

PULSE

WHAT MATTERS
TO WRITERS NOW

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From Writing East Midlands

WRITING
EAST
MIDLANDS

MAGAZINE

Welcome to the fourth edition of *Pulse*.

You might have heard that the truth is subjective, stranger than fiction, that it fears no questions and always comes out. With so many expressions on the topic, it's clear to see the contentious nature of 'the truth' among literary circles.

In our last edition, we questioned what it means to be both a writer and an activist, and in this issue, we're tackling another ever-relevant subject to creatives, that of 'Writing the Truth'. At a time when an author's past can so easily bubble to the surface of online discourse, when it's becoming even harder to distinguish AI art from the real deal, and when accusations and genuine instances of fake news are rapidly infiltrating mainstream media, the truth may seem illusive at best.

Within these pages, we question the importance of truth in writing. Whether you're a journalist, novelist, memoirist or poet, we ask what being truthful actually means—to yourself, your readers and your community—and if the truth is really as attainable as it seems.

In this edition, Vaseem Khan talks cultural appropriation versus writing with empathy. Shreya Sen-Handley contemplates the line between creative licence and downright deception. Helen Jukes discusses knowledge, empowerment and *Mother Animal*. Laura Kate Dale examines the kaleidoscopic effect of political and personal perspective on objective truth in journalism and beyond.

Cara Thompson writes on the intersection of creative freedom, community and authenticity. Eve Makis explores writing between worlds. We celebrate last year's winners of the Aurora Prize for Writing in the leadup to our 2025 Award Ceremony. Four leading literary agents tell us what they're looking for in 2024. And the National Holocaust Museum team share with us some extracts from the Karen Becher Award's winning essays.

Throughout this issue, we aim to shed a light on the myriad ways to approach truth in writing. And we hope that any truths you find here set free your inspiration, encouraging you to write your own—or make it up as you go along.

Lola Kent

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Cover art by Abbie Leeson

Abbie Leeson is a writer, designer and illustrator from the East Midlands. Following the completion of her Master's degree in 2024, she published her illustrated poetry pamphlet, *Overload*, was shortlisted for the Creative Future's Writer's Award, and landed her work in *Mslexia* magazine, amongst other publications. In 2025, Abbie co-founded UK Independent Press, *The Tenth Magpie*, where she currently works as Designer and Co-Director. She is now working towards a PhD in English Literature, and pursuing writing and illustration on the side.

