

The importance of literature in and from a working-class context

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You know, I hate that title. If I'm being honest, I hate the term 'working class'. It is such a nebulous, outdated and unhelpful term as it tends to not describe individuals or demographics very accurately, certainly not in this modern global society.

But let us fix on a definition before we get much further, so we're all on the same page as to actually *who* we are talking about, as well as *what*.

The Oxford dictionary defines 'working class' as 'the social group consisting of people who are employed for wages, especially in manual or industrial work', which is particularly unhelpful.

Now we all accept the term 'working class' means those on the bottom rungs of our social strata. Those with 'few means'; we are certainly not describing bankers or academics, our highest earners, or our political leaders, and yet this term could easily be applied to the vast majority of people – 'those employed for wages'. If this term only refers to 'the poor', then does that mean the privileged don't work? I'm pretty convinced they'd object profusely to that claim... almost as much as being referred to themselves as 'working class'... Let's look elsewhere.

The Cambridge English Dictionary defines 'working class' as 'a social group that consists of people who earn little money, often being paid only for the hours or days that they work, and who usually do physical work' which seems a little more accurate. If we choose to move away from these rigid definitions, we find ourselves closer to the classical Marxist root of the term as referring to individuals who sell their labour power for wages and who do not themselves own the means of production.

They are not the bosses. They are the bossed.

The term 'working class' is a rebrand of an earlier term – the labouring class. When our society was more feudal (and some would argue that is very much the direction our society is heading back towards), there was a clearer distinction between those who worked and those that benefitted from such work. Now as thinking became more progressive, it became unpalatable to be so 'on the nose' and 'working class' was rebranded to give it an impression of empowerment.

It still means the same today as it did then; a division between the 'have' and 'have nots'. Between an access to power, and none.

Interestingly, these definitions are used by the privileged to describe a group outside of themselves. They carry a lack of genuine acknowledgement of the true position and circumstances of those in the lower strata of society, but more than that, they avoid the truth. We have become very uncomfortable calling people 'poor'. I would argue, not due to the fact that there are indeed people who are poor in finances, circumstances and opportunities, but we don't like to call people 'poor' because it highlights our own complicity in their circumstances; we've all agreed that in a modern society it is entirely acceptable there are those that

cannot feed or heat themselves adequately, including the working poor. God forbid we actually acknowledge that within ourselves.

For my purposes, I will define working class as: those who have had to choose between eating or heating; those for whom university is an enormous decision not a given, an aspiration not an expectation. According to current statistics, that's around 14 million people in the UK. Many have jobs, homes and families.

This is who we are going to refer to when we speak of 'the working class'. I myself come from a working-class background. Hence why I'm so damn chippy about it. I was raised on a social housing estate in Leicester by a doting mum, amidst very little opportunity and few routes for success. Christmas was something that was saved up for all year long, so that I wouldn't go without; so my mum would push me five miles in a pram to a car boot sale, buy a teapot, make the journey back, clean it up and the following week take me in the pram (with a box of items on my knee and a paste table under her arm) then she would sell the teapot she had bought the previous week for a 20 pence profit. She would keep a little red budget book that contained columns of pennies balancing (not pounds). She was incredible and did a whole lot with very little. We were poor. But not in spirit. Even under difficult economic circumstances (and being a single parent of a mixed-race child in the 1980s was – ooof, heady!), our little ground-floor flat was filled with joy. Always. Constant laughter, banter and in-jokes that would last us and be told regularly for decades. Rich daily conversations that ran the gamut from Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles to the fall of the Berlin Wall. Board games and chess marathons that lasted days. Like I say, she did a whole lot with very little and would always encourage me to pursue anything that interested me. Even from our societal position,

she believed that if you were happy, then you were rich, and you should spend your time doing what you loved.

And for me that was reading.

I started reading very young. I'd read anything I could. Anything that came to be in front of me. I'd go into the cupboard and sit on the sideboard, reading the labels on the tinned beans and peas; I'd put on Ceefax instead of the TV and read the horoscopes and holiday adverts. Being poor, catalogues were a big part of growing up, and although my careful mum would never incur debt ('Neither a borrower nor a lender be!') she would get the catalogues so I could read the descriptions. And I would. From the clothes, into the home and garden section and out via the toys. Every page. By the time I was seven, I had read a lot of Mills and Boon. At 11, my library was an odd mix of Mad comics and Clive Barker. I drank words. They danced around me, and there would be those amazing times when I would lose myself and the words would pick me up and catapult me elsewhere. My mum saw this and, like everything else I showed a passion for, she encouraged it, and our weekend trips to the car boots became scavenger hunts for literature.

Now we weren't just looking for teapots and bits of cutlery, but books! Now car boots in the 1980s were miraculous beasts. Sprawling Aladdin's caves with every few feet bringing a vista of new things. I would hunt in boxes, lifting rugs to find hidden treasures. And imagine when there was actually just a stall filled with books? Those immaculate rows of words, ready for the consuming? The books were priced in pennies, but when the household budgets were already pounds under, they were very much 'luxury items'; nonetheless my mum would find a way. She fully understood the

importance of them. The need for them. *My* need for them, in a way I wouldn't understand until much, much later.

She knew books held keys to worlds that people such as us wouldn't usually access. Not just within their subjects, or through their escapism, but in what books represent: intelligence and learning.

Educating Rita by the Liverpool playwright Willy Russell still holds up today because the gap between the upper parts of society and those working to survive or trying to rise can still be astronomical. It is often our environment and our education, or lack of it, that is an obstacle, not our abilities or desires. (And I mean 'education' not only in terms of school years, but in the wider sense of knowledge, skills... not simply knowing the right things to say, but the right way to behave...)

