



Hawkwood Books Blog: July 2024

Invisible Words by Eugene O'Toole

One of the most infuriating words that abounds in the literary industry today is “underrepresented”.

We hear this often when the next best thing splashes on to the scene with a page-turning blockbuster that is a must-read for newspaper reviewers competing with each other for the title of most progressive, worthy, enlightened etc.

We encounter it as writers submitting our work to agents—that line at the bottom of the site telling us how keen they are especially to receive submissions from “underrepresented” groups, making it abundantly clear that if you’re not one of them, don’t bother pressing “send”.

We see it all the time when we pick up a title lauded everywhere for its genius and garlanded in glory by the press pack only to discover upon reading it that it’s not, well, that … good.

Forgive me if you detect the metallic taste of bitterness, but you are correct.

That is what I feel: because the most “underrepresented” category in literature, art, film, indeed all creative pursuits is the one that continues to remain most invisible—the greying working majority who have spent their lives at the coalface putting their families first and their yearning to write a very emphatic second.

That is not to say that it is not important to help certain social groups that have, historically, not been invited to the party. The trouble is, doing so has become wildly, irrationally, selective.

I have no statistics, but I would bet my house that in this country a large majority of writers in the early stages of exploring their literary selves—be it poetry, short stories or novels—are older people, perhaps if they are lucky even recently retired, who have, for the first time in their lives, found a bit of headspace in which to do something they have always yearned to do: put pen to paper.

Maybe the children have grown up and left home at last, perhaps they have been able to go part-time in the run up to retirement, maybe they just suddenly find themselves with the focus they have lacked all those years toiling and managing a bustling household, or maybe they simply become aware that time is running out and their mortality is coming into focus.

Either way, these are the unsung, understated heroes of British creativity—and there are millions of them. They receive no help, no special treatment, no grants or encouragement, they just get on with things with quiet humility as they have all their working lives.

I know several people in this category, kitchen-table writers scratching out a few lines in between paying bills, and include myself within it. I have been writing fiction for just six years, somehow unable to exorcise this burning need prior to that because of the endless demands of my work, family, life in general. It is a passion I have nurtured since childhood, but one I was only able to act upon in my fifties. Think about that.

And now that I have begun at last to make what I regard as credible progress—thanks in large part to Hawkwood—I find myself encountering that irritating, unjust, and ironically unrepresentative term: “underrepresented”.

It is as if all the sacrifices I have made to get to this point are irrelevant because my work will never be judged on its merits, but on the criteria du jour selected by a powerful cartel that dominates the publishing world which judges *who* is worthy of merit, and not *what*.

There is a gaping, dishonest hole in the British literary industry—it hides behind the term “underrepresented” to salve a shallow conscience, but in so doing completely misses the point.