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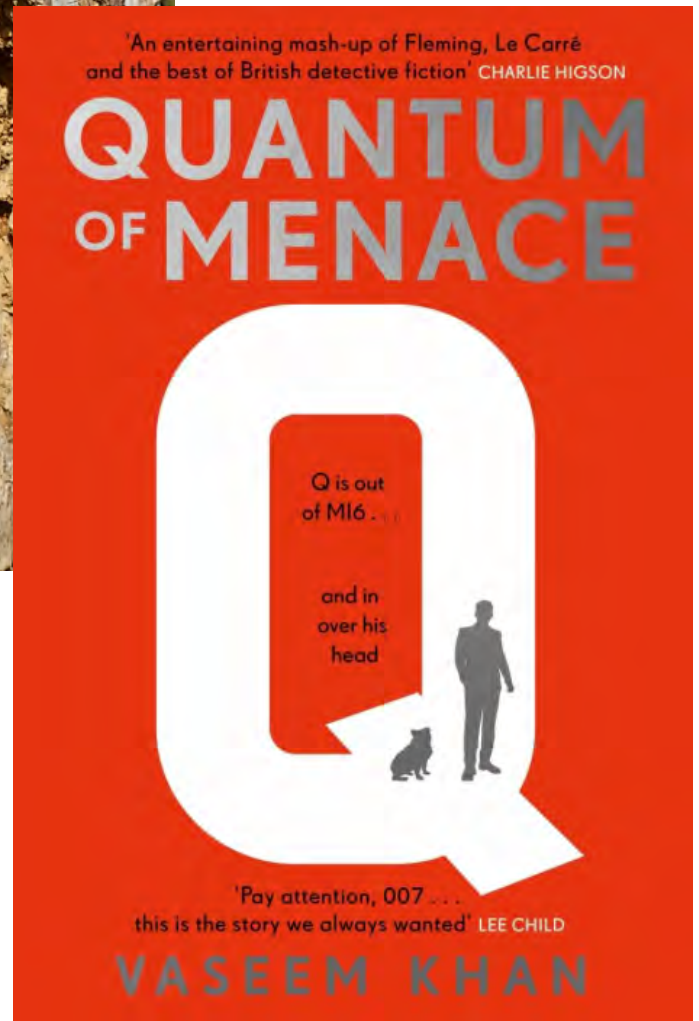
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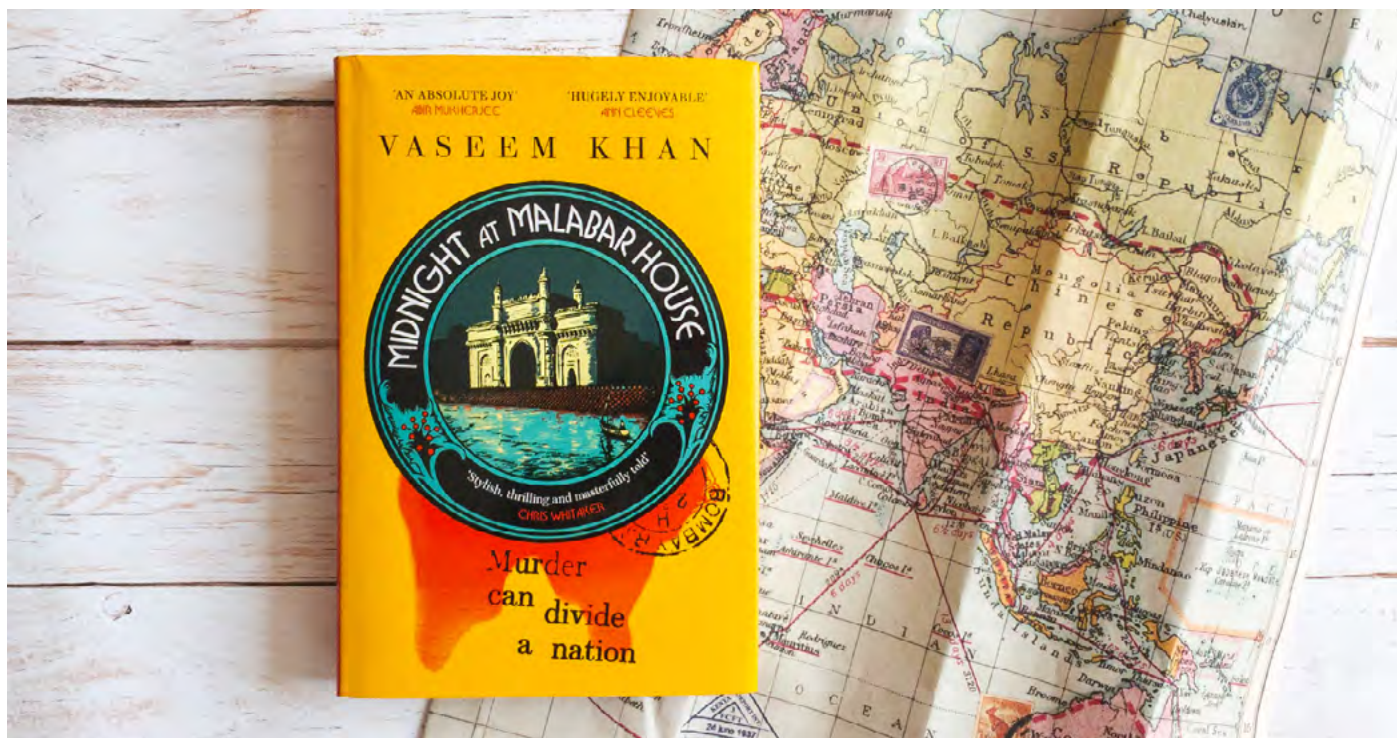
Who Owns the Truth?