From the top looking down, this 'gap' may not look very wide, but the view from the bottom up where your financial means are as limited as the opportunities you're presented with, it can seem insurmountable. The things we dream of and the aspirations we have are often far, far removed from our reality. They are not for us. Not for people *like* us. We often invalidate our own abilities and strengths as they do not match with what we have been told is valuable in this world. We are not 'smart', we are not learned. We see who has success and means on TV, and in magazines and books; they do not sound like us or use the words we use. The business leaders, spokespeople, the wealthy and powerful, the bosses and people leading their countries, they speak with a confidence, an intrinsic privileged knowledge of themselves that allows them to convey that they have all of the answers. My very bright, woke mum understood this – *successful* people know all the right words.

For many working-class people, we aren't taught the right words. The 'magic spells' that enable you to succeed, those little nuggets of expression or information that tell the other person in the room 'I know what I'm talking about'. It is a lexicon developed from childhood and carried on throughout our growth that can only be obtained from a very limited number of sources – literature, university or being surrounded by those happy enough to share that knowledge with us. It is a lack of access that prevents many of us from achieving beyond our circumstances. Working-class people, we're not thick, we're just uneducated in the ways that have been decided, by the privileged, to hold back the keys to success. The smartest people I know have never been to university and speak in a way that would be described as 'street', but they could sit on any Board or in Cabinet and stand mind-to-mind with any honourable or learned gentleman. However, the 'room where it happens' – as it's put in *Hamilton* - is barred to the likes of us, in part due to the aforementioned lack of the right 'magic spells'.

As soon as we open our mouths, we are 'found out'; we aren't formally educated, and therefore our opinion is somehow less valid because of our 'accent'. It shows we are not from the circles that have been chosen to produce 'proper' thinking and valuable insight. I myself have experienced this on numerous occasions. You know, I'll be in the midst of conversation, I'll mispronounce a word and, instantly, the whole conversation is derailed to make way for criticism, and it's just an attempt to deflect and pour cold water on your valid point. And unfortunately, as I have often had to point out, mocking someone for mispronouncing a word does no more than highlight one's own ignorance and prejudice – if you mispronounce a word, it's because you learnt that word by reading.

Literature educates in fundamental ways that many who are surrounded by books, or have access to knowledge readily, take for granted. Books form

worldviews, they inspire, provide fuel for aspiration, build and hone our moral compasses in safely theoretical environments, they help us understand our place in the world, or a really good book can even completely change our life trajectory. They can make us believe we can be kings; and some books can even teach how to actually become a king. Every story we absorb touches us, somewhere; and reading can lead us to ideas and thoughts that open opportunities and possibilities that simply were not present before.

There are barriers, tangible and imperceptible, that can keep you from your dreams, but that can be traversed with knowledge.

I am now a CEO of an international organisation and, as you may have guessed, I didn't go to a university. Now I credit a large part of the position I find myself in to the fact I read so much when I was younger.

I was incredibly fortunate; I had an infinitely supportive mum, who fed and entirely supported my love for literature, fuelled by an unending supply of material from markets and car boots. But what of others and their ability to access reading? The stable environment? The access to cheap materials?

Access to literature is everywhere, so what is the problem?

Now the internet doesn't count. In truth, although a repository of information, the haze of flashing games and tantalising nuggets of nonsense keep supposedly grown-up minds addled, let alone those of impressionable young people, so I think we can cut them some slack. On top of that, many don't have internet. Again, something that many may find hard to believe but only 47% of people on low incomes have broadband. Remember that little red budget book of my mum's? That is the reason.

And as us elitist bibliophiles will testify, the fizz of a screen can't compete with the page; the truth is that when you read a book you fall into it – when you read on a screen it comes at you.

Libraries are being closed. Nearly 800 in the UK in the past decade. Now some would say there is no longer need for them, but I'd disagree. For me, they were sacramental sanctuaries. Libraries demand quiet and reflection. They are meditative spaces. They're a place where the world is elsewhere, where I could focus, study, learn and absorb. When you come from a chaotic environment, this peace can be invaluable. They're a repository open to all, within the community, that allows a space akin to... well, a self-motivated university.

The current public conversation regarding inequality has shown it to be entrenched in every aspect of society, so perhaps now is the time for the conversation as regards education and access? Isn't it only right that we ensure that everybody has access to the same opportunity and information?

In fact, I'll go one step further: isn't it imperative? Now if we look at our planet, it's in a bit of a state and it demands a unified approach, the unity of us all. There isn't a single organisation, government or country that can change the trajectory we find ourselves on alone. It is going to take the unified effort of us all. Be it new technologies and councils of academics working out how to fix the planet, or down to me making sure I'm doing my recycling. The problems we face traverse class entirely, and so unless we are all on the same page, have access to the same stories, get taught the same spells, we're all probably a little bit doomed.

If we are to survive as a species, isn't it essential that we ALL get to know the stories?

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Fraser Ayres

Fraser is an award-winning actor/writer/director as well as CEO and founder of the TriForce Creative Network and dandi.org.uk; an organisation set up in 2003 with a core ethos of 'inclusivity' that promotes equal opportunities in the entertainment industry.

He is mixed race (Barbadian/Scottish), born and raised in Leicester, from a single parent, working-class family. This very much informs all his work on and off-screen.

Fraser is responsible for creating the only comedy panel show about Black history, *'Sorry, I Didn't Know'*, and his writing includes *In the Long Run*, *Eastenders*, and *Lagging*, alongside radio productions such as *Maynard* for BBC Radio 4 (receiving the 2021 Imison Award) and *Space is the Place*, a five-part dramatization of the lives of the jazz greats for Jazz FM.

A recording of this talk can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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