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Philip Pullman

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## PROPOSITION

### On the closure of public libraries of Oxfordshire

Philip Pullman\*

*Philip Pullman writes books for children. His best known is probably the His Dark Materials trilogy, Northern Lights, The Subtle Knife and The Amber Spy-glass. His most contentious probably The Good Man Jesus and the Scoundrel Christ. He writes not so much to explain as to allow the reader's own imagination to work on his words. The same purpose is at the core of his belief in the value of public libraries. The debate on the role and future of public libraries in the UK was marked by the accusation that authors had their own interests in mind when they objected to library closures. Philip Pullman leapt to the attack. This is an edited version of his mauling of Oxfordshire County Council.*

You hardly need me to give you the facts. Everyone is aware of the situation. The government, in the Dickensian person of Eric Pickles, has cut the money it gives to local government, and passed on the responsibility for making the savings to local authorities. Some of them have responded enthusiastically, some less so; some have decided to protect their library services, others have hacked into theirs like the fanatical Bishop Theophilus in the year 391 laying waste to the Library of Alexandria and its hundreds of thousands of books of learning and scholarship.

Here in Oxfordshire we are threatened with the closure of 20 out of our 43 public libraries. Keith Mitchell, when leader of the county council, declared in the *Oxford Times* that the cuts are inevitable, and invited us to suggest what we would do instead. What would we cut? Would we sacrifice care for the elderly? Or would youth services feel the axe? I think we should not accept his invitation. It's not our job to cut services. It's his job to protect them. Nor should we respond to the fatuous idea that libraries can stay open if they are staffed by volunteers. What patronising nonsense. Do our councillors think the job of a librarian is so simple, so empty of content, that anyone can step up and do it for a thank-you and a cup of tea? Do they think that all a librarian does is tidy the shelves? And who are these volunteers? Who are these people whose lives are so empty, whose time spreads out in front of them like the limitless steppes of central Asia, who have no families to look after, no jobs to do, no responsibilities of any sort, and yet are so wealthy that they can commit hours of their time every week to working for nothing? Who are these volunteers?

The fact is that if there is anyone who has the time and the energy to work for nothing in a good cause, they are *already* working for one of the voluntary sector day centres, or running a local football team, or helping out with the league of friends in a hospital, or busy with one of the many activities that bind our communities together. What's going to make them stop doing that and start working in a library? Which

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\*Email: [philippullman@btinternet.com](mailto:philippullman@btinternet.com)

voluntary activity would our councilors like them to stop doing, and run the library service instead? The council is hoping that the youth service, which by a strange coincidence is also going to lose 20 centres, will be staffed by – guess what – volunteers. Are these the same volunteers, or a different lot of volunteers?

This is the Big Society, you see. It must be big, to contain so many volunteers. But there's a prize being dangled in front of these imaginary volunteers. People who want to save their library, we're told, are going to be "allowed to bid" for some money from a central pot. We must sit up and beg for it, like little dogs, and wag our tails when we get a bit. The sum first mentioned was £200,000. Divide that between the 20 libraries to be closed and it comes to £10,000 each, which does not seem like very much to me. Of course, it is not going to be equally divided. Some bids will be preferred, others rejected. And then comes a trick: they "generously" increase the amount to be bid for. It's not £200,000. It's £600,000. It's a victory for the volunteers. Hoorah for the Big Society! We've 'won' some more money!

Oh, but wait a minute. This isn't £600,000 for the libraries. It turns out that this is the amount to be bid for by everyone who runs anything at all. All those volunteers bidding like mad will soon chip away at the £600,000. A day care centre here, a special transport service there, an adult learning course somewhere else, all full of keen-eyed volunteers bidding away like mad, and before you know it the amount available to libraries has suddenly shrunk. Why should libraries have a whole third of all the Big Society money?

But just for the sake of simplicity, let's imagine it's only libraries. Imagine two communities that have each been told their local library is going to be closed. One of them is full of people with generous pension arrangements, plenty of time on their hands, lots of experience of negotiating planning applications and that sort of thing, broadband connections to every household, two cars in every drive, neighbourhood watch schemes in every road, all organised and ready to go. Now I like people like that. They are the backbone of many communities. I approve of them and of their desire to do something for their villages or towns. I'm not knocking them, I'm not mocking them.

But they do have certain advantages that the other community, the second one I'm talking about, does not. *There* people are out of work, there are a lot of single parent households, young mothers struggling to look after their toddlers, and as for broadband and two cars, they might have a slow old computer if they're lucky and a beaten-up old van and they dread the MOT test – people for whom a trip to the centre of Oxford takes a lot of time to organise, a lot of energy to negotiate, getting the children into something warm, getting the buggy set up and the baby stuff all organised, and the bus isn't free, either – you can imagine it. Which of those two communities will get a bid organised to fund their local library?