“Writers are continually grappling with their duty to the truth. How to use it. What exactly it means.”

Much of fiction accretes itself around kernels of truth. But the truth is a slippery thing. Seen through the prism of the modern world, truth can vary vastly depending on who is doing the viewing – or the telling. And it is in this context that we, as writers, often find ourselves struggling with the notion of personal truth and our right to use such truth in our work. A debate that has sharpened considerably in recent years.

When we talk about cultural appropriation, what we really mean is writing about experiences that are not our own in a way that is deemed to cause offence. It particularly becomes an issue when one writes about a historically disadvantaged culture.

Here's an example. In 2009, Kathryn Stockett's *The Help* was published, to great commercial success, only to later be hit by a storm of criticism. Stockett, a white middle-class American, had written a story about African American maids in 1960s Mississippi. The book was accused of delivering only the shallowest truth of the lives of her black protagonists. Undeterred, Hollywood turned the book into a (very successful) film. One of its stars, Viola Davis, later said, in a 2018 *Vanity Fair* interview, that she regretted doing the movie because: “I felt that at the end of the day it wasn't the voices of the maids that were heard. I know Aibileen. I know Minny. They're my grandma. They're my mother.”



And yet, other works where writers have ‘borrowed truth’ have elicited the opposite reaction. Thomas Keneally, author of *Schindler’s Ark* (later turned into the Oscar-winning *Schindler’s List*) is neither Jewish nor had any direct experience of the Holocaust. What he did do was put in the work, poring over documents, conducting interviews, and even travelling to Poland, with Jewish Holocaust survivor Poldek Pfefferberg as his guide, to visit Kraków and the sites associated with the Oskar Schindler story. (Schindler, a Nazi Party member, saved the lives of a thousand Jews – including Pfefferberg – during the war).

What sets the two works apart? Many believe it is Keneally’s obvious empathy, and the homework he put in to express the truth of his subject matter. In effect, he took ownership of that truth and, using the seasoned skills of a writer, brought this truth viscerally to life for a wide audience.

The fact is that writers borrow from other cultures and experiences all the time. To suggest that authors can only write characters that mirror themselves would pretty much kill off fiction overnight. For me, that’s a little too close to literary censorship. But there are clearly more complex arguments to be made around the issue – debates about cultural appropriation and the historical lack of access to the publishing industry for voices from minority backgrounds.

Another example: my own. I spent twenty odd years and seven novels trying to get a publishing deal. I wrote what I thought the market wanted – often with white protagonists whose lives were wholly inconsistent with my own. I finally decided to write a book that drew heavily on my experiences and heritage – my ‘personal truth’, if you will. I was born and grew up in London, but lived in India during my twenties. This inspired two mystery series set in India. The first began with *The Unexpected Inheritance of Inspector Chopra*, a story about a middle-aged policeman who inherits a baby elephant. The book was an attempt to capture my incredible memories of a changing subcontinent. I was offered a four book deal by a Big 5 publisher; effectively the book gave me a career as a novelist.

Later, I wrote *Midnight at Malabar House*, the first of a historical crime series set in 1950s Bombay, featuring India’s first female police detective and her English sidekick.

However, if one takes a closer look, you will see that my respective protagonists, Inspector Ashwin Chopra and Inspector Persis Wadia, are not quite aligned with my cultural identity. Chopra is a Hindu, Persis a Parsee. I grew up in a Muslim household. But having lived in Mumbai/Bombay I came to intimately know and understand the people that live there. I lived their truth, and this allowed me to command a degree of trust with my agent, editor, and, ultimately, readers. This ‘trust’ is why some authors are given license to write about particular subjects, while others are quickly torn down for doing so.

Today I am writing a series featuring a white man, specifically Q from the James Bond franchise. The first, *Quantum of Menace*, will be published in Oct 2025. It’s a ticklish business, deciding who should be allowed to write what kind of story. Personally, I believe that a good story, well told, deserves to be written – and read. No writer has a monopoly on the truth, and no writer should be excluded from writing another’s truth. Just make sure you do your homework.

