**Chapter 30: The underestimated importance of reading and libraries**

I began this memoir with the story of a seven-year-old girl who fell in love with books when she entered a library full of them. The realisation that she could borrow any one from that treasure trove of knowledge and imagination, opened the world to her.

You wouldn’t be reading this if I had failed my 11+. I tracked down a fellow pupil from Hart Lane Junior School. He’s now a Professor at St Andrews. He also passed and it opened doors for him too. Our school must have got something right, but I believe that developing a love of reading was the key that unlocked a parallel universe for me.

Michael Rosen, the famous children’s author, was the curator of stories at the Story Museum when I cast him away on Oxtopia. He told me that the evidence from everywhere in the world is that children who read for pleasure, do well academically. They find a lifelong friend in books. My story is evidence of the role they play in social mobility for kids whose parents can’t afford to buy books. My community’s library is small but it has access to two million books, provides free research facilities and free internet and is a busy community space which welcomes everyone as equals. The cost of running our library for a year was a mere £23,000. It's amazing value for money.

In December 2010, we received unbelievable news. As part of the austerity cuts caused by the 2008 financial crisis, twenty Oxfordshire libraries were to close, all in villages or suburbs without a surplus of amenities. The council’s plan was to spend a little more on the larger town libraries and encourage old people and mothers to get on buses with their pushchairs and children and take an hour there and back. Really? Could the men and women who run this country have so little grasp of how the real world works?

Much has been written about the 2008 financial collapse of the banking, and I’ll leave it to my betters to explain why and how a deregulated mortgage market in the USA caused a global financial meltdown. In the UK, the Conservative-Liberal Democratic coalition government decided that the best way to resolve this crisis was by massive state cutbacks across all sectors. There was, at the time, substantial economic data from twenty plus years of neoliberalism implemented in other countries, namely Latin America, that it didn’t work at all. Neoliberal polices impoverished a people who were already suffering, reduced socio-economic mobility (unlike libraries) and transferred assets upwards.

I felt angry.

I contacted Reg Little the reporter on *The Oxford Times*. I couldn’t do it now because the paper no longer has a dedicated reporter. Reg asked if a librarian would talk to him. I asked our library manager, my friend Dominique Henderson. The librarians were under threat if they spoke to the press but she agreed on condition that her identity wasn’t revealed. Thanks to her, the news of our campaign to oppose the closure was on the front page of the paper the next day. Parish Councillor and library supporter Paddy Landau and I met to discuss what to do. We set up the Save Oxfordshire Libraries Campaign to make sure we spoke and acted as one. My gut feeling was that would not be enough. The politicians and civil servants would easily outmanoeuvre us on their territory. We needed to find a way to outmanoeuvre their outmanoeuvring.

Oxford Castaway, Korky Paul, the illustrator of the popular children’s books featuring Winnie the Witch, was popular at St Swithun’s school so I rang him and asked, ‘Would you lead our Pied Piper Procession?’ He agreed.

On Monday Feb 7th at 3.30p.m, a procession 300 yards long snaked its way through the village to share tea with the leader of the council. The children carried posters and noisy musical instruments. Korky wore his Winnie socks and followed Phil Freizinger, a flautist. The regional TV and the press filmed in the packed hall. I didn’t allow political speeches. The adults gave the leader of the council, Keith Mitchell, 600 letters and a petition, the children their letters and posters. Then we allowed him to speak. But… he then had to sit and listen as Korky and MG Harris read to awed youngsters and interested adults, and to the children's choir sing.

‘Consider yourself At Home. Consider yourself one of the family.’

The crowd filled the stage behind Keith and spilled out into the foyer and beyond. Keith had expected maybe fifty or so voters but what he got was a packed gathering where the youngest was a baby and the oldest was the former chair of FOKL and KOA, the castaway Charles Swaisland, aged 92.

Two days later, Keith Mitchell announced a rethink. None of Oxfordshire’s forty-three libraries would close. When it comes to protests, take a page from novelists: *show not tell.*

We thanked Korky by making him our honorary life president. I asked him again if he would be patron of our Build a Library campaign for the Nasio Trust. I'd suggested to Nancy that we donate some copies of Not so Black and White to libraries in west Kenya. There was a problem. In Mumias West, an area the size of Oxfordshire, there is not one library, neither in the community nor in schools. So we have set about raising the money to rectify that.

When Korky Paul comes to talk to the children of Kennington, our library manager, French citizen Dominique knows how to thank Korky: with a box of her madeleines.

**Madeleines Recipe by Dominique Henderson**

**Madeleines are easy to make, you just need time! I advise to start the day before you wish to enjoy them.**