

A Conservative Backlash in UK Publishing?

The Case of Maggie Gee's *The White Family*

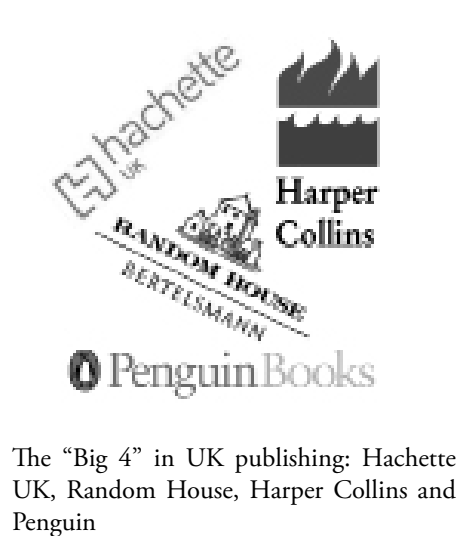
Sandra Müller

Maggie Gee's Roman *The White Family* wäre beinahe nie veröffentlicht worden. Im Gegensatz zu anderen Gegenwartsromanen, die das multikulturelle Großbritannien weit weniger kritisch sehen, wird man in Gee's Roman mit verschiedenen Formen von Rassismus konfrontiert. Sandra Müller (Berlin) zeigt in ihrem Artikel wie Konzentrationsprozesse im britischen Verlagswesen literarische Trends beeinflussen. Sie erklärt am Beispiel von *The White Family*, welchem Druck zur Anpassung Autorinnen und Autoren ausgesetzt sind.

Every year, about 133,000 books are published in the UK¹. And yet, even more manuscripts end up on the publishers' slushpiles for various reasons. So while some people may say tongue in cheek that there is almost one literary prize for each novel published in the UK, success does not come easy. Novels and other literary texts can be as creative, daring and experimental as they want, but if they are not published, the majority of people will never be able to read them. So the publishers have a considerable amount of power over what we can and cannot read.

For quite some time, novels about 'multicultural Britain' were omnipresent on bestseller listings; Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* and Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* are just two examples. One could have gained the impression that British authors, publishers and readers were all engaged in the discussion about the consequences of Empire and migration, the state of the nation, what it means to be British for various groups etc. However, while novels celebrating multicultural constellations have been selling well, texts which do not join the 'happy multicultural land'-chorus, texts which deal with conflicts and the not-so-happy sides of migration, discrimination and integration debates are not that easy to be found. Have they not been written? Were they simply too bad to be published?

Maggie Gee's novel *The White Family* is one example of a novel which deals with the challenges to multicultural-



The "Big 4" in UK publishing: Hachette UK, Random House, Harper Collins and Penguin

ism. It is a novel which explores the roots and results of stereotypes and racism, not only in uneducated communities, but rather in white middle-class families as well as immigrant communities. An acclaimed writer, Maggie Gee desperately tried to have her sixth novel published by her usual and then by other mainstream publishers, but nobody wanted to publish this difficult text.

The case of Maggie Gee's novel *The White Family* illustrates that the British publishing industry is not as innovation-friendly as they might want to make authors and readers believe, but rather increasingly conservative.

Something's Rotten in the Literary Field

In order to understand the difficulties Maggie Gee faced when trying to publish her novel *The White Family*,

we have to take a look at some developments in the publishing industry in the UK. At the beginning of the 20th century, most British publishers were mid-sized family-owned businesses. After the Second World War and a period of deregulation of the financial markets, the market became increasingly concentrated: big conglomerates bought formerly independent publishers or even other conglomerates.² Usually they kept the names of their new additions as imprints in order to cater to the needs and niches of different market segments. The consequence of such conglomeration is above all that a small number of companies owns and thus controls a large part of the market. In the UK, the "Big 4" (Hachette UK, Random House, Harper Collins and Penguin) own over 50% of the market share.³

Another effect is the market-oriented behaviour of such conglomerates. Rather than being interested in the production of books with high literary or artistic value or simply interesting books sticking out, they pursue the principle of maximizing profit. Whereas in the past many of the then independent publishers could afford to produce books that were less promising financially and to cross-finance the potential loss with some bestseller texts, the market-oriented idea behind products made by the conglomerates is that each product has to be self-sustaining, i.e. rather than cross-financing interesting but rather small editions, every

product has to at least break even.