Vaseem Khan is the author of several award-winning crime series including the *Baby Ganesh Agency* adventures, set in modern Mumbai, and the *Malabar House* historical crime novels, set in 1950s Bombay. His first book, *The Unexpected Inheritance of Inspector Chopra*, was selected by the *Sunday Times* as one of the 40 best crime novels published in 2015–2020, and has been translated into 17 languages. *Midnight at Malabar House*, the first in the *Malabar House* series, won the Crime Writers’ Association Historical Dagger. Vaseem has won numerous awards for his work, including, most recently, the Fingerprint Award for Historical Crime Novel of the Year for *City of Destruction*, the fifth in the *Malabar House* series. Vaseem is also the author of *The Girl in Cell A*, a psychological thriller set in small town America, and *Quantum of Menace*, the first in a series featuring Q from the world of James Bond.

SHREYA SEN-HANDLEY

Truth in Memoir



I'm with Oscar when he posits, "the truth is rarely pure and never simple." Wilde! Not at all how a lot of folk, including famous philosophers, view truth – as the single unimpeachable edict on which we must build our world. Yet, the witty Irishman was, as always, spot on. The multiplicity of our planet makes undiluted, uncomplicated truth impossible, begging the terribly modern question of "whose truth?" There's never just one side to a story, you see, though one of the numerous versions taking wing might brush closest to its empirical moorings.

Then there's Artistic Truth, which is an entirely different kettle of iridescent fish. In Barcelona last year, studying Pablo Picasso's portrait of a lady with her nose out of joint (literally), I was struck by the stark honesty of his surreal depiction, though undoubtedly disappointing to its sitter. Not only did it reveal how he saw her, but his worldview. Laying bare his inner workings was Pablo's Truth.

Literary truth may be an even bigger leap from its 'factual' foundations, because so much of it is left to the reader's imagination. Our stories are shaped not just by the writer's perspective but the individual embrace of each reader. We know this and yet, every few months there's a big brouhaha about the writerly relationship with the truth (ahem, admittedly tenuous).

The Buddha said that three things can't stay hidden for long and one of them is the truth. Sure enough, the press (writers themselves) regularly regale us with shockers, exposing the malodorous clay feet of our stellar authors. Creator of perfect families, Enid Blyton was cruelly unmaternal. As was short story maestro Alice Munro. Bestselling author AJ Finn was caught making up diseases as well as attainments, whilst Lewis Carroll was quite possibly a perv. Yet, should the real-life fabrications of writers of fiction matter? YES, if they are straying into criminality, like Carroll perhaps, or Neil Gaiman, if the charges against him are proved. And no, if the fantasies of these brilliant fantasists are found to have no victims.

But what when writers' lies about their personal lives spill over into their work? Truth seems to be a particularly contentious concept when it comes to the writing of memoirs. A memoirist myself (writing fiction, plays and columns besides), I teach my creative writing students that a memoir isn't an autobiography. The latter is your account of the greater part of your life, often chronologically ordered, whilst a memoir is a crucial cross-section of your story that you delve into forensically. In focusing on one part or facet of your life in your memoir, depth becomes more important than span. Your reader doesn't need you to account for every moment of your existence, record everyone who's crossed your path, or detail every emotion.

“Autobiography is an unrivalled vehicle for telling the truth about other people,” writer Philip Guedalla had half-seriously suggested, implying that the larger part of the truth about oneself is withheld in these tales. In my first book, *Memoirs of My Body*, true to its title, I wrote about the many funny, awful, beautiful things that have happened to my woman’s body, laying it bare in a manner that felt deeply uncomfortable to a private person like me, but also very necessary. The idea was to encourage other women to talk about these messy experiences, considered embarrassing or even taboo, by starting the conversation myself.

I was uncompromising about telling the truth about my body, difficult though it was, but was every last word in the book factual? No. I changed the names of some people to protect their identities. Dropping characters who didn’t seem essential to the physical and sexual slant of my story to ensure a crisper narrative, I also heightened the colour of certain situations to tickle my readers’ funny bone.

