

Queer Archives and Reprints

The 18th of November 2023 marked the twentieth anniversary of the repeal of Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988, a law that stopped councils and schools 'promoting the teaching of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship'. The anniversary provides an opportunity to reflect on the impact the legislation had on the lives of LGBTQ+ people whose access to books in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries in schools, libraries, and bookshops was radically suppressed.

Lurid Editions is a Bristol-based publishing house who publish 'reprints that refuse to fit in'. In June 2024, they will publish their third book *The Milkman's On His Way* by David Rees. As a South West-based author, Rees taught at the University of Exeter while writing his books, and the archives held at the University now contain a variety of documents and manuscripts from his collection. *Milkman* was displayed as part of an exhibition by Special Collections at the University. Through this, D-M Withers, Publishing Director for Lurid Editions, discovered the text and the history behind it. In a personal interview with me, Withers noted that at the university, 'there had recently been an exhibition dedicated to the Rees collections, curated by Annie Price, which highlighted *The Milkman's On His Way*. As someone whose education was shadowed by Section 28, my interest in the book was immediately piqued'. Now, this discovery of the *Milkman* manuscript has allowed for a regional publishing house to republish a text that holds significant value in queer history.

During my time as a Masters of Publishing student at the University of Exeter, I had the privilege of becoming a Publishing Intern for Lurid. As part of this work placement, I learned how archival material and the creation of new reprints of queer books has uncovered a world of texts that can be revealed to new audiences. I took a deep dive into Rees's archive, discovering his own opinions on different texts, including his own, as well as public and media receptions to the books that he had written. It revealed a rich history of LGBTQ+ publishing and writing from the twentieth century, as well as showcasing how the South West inspired and enriched Rees's books.

David Rees (1936–1993) was a writer of children's and young adult fiction primarily, while also working as a lecturer of education at the University of Exeter. He won the 1978 Carnegie Medal for his book *The Exeter Blitz* and published over thirty texts, including fiction, essays and short story collections. Often, his writing was set in Devon and Cornwall, as they were the areas he became familiar with due to his work in Exeter. Aside from his novel writing, Rees held a long-lasting post as an article writer and reviewer for *Gay Times*, *Express and Echo*, and *The Journal of the Royal Society of the Arts*. In his articles, he often referred to the lack of fiction that positively depicted gay male characters, themes and relationships, particularly noting that there was none available for young

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adults. In response, he wrote three young adult novels, *Quintin's Man* (1976), *In The Tent* (1979) and *The Milkman's On His Way* (1982), with the intention of changing the landscape of gay representation in fiction for teenagers. Like many men of his generation, Rees's life was indelibly marked by the AIDS crisis: in 1985 he was diagnosed as HIV positive. This diagnosis influenced Rees to write the book *The Wrong Apple* (1987), depicting a young man who has just been diagnosed with AIDS and is trying to come to terms with it, and then finds care and reassurance from a new friendship. In 1992, Rees was forced to stop writing as his illness worsened. He died a year later, on 22 May 1993.

Rees's literary papers are housed in Special Collections at the University of Exeter, stored alongside the artefacts of significant South West authors and organisations such as Ted Hughes, Agatha Christie, William Golding and the Arvon Foundation. The Rees archive consists of original manuscript and typescript drafts of his novels, short stories, poems, reviews, articles, speeches and interviews; as well as correspondence, reviews and newspaper clippings, explains University archivist Annie Price. While not all of his works are included in the archive, it does feature his most well-known novels such as *The Exeter Blitz*, *In The Tent* and *The Milkman's On His Way*. Alongside his own writings, the collection also contains newspaper articles about his works, including responses to his inclusion of homosexual characters in several of his books, which were often viewed as controversial due to the social attitudes of the time. Additionally, the archive holds a typescript draft of Rees's Carnegie Award acceptance speech, where he discusses his own career in depth from a personal perspective, describing his motivations behind his writing of certain themes. The speech also reflects on the importance of Exeter for Rees, not only within his books but for the network of writers that it provided for him. This included Sidney Robbins, founder of the magazine *Children's Literature in Education*, and Gene Kemp, winner of the Carnegie Medal in 1977, the year before Rees. Price explains that the speech shows Rees's love for Exeter and the influence of the city on his works. This passion for place is something he shares with many other South West writers represented in our archives, including Jack Clemo, Daphne du Maurier, and Charles Causley.