Censorship and Conservative Publishing Patterns

This leads to market-censorship: the belief that a novel will not sell on the market, e.g. because of a difficult subject, sometimes suffices to not publish it at all. But how can one make sure that a novel earns enough money to break even?

One tool in this endeavour is called Book Scan. It is a service provided by the Nielsen Company that allows publishers to monitor the sales figures for every ISBN number. Thus, publishers can trace which titles did well and which ones did not and base decisions on future products on this data. The result is often a bandwagon effect: publishers try to repeat success stories they observed in the past. As a result they become more conservative, publishing again and again what has already become successful in economic terms.

However, there is no guarantee that similar books will also do well. Anamik Saha, who wrote his PhD thesis on “The Postcolonial Cultural Economy: The Politics of British Asian Cultural Production” at Goldsmiths, London, refers to a number of examples where producers “rely upon formulas that are known to have worked in the past”⁴, e.g. with Zahid Hussain’s *The Curry Mile* and Gautam Malkani’s *Londonstani*.

For David [Mitchell], Malkani – who caused a furore within the industry over the reportedly six-figure advance for his debut novel *Londonstani* – represents the cynical attempt by publishing houses to repeat past success, in this instance, emulating the ‘multiculturalist’ novels of Zadie Smith and Monica Ali. He explains how, as part of this overarching logic, novels get pitched and bought in this way.⁵

The novel *Londonstani*, however, was written for a completely different audience (i.e. young readers), fell short of those created expectations and did not ‘perform’ as well as expected on the market.

In the course of the attempts to make sure the published novels sell well,

marketing and sales departments have gained more power in the publishing houses. The predictions of these departments on whether they believe a novel will sell have a huge impact on the deci-



In her memoirs *My Animal Life*, published by Telegram in 2010, Maggie Gee gives us some insight into conservative publishing practices. (photo: <http://blog.southbankcentre.co.uk/2010/07/20/my-animal-life>)

sions whether to publish or not. Furthermore, marketing departments often get to decide on the title and pitch the novel, e.g. through the cover design and ads. I have come across some cases in which authors complained that their publishers would go as far as asking them to change not only their novel’s title but also major parts of their texts, e.g. because the ending seemed too dark as in the case of Helen Walsh’s novel *Once Upon a Time in England*.⁶ Whether an author is able to stick to his or her own plan or has to give in is a matter of various factors, not least the respective author’s standing in the literary field.

One example of a publisher overruling the author is Zahid Hussain’s *The Curry Mile*, as the author stated in an interview with Anamik Saha:

ZH: [The novel has] been very heavily in-

fluenced by my publisher as well. But it wasn’t quite what ... I would have published the first version.

AS: Which was the darker more subversive story

ZH: Oh yeah it was dark.

AS: So do you feel the publishers pushed it more commercially?

ZH: Yes ... the edginess was gone.⁷

Market-Orientation and Complicity in Nationalist Discourse

In an interview conducted by Anamik Saha, the author Rajeev Balasubramanyam draws a connection between the market-orientation of many publishers and a racist climate in Britain:

AS: Could you explain ‘market-orientated’ for me?