You have to be generous with how much you share of yourself because that’s how a connection is made, making the reader feel seen and supported on their own journey. Yet, to be able to draw them into your world in the first place, you have to tell a cracking story! Neither I nor Gerald Durrell are alone amongst memoirists in understanding that the genre requires unvarnished truth to be balanced with polished artistry. In *My Family and Other Animals*, Gerry never even refers to his brother Larry’s wife who had in reality travelled with them to Corfu, and was living with Larry in a separate residence. To make his story sing, he placed all his oddball siblings under the same tumbledown roof, with his joyously eccentric mother presiding over them, and the result was the heartwarming riot of a book we love.

Does that mean it’s okay for Misha Defonseca to claim she was brought up by wolves in *Misha: A Memoire of the Holocaust Years*, when she wasn’t? Or for *The Salt Path*’s Raynor Winn, in a controversy that’s made headlines recently, to have concealed the story of her criminal behaviour in her version of it? Or that she might have lied about her husband having corticobasal degeneration and surviving it, when with this particular condition that appears virtually impossible? Well, no, none of this is permissible in memoir, for the simple reason that you cannot make up a whole other upbringing when it’s the very foundation for your tale, or a terminal disease, which you then pretend to beat, misleading hundreds of patients with false hope and spurious treatments. And while it might have been acceptable to omit the details of the financial fraud she’d perpetrated if it wasn’t relevant to their story, it is, I gather, the springboard for her saga and therefore, integral. When it isn’t, ‘leave out, not lie about’ is my recommendation!

We know from how the powerful operate that facts and figures can be twisted. And truth be told, truth itself is subjective, because no two recollections of an event are the same. Witnesses to a crime rarely submit the same evidence, and childhood memories of glorious family holidays may not be as rosy for the stressed parents! Not only do our circumstances and personalities influence our understanding, it’s further transformed by the tricks of memory. We only ever retain what’s significant to us as individuals.

If that compounds the problems of every day, it creates the perfect conditions for the writing of memoir! With the nitty gritty of the grind falling away, we can set to presenting OUR truth. Genuinely sharing our vulnerability, fallibility, our very humanity, invests memoirs with the emotional truth they depend on. Yeah, it’s hard, but if you can dance like nobody’s watching, you can banish readers from your mind when you write. That’s what makes your voice authentic, ironically, and truly speaks to bookish hearts.

Don’t we need a dose too, of the empathetic magic that emotional truth-telling conjures, in our polarised daily lives?



*Memoirs
of My
Body*

Shreya Sen-Handley



Currently writing her fourth book, for Penguin in 2026, Shreya Sen-Handley is the award-winning author of three books published by HarperCollins: *Handle with Care* (2022), presented to The Queen by the National Literacy Trust and longlisted for Times of India’s Best Nonfiction Book 2023, acclaimed short story collection *Strange* (2019), and *Memoirs of My Body* (2017), Best Nonfiction Book at NWS Writing Awards 2018 and a UNESCO Cities of Literature Best Read 2017. The first South Asian woman to write international opera, Shreya has co-written Welsh National Opera’s film series *Creating Change* (2020) and epic production *Migrations*, voted one of 2022’s best shows by the British press. Her play *Quiet* premiered at London’s award-winning Tara Theatre in 2021. Fiction judge for Writing East Midlands and The Society of Authors’ Aurora Prize 2022, and writer-in-residence for First Story, Shreya is a print and television journalist, creative writing teacher, poet and widely-published essayist as well.

<https://shreyasenhendley.com/>

INTERVIEWED BY MOLLY ELLSON

An Interview with Helen Jukes

Helen Jukes is a critically acclaimed author, a mother, and a creative writing tutor – her work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The Boston Globe* and *Port Magazine*. She lives on the edge of the Peak District.

Following the rampant success of her debut book, *A Honeybee Heart Has Five Openings*, Helen decided to continue along the Memoir path when she fell pregnant. She wrote *Mother Animal* whilst navigating the myriad twists and turns of encroaching motherhood, and the anxieties, triumphs and ferocity that come with it.

Here, we discuss those layers, how it felt to birth a book and a baby simultaneously and the importance of raw honesty to new mothers, especially in an ever-increasingly polluted world.