For reprint publishers like Lurid Editions, archives and libraries are important places to discover the existence of forgotten books. The curatorial role performed by archivists, according to Withers, highlights the vital role [they] perform in research – without Annie's curation it would have taken me longer to find the book, there is also the risk that I may never have found it. This provides a clear example of the use of the University archives for publishing – not only are they useful to find out more about previous writers and their publishing practices, they also allow publishers to rediscover manuscripts and texts that are out-of-print. Within the archives, the manuscripts are also surrounded by their relevant history, both authorial and publishing-business related, allowing for the

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publisher to become quickly invested in the story's rich historical narrative and context. It is this rediscovery of the past that has been lost that makes the reprint publishing business an important venture: the reward is knowing that the public will once again be able to access an author's hard work and a valuable piece of history.

Special Collections are now taking a proactive approach to the curation of their collections in order to highlight marginalized voices and lives that to date may have been overlooked. Price explains that 'since 2020, Special Collections has been undertaking work to identify problematic language, bias and erasure in our catalogue descriptions,' elaborating that this review was especially important regarding Rees's archive. According to Price, the archivists 'identified the omission of significant contextual information in the collection description for the David Rees literary papers; for example, that Rees self-identified as gay, and that he was one of the first writers in the UK to feature central gay characters in his books for children and young adults.' Thus, the collection description was modified, making his work more identifiable for researchers. Not only is Rees's archive therefore an insight into how queer history affected the restrictive outreach of his books, but it also presents a detailed representation of his personal and working life, especially his self-identification as a gay man. The breadth of Rees's personal collection held at the University of Exeter provides a valuable insight into his life as a writer and reviewer. It also shows how he chose to focus on his gay identity, reviewing several fiction books that included gay characters for *Gay Times*, and ensuring his own works contained the homosexual representation he wished had been available to him as a teenager.

One of his most renowned books was *The Milkman's On His Way*, originally published in 1982 by the Gay Men's Press, a radical publisher. The book caused a political stir due to its inclusion of homosexual content targeted towards a young adult audience. *Milkman* portrays teenage Ewan Macrae's coming-of-age story as he grapples with his gay identity and experiences the reactions of others, including his parents and close friends. Set in the small town of Bude in Cornwall, Ewan discovers that he cannot be himself in such a tight-knit community of locals and leaves for London to discover himself and queer culture. Throughout his journey, Ewan learns about his identity while finding freedom in London's burgeoning gay scenes. The book also embraces the awkwardness of the teenage coming-of-age phase, discussing self-discovery, sex and identity throughout.

In a feature published in *Gay News* in June 1982, journalist Alison Hennegan noted that the publication of *The Milkman's On His Way* was for Rees 'the culmination of a theme he's pursued for several years: the adolescent gay boy who makes his way cautiously, uncertain but ultimately triumphant, towards an adulthood in which his sexuality is accepted, integrated and enjoyed.'¹ The

¹ Hennegan - EULMS 271/4(GAY TIMES) (62). *Gay Times*, no. 242, "End of Part One", pg. 37, dated 10 Jun 1982

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Rees archive contains additional information about his thoughts on the need for queer young adult literature. In a handwritten note scrawled onto the back of his article 'On Katherine Paterson, Alexander Pope, Myself, and Some Others', published in *Children's Literature in Education* in Autumn 1983, Rees wrote: 'there is no subject which interests adolescents more, and we are short-changing our readers if we don't show the teenage characters in our books at least thinking about sex, experiencing, sexual desire, and wondering how to cope with themselves as sexual beings'.² It is clear from several of Rees's articles and personal notes that discussion of sex was a theme he believed was fundamental to include in children's fiction, especially revolving around gay teens, who deserved to see their identities represented.

When first published in 1982, *The Milkman's On His Way* was celebrated by gay reviewers for providing the kinds of representation Rees believed was so important. A few years later, amid the AIDS crisis, the book achieved notoriety for its depictions of sex and homosexuality. An article published on the front page of North London newspaper *The Journal* on 31 October 1986, titled 'New Gay Sex Book Scandal', describes responses to *The Milkman's On His Way* as 'obscene', 'stomach-turning', and 'pornographic'.³ The controversial responses to the book, from parents and politicians, originated from uproar regarding access to the book in public libraries. Many critics disliked that 'impressionable' children, who they believed should not read explicit content regarding gay relationships or sex, were able to access the book. In response, conservative politicians quoted the 'obscenity' of the book's homosexual content in their 1988 debates as one of the justifications for creating Section 28. Through their inclusion of *The Milkman's On His Way* in the Section 28 debates, alongside other books that included gay characters, such as *Playbook for Kids about Sex* by Joani Blank (1980) and *Jenny Lives with Eric and Martin* by Susanne Bösch (1983), Margaret Thatcher's government was labelling books containing homosexuality as 'obscene'. Consequently, the book was heavily suppressed from its audience through the passing of Section 28, and the representation that Rees had sought to include in the industry was tragically lost.