RB: [Y]ou get these kind of novels which are reductive in terms of identity. And I think that publishers encourage them because they know they can sell them, I think because it appeals to the particular nature of the racist climate today, which is a racism without calling it racism. A government which is extremely right-wing but uses the language of the liberal left. Multiculturalist novels fit that completely – a way of degrading Asian people while pretending to celebrate them.⁸

Saha’s conclusion is not only valid for Asian British cultural production: Rajeev draws an explicit line between the ideology of the market, aesthetics and cultural politics, where only those narratives that fit in with the dominant ideology – in this case a particular diluted, and unchallenging (and ideological) version of multicultural Britain – are invested in. Thus according to Rajeev, ‘multiculturalist novels’ have a complicit presence in a British nationalist discourse, and it is precisely their reductive representations of Asians that publishers deem marketable.⁹

Curious Rejection Letters and a Small Indie Taking a Chance

But let’s get back to *The White Family*. Maggie Gee received peculiar answers from her publishers why the novel would not be published:

The rejection letters were curious. Too

long, too insulting or self-justifying, some just inappropriate: one editor remarked that she 'simply disagreed', though generally you don't disagree with a novel. Many of them used the same adjectives; 'dark' was a favourite, which should have been amusing.¹⁰

Maggie Gee sees a combination of different factors as the reason for the rejection of her novel:

*I come to this conclusion: the novel was turned down partly, perhaps mainly, because the subject was unacceptable. Britain didn't want to think about racism. It wasn't ready, though one day it would be. In 1995, publishers turned their backs.*¹¹

Maggie Gee explains further that the novel was written in the wake of Stephen Lawrence's murder at a bus stop in London in 1993:

*What kind of country, what kind of family, might produce racists like the five white thugs [who killed Stephen Lawrence, S.M.]? This was what I needed to write about. What did it say about my city? For I had become a Londoner, and Stephen Lawrence was one of our own. But so were the thugs, the murderers.*¹²

After seven years Maggie Gee found a publisher willing to produce her novel: Saqi Books. This small independent publisher (and bookshop) actually spe-

cializes on non-fiction about the Middle East, but felt that her book was worth being published. They were proven right – by readers and critics alike. *The White Family* was shortlisted for the Orange Prize for Fiction in 2002. Saqi quotes *The Times* on their website:

*Anyone interested in Arab Culture in London today is aware of the invaluable role Saqi plays, not only as a focal point for the city's Middle Easterners, but also in making available pioneering, specialist and often controversial books that large publishers refuse to go near.*¹³

The White Family

Let's have a closer look at why the novel might have appeared too problematic for some – and why I think it is worth reading, both for its contents and the form. You'll find a plot summary in the box below.

Racism is a central topic in the novel. What is so special about Maggie Gee's way of dealing with it is that it is not only those characters one might put in the "uneducated" or "unlikable" box, but it is also a problem for the educated white middle-class family and those characters deemed likable. Furthermore, the Ghanaian characters and the ones with Jamaican backgrounds are

not exempt from believing in stereotypes based on ethnicity.

Dirk repeats his father's stereotypes and gets caught up in his nostalgia for post-war Britain. When his sister marries a black man, Kojo, Dirk slowly warms to him, but treats her second partner who is also black, Elroy, with contempt.

But eighteen months after she took up with Elroy, and to May's astonishment they started again, Dirk and his father, as if they'd learned nothing. 'Kojo was different,' Dirk insisted. 'Kojo wasn't like the others.' ... And that was that. May tried to make sense of it. People kept things in their brains in tight little boxes ... Because Dirk liked Kojo, Kojo stopped being black. But her son still hated all the other coloured people. (63)

Dirk's sister Shirley has a hard time trying to fit in with her new families, at first Kojo's Ghanaian family and later Elroy's Jamaican-British family. Kojo's sister and cousin make fun of her and condescendingly call her *obroni* (white person) and Shirley can't get "used to Viola and Delorice, their edge of resentment, their sass, their chill, the suspicion in their eyes when they looked at her" (303). But Shirley's attempt to explain their contempt is simplistic, too

Plot and Character Overview

The White Family revolves around the Whites who live in Hillesden Rise in London (probably a reference to Willesden or Hackney). Alfred, the head of the family, is the keeper of Albion Park, a Victorian park in the neighbourhood. After starting an unnecessary fight with a black family who had walked on the grass, Alfred suffers a heart attack. The Whites reunite at his side at the hospital: Alfred's wife May and their three children Darren, Shirley and Dirk.