But one of the few things that make life bearable for the young mother in the second community at the moment is a weekly story session in the local library, the one just down the road. She can go there with the toddler and the baby and sit in the warmth, in a place that's clean and safe and friendly, a place that makes her and the children welcome. But has she, have any of the mothers or the older people who use the library got all that hinterland of wealth and social confidence and political connections and administrative experience and spare time and energy to enable them to be volunteers on the same basis as the people in the first community? And, as I said before, how many people can volunteer to do this, when they're already doing so much else?

What I personally hate about this bidding culture is that it sets one community, one group, one school, against another. If one wins, the other loses. I've always hated it. It started coming in when I left the teaching profession 25 years ago, and I could see the way things were going then. In a way, it's an abdication of responsibility. We elect people to decide things, and they don't really want to decide, so they set up this bidding nonsense and then they aren't really responsible for the outcome. "Well, if the community really wanted it, they would have put in a better bid ... Nothing I can do about it ... My hands are tied ...."

And it always results in victory for one side and defeat for the other. It's set up to do that. It's imported the worst excesses of market fundamentalism into the one arena that used to be safe from them, the one part of our public and social life that used to be free of the commercial pressure to win or to lose, to survive or to die, which is the very essence of the religion of the market. Like all fundamentalists who get their clammy hands on the levers of political power, the market fanatics are going to kill off every humane, life-enhancing, generous, imaginative and decent corner of our public life. I think that little by little we're waking up to the truth about the market fanatics and their creed. We're coming to see that old Karl Marx had his finger on the heart of the matter when he pointed out that the market in the end will destroy everything we know, everything we thought was safe and solid. It is the most powerful solvent known to history. "Everything solid melts into air", he said. "All that is holy is profaned."

Market fundamentalism, this madness that's infected the human race, is like a greedy ghost that haunts the boardrooms and council chambers and committee rooms from which the world is run these days. In the world I know about, the world of books and publishing and bookselling, it used to be the case that a publisher would read a book and like it and publish it. They'd back their judgement on the quality of the book and their feeling about whether the author had more books in him or in her, and sometimes the book would sell lots of copies and sometimes it wouldn't, but that didn't much matter because they knew it took three or four books before an author really found his or her voice and got the attention of the public. And there were several successful publishers who knew that some of their authors would never sell a lot of copies, but they kept publishing them because they liked their work. It was a human occupation run by human beings. It was about books, and people were in publishing or bookselling because they believed that books were the expression of the human spirit, vessels of delight or of consolation or enlightenment.

Not any more, because the greedy ghost of market madness has got into the controlling heights of publishing. Publishers are run by money people now, not book people. The greedy ghost whispers into their ears: why are you publishing that man? He doesn't sell enough. Stop publishing him. Look at this list of last year's books: over half of them weren't bestsellers. This year you must only publish bestsellers. Why are you publishing this woman? She'll only appeal to a small minority. Minorities are no good to us. We want to double the return we get on each book we publish. So decisions are made for the wrong reasons. The human joy and pleasure goes out of it; books are published not because they're good books, but because they're just like the books that are in the bestseller lists now, because the only measure is profit.

The greedy ghost is everywhere. That office block isn't making enough money: tear it down and put up a block of flats. The flats aren't making enough money: rip them apart and put up a hotel. The hotel isn't making enough money: smash it to the ground and put up a multiplex cinema. The cinema isn't making enough money:

demolish it and put up a shopping mall. The greedy ghost understands profit all right. But that's all he understands. What he doesn't understand is enterprises that don't make a profit, because they're not set up to do that but to do something different. He doesn't understand libraries at all, for instance. That branch – how much money did it make last year? Why aren't you charging higher fines? Why don't you charge for library cards? Why don't you charge for every catalogue search? Reserving seven books – you should charge a lot more for that. Those bookshelves over there – what's on them? Philosophy? And how many people looked at them last week? Three? Empty those shelves and fill them up with celebrity memoirs. That's all the greedy ghost thinks libraries are for.

Now of course I'm not blaming Oxfordshire County Council for the entire collapse of social decency throughout the Western world. Its powers are large, its authority is awe-inspiring, but not that awe-inspiring. The blame for our current situation goes further back and higher up even than the majestic office currently held by the leader of the council. It goes even higher up and further back than the substantial, not to say monumental, figure of Eric Pickles. To find the true origin you'd have to go on a long journey back in time, and you might do worse than to make your first stop in Chicago, the home of the famous Chicago School of Economics, which argued for the unfettered freedom of the market and as little government as possible.

