



for You

Review by Jenny Mathiasson

Culture is Bad for You: Inequality in the cultural and creative industries

By Orian Brook, Dave O'Brien and Mark Taylor

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As conservators we tend to cherish the thought of culture (or perhaps what we might call heritage) as something good, wholesome and even health inducing. In fact this book starts by reassuring us that this is still the case; there is considerable research about the many benefits of culture on the well-being and prosperity of both people and the economy. That is not the full picture though; we are a sector lacking in diversity, vastly overqualified for our meagre pay cheques and often on the brink of burnout. Culture is bad for *us*.

I'm getting ahead of myself here. Let's get back to the meat (pulp?) of the book: in it we meet 66 culture workers under pseudonyms (over 200 contributed to the research but there's only so much room on a page) alongside some hefty research to draw upon. Their voices come from many backgrounds, age brackets and cultural occupations (and while we can't say for certain if any of them are conservators, there may very well be some hiding under the guise of "consultant" or "museum professional" in the list of contributors).

Each chapter contains at least a couple of quotes from these individuals to give us a bit of context before we explore some of the reasons behind people's experiences and views. Together we embark on a journey of discovery: who works in culture? (Spoilers: mostly passionate but privileged people who truly believe they can change something about the world via arts and heritage.) If workers do not conform to the norm, how do they feel about that? (Further spoilers: they often feel out of place, but the *hows* and *whys* are important and not always obvious.)

What even is a cultural job and what does that look like? As you'd expect there's a huge amount of variety in this, and the authors spend a fair bit of time pruning their definition tree into a manageable shrub. But they probe further: how do we become cultural work-ers, who do we know and what are our values? The "who do we know" goes beyond hiring practices as this is not just about getting your foot in a door. Who do we socialise with? This gives a glimpse into social mobility and whether we all just hang out with people who are more or less carbon copies of ourselves. Cultural workers, as it turns out, mingle quite exclusively; so conservators might hang out with curators, artists and lecturers in their spare time, but we are very unlikely to be friends with bus drivers or factory workers. Does that reflect your social circle, dear reader? I certainly felt seen.

Who consumes culture? This matters because if we consume culture we are more likely to want to work with it. "Culture" is perhaps a tainted word for many and conjures up images of classical concerts, opera, dance performances or exclusive art viewings. Visiting a heritage attraction is probably not far behind, but picking up a picture book at your local library might feel a little less stifling. How about going to the cinema? Seeing some graffiti art on a wall in town? Writing a

rude limerick? Playing a video game? They are also culture, but they are often dismissed as low brow. These perceptions matter and shape us. So too do they carry over into our own profession: do we attach more worth to the conservator working on easel paintings than the one working on street art? (Discuss.)

The book addresses many topics familiar to any conservator who has been following the diversity debate in recent years: how unpaid internships and having to volunteer for experience favour the wealthy or well-connected, how precarious work drives people away unless they have considerable savings or a family to support them both financially and emotionally and that passion does not pay the bills or support loved ones. All of these things favour a very specific subset of society, and it shows. You may think this book says nothing new in that regard, but I feel the level of insight it conveys is really worthwhile. This is an engaging and well written work which goes well beyond basic awareness raising.

In the final few chapters, we get an idea of how inequality is experienced (a very important read for those of us who mainly reap the benefits of the current work environment) and how men and women experience the culture industry differently. The authors attempt to bust the myth of meritocracy. We would love to think that hard work and talent is all it takes, but many of us know that is not true. These are factors, but long hours of benchwork and a good eye for colour matching are not enough to succeed; you need resources, social and financial capital and usually you must “fit in” which negates any attempt at diversifying the workforce.

The personal experiences of actual people are what lends this book so much of its power. This isn't a report or a mere analysis of data, it is lived experience *alongside* data. It is people in their own words. People you and I work with. Our people.

This is a book that makes you take a look around the lunch room (or Zoom meeting) and question everything. It contains some hard hitting truths for us all to take in. I hope you read it and, above all else, I hope you talk about it.

A final caveat: the scope of this book is limited to Britain, and there are some aspects of inequality which the authors freely admit they could not explore as much as they would like, but wherever you are, it is a book you should read. The inequalities it highlights resonate in many lands and could be a springboard for critical analysis anywhere in the world—and isn't problem solving one of those things we pride ourselves on as conservation professionals?

You can also listen to Jenny's review of this book (and so much more) on [S08E05: Supporting the Sector](#).

Author Byline

Jenny Mathiasson is a freelance objects conservator based in Carmarthen, Wales, United Kingdom. She has run Kuriosa Conservation since 2020. She is also a familiar voice to many as host and executive producer of [The C Word: The Conservators' Podcast](#).

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