This brings to light some conflicts between the family members and stories from the past. While Shirley's reaction to her father's authoritarian 'rule' and his racist and conservative attitudes is rebellion – she only dates black men, gets pregnant very young, moves out of the house, and marries a Ghanaian academic – her older brother and model-son Darren literally flees to start a new life in the USA. The youngest son, Dirk, stays with his mother and father and uncritically repeats his father's xenophobic prejudice. It is Dirk who in the end murders a young black student in Albion Park, a reference to the murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993. While Dirk and May try to play it down (he was just a foreigner, family first), Alfred reports his son to the police because he believes that "in the end, there's right and wrong" (332).

Racism is one central conflict in this novel, in its straight-forward forms as well as hidden and institutionalised racism. But the readers are not only confronted with discrimination from white characters against their black compatriots, but also the other way round, as well as racial stereotypes between Jamaican and Ghanaian characters.

Every chapter of the novel is told from a different perspective by one of the members of the White family and Thomas, a childhood family friend who now works in the local library. Other important characters are Kojo Asante, Elroy and Winston King. Kojo is Shirley's first husband, a Ghanaian academic who has a doctorate in comparative literature and teaches at a London university but later dies of cancer. Elroy King is Shirley's current partner. He was born and raised in London, but because his parents emigrated from Jamaica he is often discriminated against and seen as a foreigner. Winston is Elroy's little brother. He suffers from double discrimination because he is black and homosexual, and his sexual orientation is stigmatised in his Jamaican-British community and family. Winston is the student who gets killed by Dirk.

– she brushes it off, judging it as a normal reaction because all Jamaicans were “descendants of slavery” (303) and thus naturally hold a grudge. Shirley took in uncritically what Kojo had told her about the relations between Africans and Jamaicans (funny enough that he was the one who compared a country to a continent, an absurd and racist comparison that is often criticised if used by white people):

Elroy's family is Jamaican, though he was born in south London. That's partly why Elroy is jealous of Kojo, because he was African, and so highly educated. West Indians don't like Africans much and I always think it's jealousy. Africans have their own names, after all. West Indians don't. White people stole them. I felt so ashamed when Kojo told me West Indian names are all slave names. Slave owners stamping their names for ever ... and then there are the African's who don't like West Indians, 'slave babies'. The worst insult. (108)

Contact Zones

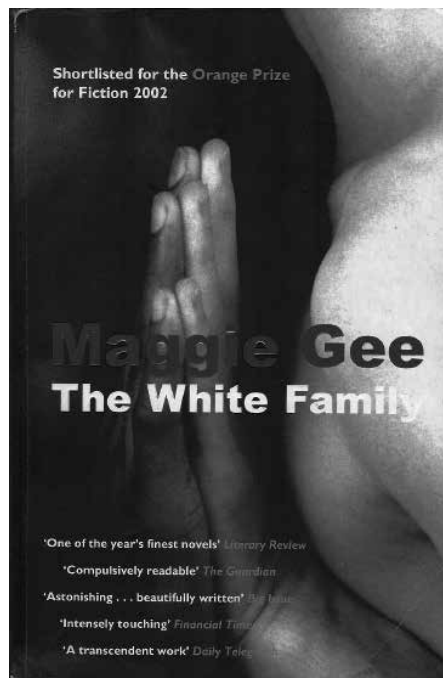
There are only very few spaces where the black and white characters meet; one is the church.

Whereas in Shirley's traditional church, which shows some references to the Church of England, everybody turns their heads at the sight of a mixed couple, the charismatic church the King family attends, is much more international and intercultural.