In June 2024, Lurid Editions will publish a new edition of *The Milkman's On His Way*, featuring an introduction from Paul Baker, author of *Outrageous!: The Story of Section 28 and Britain's Battle for LGBT Education*. *Milkman* is the third book published by Lurid: *Chase of the Wild Goose* and *The Awakening of Indian Women* were both published in 2023. To publicize these titles, Lurid have held launch events with independent bookshops in the South West region, including

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² Rees - EULMS 271/4(MISCELLANEOUS) (9) - David Rees for Children's Literature in Education, "On Katherine Paterson, Alexander Pope, Myself and Some Others", dated autumn 1983 (pictures of pgs. 1, 6 and 7)

³ Klein - EULMS 271/1/34(13). *The Journal* (Richard Klein) - New Gay Sex Book Scandal – 31 Oct 1986

BookBag (Exeter), Bookhaus (Bristol) and Gloucester Rd Books (Bristol). Their previous book launches have featured conversations between artists, publishers, scholars, and historical experts. As a publishing house, their aim is to bring books that have fallen out of print and history back to the foreground of publishing, in beautifully striking **Lurid Pink** designs. When questioned about the curatorial influences for Lurid Editions and their selections, Withers noted that 'each book is an experiment in marketplace positioning, about finding readers for overlooked works. All the books are queer, in the sense that they challenge the norms of the moment they were written, and that challenge continues to echo loudly today.' Lurid's decision to publish reprints of forgotten books in turn generates its own echo: they seek to diligently restore the lost queer voices of the past, giving them the recognition that they have deserved all along.

D-M Withers hopes that Lurid Editions, as a new South West publishing house, can help to practice cultural justice in publishing and to reclaim lost voices in history. With regards to *The Milkman's On His Way*, they emphasize that 'this sweet and unthreatening book was taken away from a generation of queer readers, and republication is a way to put the text back into circulation. We can't take back that stolen time, or the isolation that gay adolescents may have felt growing up in the 90s and 00s without positive representations to help them feel secure in their identities, but we can right a historical wrong, and talk about what it all means now.' Evidently, the importance of Lurid Editions's republications is to demonstrate how books provide an insightful view of the past, inspiring new conversations to be had about the significance of their texts, and perhaps why they were unfortunately lost to history in the first place.

By publishing a young adult novel, Lurid aim to begin a conversation about the past between different generations. Drawing on the plans for *The Milkman's On His Way*, Withers explains, 'I do think for the generation who were young adults in the 1980s and 90s, the book will have a nostalgic appeal. For younger readers today, it will offer a way of connecting with the queer past – a queer past that they too may experience as a loss, albeit one step removed. I think what can unite all generations is a reading of what might have been.' The young adult framing of the novel brings a unique perspective of history to readers, as it provides an opportunity for people who were young adults at the time of original publication to revisit and rediscover texts that were suppressed when they were young. The nostalgia of the time and setting of the book opens discussions between readers about how their teenage journey of self-identity occurred. Also, the historical context of the book's publication continues to draw attention to the political setbacks of queer history, re-opening conversations about the social impact of Section 28. For younger generations, *The Milkman's On His Way* can provide an insight into what it meant to be a gay teenager in the 1980s, and also, as D-M notes, the book offers the chance to read and discuss the possibility of what might have been had

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Section 28 not been suppressed. The publication of *The Milkman's On His Way* provides an opportunity to reclaim the text's optimism, its hope for a better queer future. As D-M notes: 'the book was first published in 1982, before the AIDS crisis hit. It has a resolutely positive tone, it offers us a happy ending. In that sense, it functions as a time capsule – a spirit of optimism that was taken away, but can still be recovered. This is probably the aspect of the text I find most moving, and powerful.'

Like other South West publishers – Little Toller, Handheld Press, Persephone – whose work centres on the reprints of out-of-print works, Lurid Editions is finding gems from the past and giving them the chance to be read again. While each book is 'connected by their differences,' according to D-M, they become united by the Lurid Editions name, presented within the publisher's interconnected history of unique and bold queer texts. Each book reveals an important and undervalued part of history and, along with it, the local events that Lurid create provide an opportunity for communities to rediscover these historical moments together.

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