



WHERE HAVE ALL THE BOOKS GONE?

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Many of the same books seem to appear on the shelves of every public library in the country, and yet some titles never appear at all. The reasons for this are complex, but mainly result from the marketing of books today, and from librarians' selection processes.

As books become increasingly treated like any other marketable product (series such as westerns or romances sold in blocks; *Mills and Boon* titles as gifts; moves towards developing advertising in books), publishing is veering away from its traditional 'profession of gentlemen' towards being almost totally profit-orientated and affected by 'market forces'. Everyone is scrabbling around for bestsellers, with lessening room for real experimental publishing; titles which are not selling are pulped by publishers, rather than incur high storage charges; the growth of multinational publishing companies is producing novels intended to suit markets in any part of the world (and, more sinisterly, a major market in South Africa — *Collins*, *Macmillan*, *Oxford University Press* for example, all have South African departments). One consequence of these forces is the failure by publishers of books for adults to identify and deal with major issues such as racism and sexism in their books, issues which are clearly being taken on by publishers for children. Racist series, such as the infamous titillating slaver novels (successors to *Mandingo* and *Falconhurst*), continue to grow, and the packaging of even middle-of-

the-road paperback novels becomes increasingly sexist (for example recent re-issues of novels by James Hadley Chase, Erie Stanley Gardner and even Alberto Moravia). Whilst the number of publishers continues to grow, the real range of materials available is still therefore constrained; there is no acceptance by most publishers that social criticism (of racism, sexism, class bias, ageism) is valid and thus no tackling of these issues in their books.

The second range of issues lies around the sources used by many library authorities for purchasing stock for their libraries. Many still order from booklists and bibliographies, such as the weekly booktrade listing, *Bookseller*, or the more comprehensive catalogue, *British National Bibliography*, but neither of these contains annotations, and most small-press titles are omitted, so much dependence is placed on *knowing* an author or publisher. Hence perpetuation of some titles.



Librarians may also visit bookshops, but, outside large towns, this may still not give much of a range, and, with cuts in local government expenditure, travelling expenses are often the first to go. To fill these gaps, library suppliers have developed, supplying new titles on approval and purchased titles ready-processed. This sounds ideal — but the range provided by library suppliers can best be described as the middle of the middle of the road. It is very rare to receive anything from community, left wing or small press publishers, and, indeed, works from major houses such as *Virago*, *Sheba*, *The Women's Press* and the *Gay Men's Press* are often excluded. In any subject there will be a range of titles from the major publishers but very little else. Duplicated throughout the country, this leads to a standardised stock.

The third problem area is one associated with librarians themselves: selection. Since the inauguration of the public library service

in the 1850s it has become increasingly middle class in tone, both of public and staff. Part of this is reflected in some librarians' quest for 'excellence', a belief that, for example, paperbacks or popular materials should not form part of a library's stock. Another view is that libraries should be 'balanced', which usually means the exclusion of socialist, anti-racist or anti-sexist materials on the grounds of their bias, without recognising the inbuilt biases of the production, marketing and selection processes. So libraries continue to claim to buy everything (a justification made for stocking racist and sexist titles) which is obviously an impossibility.

It is time that libraries abandoned their faked 'neutrality', and began to serve their real communities, not just the minority of Sunday-paper readers who make most noise over their readers' requests. Positive efforts need to be made to visit a greater range of bookshops (including those like Sisterwrite or Soma who specialise in anti-sexist or multi-cultural materials) and to search out titles which will not arrive through normal selection channels. Librarians need too to strengthen their links with the local community to ensure support for their policies and to increase their awareness of the use made of their bookstock. Local authorities which vaunt their equal opportunities policies should be seen to carry them out, not just in terms of recruiting staff, but through services, encouraging librarians to develop written policies for positively discriminating in favour of traditionally badly served and ignored sections of the community, by developing collections of materials related to black and women's experience, for example, and by refusing to stock racist or sexist materials. These developments must ensure that librarians are accountable, through the elected council, to their community and are providing a service they really want. D