It was the warmth of hundreds of bodies, the majority black, but a true mixture, brown, pink, olive, yellow, old and young, Chinese, Japanese, even a few Indian faces. (302)

The sermon, however, does not work for Shirley, she feels it's more of a show or performance and strangely associates the preacher with Hitler when the former talks about the “new Battle of Britain” (307) and fires up the crowd with military vocabulary. Nevertheless, for Elroy's mother, this church is the place

... where she was happiest, where she felt accepted in this country at last. (But the church of England hadn't made her welcome, the church she had hoped would be her home. A hurt from fifty years ago,



never forgotten.) (304)

Winston King

Winston's character serves as a good example to show how Maggie Gee refrains from basing her characters' identities on only one facet, e.g. their ethnicity or faith. Winston is a student, young, gay, tall, black, British, a son and a brother, to name just the most important facets of his identity. However, the other characters in the novel often reduce him to only one of those aspects and make their judgments based on his appearance. When Winston hurries towards May, who slipped and fell on the street, losing her money and handbag, she only sees in him “an enormous black man looming out of the rain, panting, gasping, his golden eyes boring into hers” (117) She is scared to death, “[w]aiting for his shoe to crush her soft stomach” (131)

when he just wants to help her get back on her feet. And Thomas, the white librarian, feels “vaguely threatened” (31) when Winston comes to pick up some research notes he forgot on the previous day. Winston works on the connections between the discrimination of African-Americans and homosexuals and we are led to think that he is looking for a way of dealing with the double discrimination he experiences himself. Thomas, however, is scared of these “fanatical notes” (30): he believes they are a sign of revenge which Winston seeks for the decades of slavery and exploitation.

A Challenging Novel

Through the use of multiple perspectives which often contradict each other and confront the reader with different possibilities of perceiving a situation, and the constant confrontation with the inner perspectives and thoughts of the various characters, the novel keeps the readers on their toes. Nothing is just – forgive the expression – ‘black or white’. There are no ready-made value judgments *à la* ‘all racists are evil’ but rather complex pictures of the characters and their motivations. At the end of the day, none of the characters is free from making judgments based on prejudice, not even the supposedly educated or likable ones.

In addition, the language and style Maggie Gee uses make the novel stand apart from other easy-to-read contemporary books. As readers, we mostly read the different characters' thoughts and each and everyone has very distinct cognitive patterns, vocabulary, ideology etc., which makes it interesting but

Other novels by Maggie Gee

Dying, In Other Words. Harvester, 1981.

The Burning Book. Faber and Faber, 1983.

Light Years. Faber and Faber, 1985.

Grace. Heinemann, 1988.

Where Are the Snows? Heinemann, 1991.

Lost Children. Flamingo, 1994.

The Ice People. Richard Cohen Books, 1998.

The White Family. Saqi Books, 2002.

The Flood. Saqi Books, 2004.

My Cleaner. Saqi Books, 2005.

My Driver. Telegram Books, 2009.

also difficult at times. For instance it is often really exhausting to read Dirk's thoughts. It is not really a pleasure to be confronted with what could be going on in a racist thug's mind. His failures and self-hatred eventually boil over into violence:

I'm not a bloody wimp. I'm not a bloody woman. ... That was the end. Then I knew I had to kill them. It didn't matter who, I would have to fucking kill them. Kill Kill Fuck Fuck Kill (215).

But even Shirley, who is one of the characters with whom the reader can identify more easily, shows signs of racism when she sees Arab women on the street:

Arab men's women, she thought, contemptuously, then caught herself thinking it and was ashamed. So she was a bigot like the rest of her family. We all like to think we are better than someone. (71/72) This is one of the rare instances in which a character explicitly realises that he or she is biased.

