



## Stranger than fiction

Channel 4's social work-centred drama *Kiri* has been swept up in a Twitterstorm, with social workers decrying the apparent misrepresentation of their profession. **Claire Fox's** response: get over yourselves

So far, I have really enjoyed *Kiri*, Jack Thorne's latest drama for Channel 4. It portrays a social worker at the centre of the abduction of a nine-year-old black child called Kiri, about to be adopted by her white foster family. It has it all: brilliant acting; nuance; whodunit; human interest; surprising plot and character twists. Better still, it features one of those gritty, flawed, maverick anti-heroines we all love, played by the marvellous Sarah Lancashire. And for those of us interested in social issues, it addresses meaty, contentious themes such as cultural identity, inter-racial adoption, the rights of birth grandparents and the scapegoating of social workers when tragedies happen.

Many of my colleagues, along with TV critics and social media, love it. But there has been a howl of outrage from the one group I thought would find the drama riveting: social workers. Their grievance: 'Our profession has yet again been stereotyped and misrepresented'.

One article's headline sums up the backlash: '*Kiri*: another unrealistic and damaging portrayal of social workers on screen'.

A review by Matt Hughes, director of care professionals' website One Stop Social, complains that the show's 'negative and inaccurate representations' will feed 'a culture of low self-worth and self-esteem' in an 'embattled profession'.

Many social workers took to Twitter to call out the drama for 'damaging the public's

perception' of their work, complaining they are 'constantly scapegoated and vilified by the press [that] always focuses on the negative & never on the day2day positives'. One angrily tweets: 'So far not impressed! ...my profession always gets bad press and shit like this doesn't help! #kiri'; another writes: '#Kiri. ... only adds to the media's denigration of us'.

My response: oh, do get over yourselves. It is not TV drama's job to help anyone's 'cause' or to massage self-esteem or to churn out PR with an approved message. It worries me that public servants, playing hard-done-by victims, think that spin is the way to win public support.

Academic Robert Meredith, writing for *The Conversation*, goes so far as to blame 'poor representation and portrayal of the profession' for 'lower salaries, and poor recruitment and retention'. Forget trade unions, collective action and the political fight for funding. Apparently all that is needed are positive depictions of social workers as saints.

The main grievances surround the central figure, social worker Miriam: one critic complains she is portrayed as 'an eccentric, rebellious alcoholic' (the first two surely admirable).

The moaning largely focuses on scenes of Miriam 'drinking from a hipflask throughout the day', her 'inappropriate friendship with an ex-service user' and that she 'takes her dog to work' (think of how many health and safety rules that flouts).

Worth remembering: this is a work of fiction and should not be taken literally. As a health-worker tweets wryly: 'When watching #Kiri, social workers just need to take a deep breath and remember that on *Holby City*, the student nurse runs the wards and they can bring people back from the dead after flatlining'.

### One debate that *Kiri* brings to life vividly: how should we respond when tragedies happen to those under the care of social workers?

A doctor wittily reminds us: 'Lots of social workers complaining that this is an inaccurate representation of social work. I'm a GP who watched two seasons of *Dr Foster!* #Kiri.'

Writer Jack Thorne has been forced to explain the important distinction 'between replication and truth in drama'. Sadly One Stop Social's Matt Hughes doesn't seem to get the point when he writes: 'I cannot accept (as it is procedurally inaccurate) that Miriam...would be left solely responsible for allowing unsupervised contact between Kiri and her paternal grandparents... For this to happen a detailed assessment would be required with an up-to-date care plan'.

Thank goodness Matt and his cronies don't write dramas or we'd all be bored to tears by scenes of accurate form-filling full of sterile, rule-compliant heroines, ambivalence and complexity sacrificed to fulfil some social worker-approved version of reality.

Not only would such an approach be ruinous to artistic integrity, it is disturbing that leading social work commentators' ideal role-model seems to be a one-dimensional, risk-averse, well-behaved, box-ticking, teetotal technocrat. Give me a Miriam any day over such a soulless goody-two-shoes.

The series' social services advisor Professor Anna Gupta explains the drama aimed to 'stimulate debate and not simply provide easy answers for which there are none.' Hear hear.

One debate that *Kiri* brings to life vividly: how should we respond when tragedies happen to those under the care of social workers? When professionals believe they are doing the right thing but make decisions that don't always have positive outcomes? *Kiri* dramatises the dangers of witch-hunts: Miriam is suspended from her job and hounded by the press.

Jack Thorne has explained in interviews that he wanted to explore how the demand for solutions can result in hasty policy proposals (in this instance to 'tighten adoption rules'). He warns that the 'terrifying...current news culture – and the way Twitter works' can mean 'a small ball can turn into a boulder, can turn into a mighty weapon'.

How bitterly ironic that his own drama has resulted in just such a boulder and a Twitterstorm which demands that 'something must be done' to stop misrepresentation of social care professionals. You couldn't make it up. ■

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