1. Tell us a little about *Mother Animal*: where did it all begin?

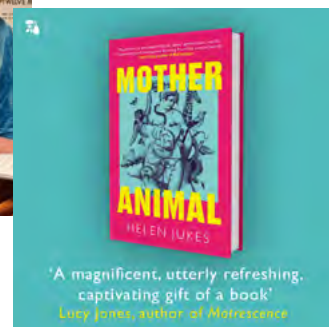
I think a book begins germinating for me when I find myself in a state of dissonance. Pregnancy was such a strange, discombobulating experience... Yet the images of pregnancy (and motherhood) I was fed by doctors and midwives, and the culture at large, suggested that I was supposed to feel tranquil and calm, and to seamlessly *become* a mother, fully formed. There was something oddly straitjacketing about all this, and I began wanting to understand it, and find stories that better spoke to my experience.



Soon I was thinking about lots of things – notions of naturalness in relation to motherhood, the role of gender norms and the patriarchy, and what it meant that following the birth of my daughter I felt so bewilderingly porous, so aware of my own *relation* to other places and species. I began reading about parenting in other animals, and immediately my conception of what it meant to be a mother shifted. Here were stories as wild and fluxy as I felt; a vision of motherhood that was diverse, in process, and – it seemed to me – full of radical potential.

2. I was intrigued to hear about how you connected the act of making a person within you to the creation of a piece of art (*Mother Animal*) and birthing both into the world almost simultaneously. Has this changed the way that you view writing, and the process involved?

Interesting question! I'd forgotten I said that. I do think that I value the process of (creative) gestation more than I used to. Maybe this is also the result of becoming a bit more experienced as a writer; I understand now that for me ideas can take a long time to form, and that a lot of the work of writing happens out of sight. These days I don't worry so much if the thoughts and themes I'm wanting to explore don't come together right away – I think a big part of writing is about learning to stay with uncertainty, or what is not yet formed, and building enough trust in the process to stay with it.



3. You've spoken before about the complexity of writing the 'self' into nature-writing – particularly regarding *A Honeybee Heart has Five Openings*. How did you grapple with this when writing *Mother Animal*? Was it always planned to be a memoir, or did that evolve as you wrote?

Yes, I am quite cautious of putting too much emphasis on the 'I' in Nature Writing, and felt very ambivalent about inserting myself into the story in *A Honeybee Heart*. With *Mother Animal* that felt less onerous, because my own experience of pregnancy, birth and early motherhood provided the central throughline for the book – it wouldn't have worked without. My aim with *Mother Animal* was for the 'I' in the narrative to function a bit like a prism, splitting motherhood open and allowing for an exploration of a much wider assortment of interconnected themes. I don't know if I was successful in that, but it was good to try, and it definitely changed my perspective on what it means to be a mother, and indeed a human, today.

4. As a memoirist, how do you navigate your relationship with the 'truth' and how do you present that truth to your readers?

When I write memoir, I enter into a contract with a reader – they'll pick the book up on the understanding that what they're reading is rooted in fact. Memory is by nature friable, and memoir is a creative act; we don't recall with perfect accuracy, and when we tell stories about ourselves we're always making decisions about what to leave in or out. So as I write, I'm looking to hone in on the truth of my emotional and lived experience – and this is what's important for me as a reader of memoir, too. I don't especially mind whether an author has accurately recalled the colour of someone's shoes, but I do want to feel that they're reaching through to the emotional truth of their scenes and their own perspective on the world. If as writers we're expressing this, it comes across, and is often what makes good writing.

5. You experienced some pushbacks when writing *Mother Animal*, around the idea of being 'too truthful' about motherhood, in case readers became anxious or fearful about the whole experience. Can you delve into this a little more and tell us your thoughts about 'telling too many truths'?

Yes, I wanted to write about how foregrounding ideas of naturalness in relation to motherhood risks disguising the ways in which maternal bodies today are made *unnatural* through contamination by human-made pollutants (specifically a group known as Endocrine Disrupting Chemicals, or EDCs, which interfere with the way the body's hormones work). Some people I spoke to expressed concern that by raising awareness about these issues I would be adding to new mums' anxieties, and I felt very aware of this as I was writing – but it also felt important to address the issue of EDCs because without knowing the extent to which maternal and infant bodies are exposed, and vulnerable, how can we create better, safer environments?