And to get back to the scene in which May has her accident and Winston helps her up: when May realises that she has misjudged Winston, she feels "relief and shame" (132) but cannot admit – even to herself – that her reaction was caused by her prejudice. Instead, May tries to reassure herself that she is not racist: "I blame the light, for the misunderstanding. My eyes aren't good, but I'm not prejudiced. I never have been. Unlike poor Alfred." (143) However, the readers already know through information provided by the narrator that May was afraid and that it had something to do with her perception of Winston and of

black people in general.

The topic of racism and the ambivalent and multifaceted characterisations might be two of the elements which made the mainstream publishers fear that the novel could put off readers. If someone were to ask whose fault it is that thugs kill people like Stephen Lawrence or Elroy King in the novel, the answer might be: everyone to a certain extent. Not something most people would like to hear. Novels celebrating British multiculturalism might be more crowd-pleasing than those unveiling that nobody is completely innocent when it comes to racial stereotypes.

Conclusion

The verticalisation of the literary field in the UK (and elsewhere) which makes a few very powerful publishers and conglomerates dominate virtually everything has led to rather conservative spending patterns. The question of whether a book will sell has become the main concern of many conglomerates. With the results from marketing analyses, BookScan and of course the observations of trends concerning literary prizes, publishers try to emulate tested and approved results from the past.

In this conservative environment, Maggie Gee's novel *The White Family* was almost not published. *The White Family* does not celebrate the success of multicultural life but addresses uncomfortable topics such as racism – no matter what ethnicity you're from. In the rejection letters there are hints that this was too hot a topic for the mainstream publishers. It is therefore all the

more welcome that the small independent publisher Saqi Books published it nevertheless and made it possible for us to read this novel, which is definitely worth reading, in terms of its content as well as from an aesthetic point of view.

Notes:

1. According to data from Nielsen (2009): "Nielsen Book, the leading supplier of bibliographic information worldwide, announced today that the number of new books published in the UK in 2009 was 133,224." http://www.nielsenbookdata.co.uk/uploads/press/NielsenBook_BookProductionFigures3_Jan2010.pdf (accessed 15 January 2011).
2. Cf. Squires, Claire (2009). *Marketing Literature. The Making of Contemporary Writing in Britain*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. 19-27.
3. Cf. Tivnan, Tom and Philip Stone. "Review of 2009 – Tough at the Top." *TheBookseller.com* 21 January 2010. <http://www.thebookseller.com/in-depth/feature/110337-review-of-2009---tough-at-the-top.html> (accessed 1 January 2011).
4. Saha, Anamik (2010). "The Postcolonial Cultural Economy: The Politics of British Asian Cultural Production." Unpublished Manuscript (PhD thesis at Goldsmiths, London). 125.
5. Saha, Anamik (2010). 126.
6. Helen Walsh in a reading and discussion session at the British Council Walberberg Seminar in Berlin (January 2011). She referred to a fight she had with her publisher about the title of the novel as well as whether one of the protagonists may commit suicide in the end or not.
7. Saha, Anamik (2010). 102.
8. Saha, Anamik (2010). 102.
9. Saha, Anamik (2010). 103.
10. Gee, Maggie (2010). *My Animal Life*. London: Telegram. 180.
11. Gee, Maggie (2010). 180.
12. Gee, Maggie (2010). 175.
13. <http://www.saqibooks.com/> (accessed 3 February 2011).

Recommendations for further reading

- de Bellaigue, Eric. *British Book Publishing as a Business since the 1960s: Selected Essays*. London: The British Library 2004.
- Clark, Giles and Angus Phillips (eds.). *Inside Book Publishing*. 4th ed. London: Routledge 2008.
- English, James F. (ed.). *A Concise Companion to Contemporary British Fiction*. Malden, MA: Blackwell 2006.
- Squires, Claire. *Marketing Literature. The Making of Contemporary Writing in Britain*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2009.
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- The Booksellers Association: www.booksellers.org.uk (accessed 15 April 2011).
- The Publishers' Association: www.publishers.org.uk (accessed 15 April 2011).