project, whether public-facing or not. One young participant tells how:

> I went along to the first workshop, honestly thinking it'd be awful, but I loved it! What struck me the most was the freedom to be who we were [...] I learnt so much, from technical camera work, to creative writing skills, to performance and public speaking. My favourite part of the project was the unity of the group. It gave us time to come together and make something wonderful. I also felt such a sense of belonging and that I was a part of something much bigger than just us messing around in the library.[31]

In the participant survey, one young person described feeling "an important part of planning, considering issues that we encountered, and helped to improve them"[32], while another reported that "I enjoyed working with the professional camera so much that I am considering this to be an area to move into in my working life".[33] Another, however, disliked "not always having a clear idea what the project was about".[34]

Challis's evaluation also captured changing views of libraries among the participants through simple before-and-after questionnaire postcards. She tells how "Answers to the question 'What happens in the public library?' became more detailed, broadened and exciting by project end," and cites one example:

> [Before] Members of the public come and read and take out books. Activities are put on for the elderly and children. [After] Reading, talking, computerising, chess clubs, scrabble, listening to music, human interaction. Dreaming, researching, living ... Utter and complete madness.[35]

Library staff, too, observed a greater sense of ownership developing:

> By the end of the project we noticed the young people were much more comfortable with the library. For example; on the first day they only accepted hot drinks when we offered them, but by the third and fourth workshops they were making themselves drinks and also making the staff drinks without being prompted. It seems like a small thing, but it was very satisfying to see them just wandering into the kitchen and making a drink, not standing on ceremony.[36]

Another member of library staff said that at first they had found it difficult to let control of the library go to the young people.

> I was amazed by and excited at their confidence in taking responsibility for the library at the end of the project and I definitely saw how they had developed and grown into young leaders. This was a very powerful experience for me.[37]

Back in Worcester on the night of 29th October 2017, the live-streamed performance ended with two of the participants – Jared and Roosa – turning off the lights and locking the doors of St John's library behind them, before taking the cameras (and thus the online audience) on a taxi ride back to their home. Once inside, they read aloud the last two instalments of *Zombies Ate My Library*, as much to each other as to the online audience, before deciding, finally, to do the last chapter again but this time set to music. This shift from a public to a private space, which echoed the act of bringing a book home from the library, seemed a fantastic *coup de theatre*, and was compounded by their open and heartfelt singing of my story to Jared's impromptu ukulele accompaniment. Not only had the young people taken over the libraries, but here, as had happened continually throughout the work, they had also taken over the story. These fleeting moments were profoundly moving to watch. Here was a bold gesture that seemed to encapsulate and celebrate the transformations that the project had made possible. After that, the ending was abrupt, and it left me feeling slightly bereft.

I wanted nothing more than to rewind it like a DVD and watch this magic again, but I couldn't. And then it really was all over. There was not even quite enough time for Jared and Roosa to finish saying thank you and goodbye before the live-stream was cut at midnight, and the credits began to roll.

Footnotes

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[7] *Ibid.*

[8] *Ibid.*, 6

[9] Certainly, such a shift "is reflected in the new CIPFA figures [for 2015–16]: though paid library staff fell by 5.3% from 18,028 to 17,064, volunteer numbers rose by 7.5% to 44,501", reported by Kean, Danuta (2016) in 'UK library budgets fall by £25m in a year'. *The Guardian* 8 December. Available from www.theguardian.com/books/2016/dec/08/uk-library-budgets-fall-by-25m-in-a-year

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[23] *Ibid*.

[24] *Ibid*.

[25] Kean, *op. cit*.

[26] In 2010 I wrote *Ivy4evr* with Blast Theory; an interactive SMS-based drama for young people commissioned by Channel 4 Education for broadcast on mobile phones. In 2015 I was script editor and story consultant on their crowd-funded Karen app, a co-commission with National Theatre of Wales and The Space.

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A Place Free of Judgement *by Blast Theory and Tony White was developed with ASCEL West Midlands and Arts Connect. It was made in collaboration with young people and librarians in Telford and Wrekin, Worcestershire, and Staffordshire, and created in partnership with young people and librarians in Solihull, Ludlow and Dudley, and the University of Worcester. The project was made with support from Arts Council England Lottery Funding, Arts Connect the Bridge organisation for the West Midlands, and the University of Worcester.*

Tony White's novella Zombies Ate My Library *is published exclusively by Blast Theory in a limited edition, 112pp, B-format paperback,* A Place Free of Judgement *by Blast Theory and Tony White, (ISBN 978-0-995-6965-0-1), available direct from Blast Theory www.blasttheory.co.uk/shop/*

Zombies Ate My Library was shortlisted for the Saboteur Awards 2017 in the Best Novella category.

Tony White

Tony White's latest novel is *The Fountain in the Forest*, published by Faber and Faber. He is the author of five previous novels including *Foxy-T* and *Shackleton's Man Goes South*, as well as numerous short stories published in journals, exhibition catalogues, and anthologies. White was creative entrepreneur in residence in the French department of King's College London, and has been writer in residence at London's Science Museum and the UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies. He recently collaborated with artists Blast Theory on the libraries live-streaming project *A Place Free of Judgement*, and until 2018 chaired the board of London's award-winning arts radio station Resonance 104.4fm.

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Previously, Claire Doherty was Director at Arnolfini (2017-19) and was the founding Director of Situations. Over the past decade, Situations emerged as one of the UK's most innovative and pioneering arts producers, commissioning and producing temporary and long-term public arts projects, creating public art strategies and visions for city-wide initiatives and leading publishing and research initiatives to improve the conditions for, and skills to produce, new forms of public art worldwide. Claire has developed an international reputation as a leading thinker in new approaches to public art policy and planning, and is dedicated to engaging those for whom the arts might have seemed irrelevant or inaccessible through transformative art and cultural experiences; advocating for the social value of the arts, and finding ways to catalyse positive change in specific places.

Claire was awarded a Paul Hamlyn Foundation Breakthrough Award for outstanding cultural entrepreneurs, 2009, and appointed MBE for Services to the Arts in the New Year's Honours List 2016.