Since the book was published I've been very touched by messages I've received from readers who have said that in fact *Mother Animal* made them feel less alone in their worry, and even empowered to act. I think sometimes we undermine women's intelligence, and their power, when we believe they should be 'protected' from certain knowledge. For me the question wasn't whether mothers should know about harmful chemicals or not, because surely such information is critical – the question was how to write about them in a way that wouldn't overwhelm, and that might even support and resource people to demand better.

Helen Jukes' work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Port Magazine*, *Aeon* and others. Her first book, *A Honeybee Heart has Five Openings*, received wide critical acclaim, and was shortlisted for the Books Are My Bag non-fiction award. Helen has led creative writing workshops for universities, literary organisations, a homelessness charity and a prison; she currently teaches at the University of Oxford, and lives with her daughter on the edge of the Peak District.



LAURA KATE DALE

Truth

“As much as I want to believe truth is objective, there will always be a degree of spin, perspective, and marketing inherent in reporting, from what you choose to report to who is allowed to report it.”

Growing up as an autistic child in the early 90's, I had a very rigid view of objective truth. Like many autistic children I sort of skipped the early developmental stage where young children experiment with innocent untruths to understand how others perceive them in a low stakes environment. According to accounts kept by my mother I was honest to a fault, admitting to wrongdoing with tears in my eyes before any accusation had been made, or when there would have been no evidence of my deeds. I didn't really have a good sense of when and how to tell "little white lies" - As far as I was concerned the truth was an objective fact, something to have a light shone on it whether or not that was convenient for myself or others.

The truth is not contextual; it is what it is.

As an adult, I fell into a career as a journalist. Okay, journalist might be a generous word for what I do; I'm perhaps better described as a media critic and reporter specialising in the video game industry. I write reviews of new releases, interview game developers, report news stories, and publish opinion articles about the gaming industry and the art it creates.

While I've held job titles that contained the word journalist, I don't know how accurate the word feels for me to apply to myself. The truth is, this type of media critique landscape doesn't do a great job at allowing journalistic truth to be separated from the reality of being denied access to opportunities that are crucial to succeeding at the job.

During the years I worked as News Editor for a few UK gaming outlets, I specialised in reporting on leaked information. I had anonymous contacts who worked for various companies working on video games, and I would report on stories prior to their official public announcement. Sometimes it was features for a new upcoming console, or the release date of a new game, or announcements planned for an upcoming showcase presentation. The information I shared was factual, but it was information that associated companies were not ready to announce for themselves.

In theory, I should have been able to publish these factual news stories without consequence. In reality, every time I published this type of story it became harder for me to get approved for early review codes for games or access to interview opportunities. The people at those publishers saw the relationship between our roles as reciprocal: if I wasn't going to play ball on their timelines for announcements, if I made things difficult with accurate reporting, I was going to be denied the opportunities provided to more obedient reporters.

There were times where you'd hear stories of similarly restricted access for outlets whose opinion content was more critical of new releases than their peers. An opinion shared in truth but that doesn't function as free advertising, was always going to be a potential target for being locked out of access by companies. It's the danger of being reliant on the subject you're reporting on when trying to produce future coverage.

It's obviously small scale in the grand scheme of things when we're talking about not getting early review code access for an upcoming game, but if we look to the way that Donald Trump is currently cancelling access to White House press briefings for reporters he doesn't like, you see the ultimate importance of protecting the journalistic right to truth in reporting, even when that means allowing opinions you disagree with, or truths you were not ready to see shared.

As much as I want to believe truth is objective, there will always be a degree of spin, perspective, and marketing inherent in reporting, from what you choose to report to who is allowed to report it.

I wrote about my gender transition in two books early in my career: *Uncomfortable Labels* and *Gender Euphoria*. In the former, I talked about my transition from a perspective of challenges I had to overcome, and in *Gender Euphoria* I talked about it from a perspective of momentous joy.

