

Discussed on June 27, 2023

## **Who are we now?**

By Jason Cowley

Jason Cowley has been editor of the New Statesman since 2008. He has been writing since the 1990's.

He says that his book was prompted by the anniversary of the weekly "clap for carers" during Covid-19, and he wondered how people had changed. He extended this to reflecting how we had changed over the past twenty years including leading up to and post Brexit. He is well versed in the politics of the time but his analysis is based on a number of news stories involving ordinary people and the issues they exposed; eg people smuggling, migration, racism. And his book closes in on the question, what is Englishness and English identity? He readily accepts that he offers no definitive answers but lets the reader reach their own conclusion.

The news stories are both factually well researched but also supported by extensive interviews of those involved. He is an enthusiastic quoter of politicians and other leaders in society. A number of threads run the book; his family, Harlow, football.

He has an easy writing style which makes the book of some 260 pages easy to read, as one would expect from a successful journalist and editor. It is also carefully, some might say heavily, structured, although the reason of the division into "parts" is not obvious. He allows himself to digress freely between the news story, anecdotes and the prevailing political background which adds variety at the cost of focus. The referencing is very clear and the inclusion of sources in the text is very helpful and avoids the awkwardness of footnotes.

A fascinating wide ranging book taking in many of the political events of the past twenty years. Which leads the reader to feel an answer is coming but it doesn't. At the end we are left with a fuller understanding of the issues facing us, an increased realisation of the wide divisions within England and the difficulties of defining Englishness. The only solution offered is a vague feeling that somehow the decency shown by the people featured in the news stories will see us through. And then reflecting on this, we realise that the book has many gaps in its coverage: the economic situation, the decline of institutions, and we wonder whether our "Englishness" will be sufficient.

Did we think it was a good use of our time reading the book?

No regrets in reading it but no deep pleasure.

Would we recommend it?

Mixed results. Some would, others wouldn't. There are better analyses available of our current state, but this is an easy introduction.