And you could go a little further back to the end of the nineteenth century and look at the ideas of 'scientific management', as it was called, the idea of Frederick Taylor that you could get more work out of an employee by splitting up his job into tiny parts and timing how long it took to do each one, and so on – the beginning of modern mass production, another stage in the dehumanisation of work and the alienation of the worker. And you could go on, further back in time, way back before recorded history. The ultimate source is probably the tendency in some of us, part of our psychological inheritance from our far-distant ancestors, the tendency to look for extreme solutions, absolute truths, abstract answers. All fanatics and fundamentalists share this tendency, which is so alien and unpleasing to the rest of us. The theory says they must do such-and-such, so they do it, never mind the human consequences, never mind the social cost, never mind the terrible damage to the fabric of everything decent and humane. I'm afraid these fundamentalists of one sort or another will always be with us. We just have to keep them as far away as possible from the levers of power.

But I'll finish by coming back to libraries. I want to say something about my own relationship with libraries. It is sometimes said that we authors who defend libraries are only doing it because we have a vested interest – because we're in it for the money. No, it isn't for the money. I'm doing it for love. Love is not a vague feeling of goodwill, it's a passionate attachment to something very particular. Books, for example, the particular books that libraries have brought to me. I still remember the first library ticket I ever had. It must have been about 1957. My mother took me to the public library just off Battersea Park Road and enrolled me. I was thrilled. All those books, and I was allowed to borrow whichever I wanted! And I remember some of the first books I borrowed and fell in love with: the Moomin books by Tove Jansson; a French novel for children called *A Hundred Million Francs*; why did I like that? Why did I read it over and over again, and borrow it many times? I don't know. But what a gift to give a child, this chance to discover that you can love a book and the characters in it, you can become their friend and share their adventures in your own imagination.

And the secrecy of it! The blessed privacy! No-one else can get in the way, no-one else can invade it, no-one else even knows what's going on in that wonderful space that opens up between the reader and the book. That open democratic space full of thrills, full of excitement and fear, full of astonishment, where your own emotions and ideas are given back to you clarified, magnified, purified, valued. You're a citizen of that great democratic space that opens up between you and the book. And the body that gave it to you is the public library. Can I possibly convey the magnitude of that gift?

Somewhere in Blackbird Leys, somewhere in Berinsfield, somewhere in Botley, somewhere in Benson or in Bampton, to name only the communities beginning with B whose libraries are going to be abolished, somewhere in each of them there is a child right now, there are children, just like me at that age in Battersea, children who only need to make that discovery to learn that they too are citizens of the republic of reading. Only the public library can give them that gift.

A little later, when we were living in north Wales, there was a mobile library that used to travel around the villages and came to us once a fortnight. I suppose I would have been about sixteen. One day I saw a novel whose cover intrigued me, so I took it out, knowing nothing of the author. It was called *Balthazar*, by Lawrence Durrell. The Alexandria Quartet – we're back to Alexandria again – was very big at that time; highly praised, made much fuss of. It's less highly regarded now, but I'm not in the habit of dissing what I once loved, and I fell for this book and the others, *Justine*, *Mountolive*, *Clea*, which I hastened to read after it. I adored these stories of wealthy cosmopolitan bohemian people having affairs and talking about life and art and things in that beautiful city. Another great gift from the public library.

Then I came to Oxford as an undergraduate, and all the riches of the Bodleian Library, one of the greatest libraries in the world, were open to me – theoretically. In practice, I didn't dare go in. I was intimidated by all that grandeur. I didn't learn the ropes of the Bodleian till much later, when I was grown up. The library I used as a student was the old public library. One day I saw a book by someone I'd never heard of, Frances Yates, called *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*. I read it enthralled and amazed. It changed my life, or at least the intellectual direction in which I was going. It certainly changed the novel – my first – that I was tinkering with instead of studying for my final exams. Again, a life-changing discovery, only possible because there was a big room with a lot of books and I was allowed to range wherever I liked and borrow any of them.

One final memory, this time from just a couple of years ago: I was trying to find out where all the rivers and streams ran in Oxford, for a book I'm writing called *The Book of Dust*. I went to the Central Library and there, with the help of a clever member of staff, I managed to find some old maps that showed me exactly what I wanted to know, and I photocopied them, and now they are pinned to my wall where I can see exactly what I want to know. So yes, I'm writing a book, and yes, I hope it'll make some money. But I'm not praising the public library service for money. I love the public library service for what it did for me as a child and as a student and as an adult. I love it because its presence in a town or a city reminds us that there are things above profit, things that profit knows nothing about, things that have the power to baffle the greedy ghost of market fundamentalism, things that stand for civic decency and public respect for imagination and knowledge and the value of simple delight. Leave the libraries alone. You don't know the value of what you're supposed to be looking after. It is too precious to destroy.