Was either story about my transition untrue? No, but while both were the truth, they were written at different times in my life, about different aspects of a life too complex for a simplified narrative structure, with different goals. One was to highlight the challenges of an intersection, the other to combat negative perspectives and find community at a time of lacking in-person opportunities.

I published *Uncomfortable Labels* in 2019, at a time when the overlaps between the autistic and trans communities were under-reported. There was value in detailing the unique struggles at that intersection in the hopes of being better understood and helping others in my situation have language to talk about their experiences. It was focused on negativity because I wrote it at the end of a yearslong uphill battle, at a time where I felt a need to see change occur to make things easier for those who would come after me.

Laura Kate Dale is an author, educator, and accessibility advocate. Her books have covered topics ranging from *Trans Joy*, to child appropriate stories of trans identity, and stories centering positive autistic lived experiences. Between writing books she works with video game developers to help make their games playable by a wider range of disabled players.

Gender Euphoria was written in 2020 during Covid lockdown. It was written at a time when in-person Pride events were being cancelled for the foreseeable future, on a backdrop of intensifying anti-trans rhetoric making it into mainstream media publications. I wanted to focus on joy, recharge with the positive queer energy I would usually get from pride events, and push back against anti-trans rhetoric that suggested all trans people were eternally miserable post transition. It existed explicitly to highlight the positives in trans stories. It didn't pretend negatives didn't exist; I just chose which truth was worth highlighting in that moment.

The truth of *Gender Euphoria* is impossible to untangle from the context of its creation. It was created at a time when it felt like the loudest voices being given platforms were painting trans existence in an unflattering, malicious, harmful light that did not reflect either the facts of reality or the emotional reality of the lives myself and my friends were living. It's true stories, told against the backdrop of others asserting lies about my community without evidence, relying on their volume to carry their narrative.

The truth of a situation is unfortunately often many things at once, hard to boil down into one objective narrative. It's an announcement that a company wasn't yet ready to reveal to the public. It's an honest opinion given freely without fear of limitation. It's an account of events written to combat a narrative or expose a perspective. As much as I wanted to believe truth was one simple thing, in a world where telling the truth comes with consequences and bigotry is presented under the guise of "honest opinion" truth has to also exist as a tool, a weapon to fight back against those being simply confident and loud.



CARA THOMPSON

Can you have creative freedom while remaining authentic to yourself and your community?



My first lesson on the value of authenticity came in 2021, when I entered UNESCO Cities of Literature international poetry competition, 'Slamovision'. This Eurovision-inspired slam invited poets from 14 cities across the world to represent their hometown with a poem in the hopes of becoming the next Slamovision Champion. As the world was still tentatively emerging from quarantine, entrants were invited to submit a video of themselves performing their poem to be voted on by an international judging panel.

I was 23 years old and didn't even feel qualified enough to call myself a poet at the time. However, after a nudge from a close friend, I threw a blanket over a chair to hide my messy bedroom and submitted a video of myself performing my poem 'Island Screams', just hours before the deadline. An exploration of the challenges and contradictions of growing up as a Black British Caribbean woman, I clicked 'submit' and went to bed without much thought, and with no expectations that my poem would connect with, let alone be understood, by judges on the other side of the world.

You can imagine my absolute astonishment when three months later, I heard my name called out as 2021's Slamovision Winner.

Beyond my jaw hanging open in shock for about a month, my Slamovision experience left me with some critical lessons about the value of authenticity. The success of 'Island Screams' showed me that I could explore myself and my community in an authentic way through my writing, and that this authenticity could be felt and celebrated by people within and far beyond my community, all over the world. My unique experiences weren't a barrier to my creative connection or success; they were the key all along.

The short answer: Yes.
The real answer:
Authenticity is the key to creative freedom.

But what else does it mean to be authentic to yourself and your community as a creative?

While my Slamovision experience showed me how authenticity can exist in what we choose to create—our stylistic choices, themes, and perspectives—authenticity may also impact how we choose to create. As I've gone on to build my career as a freelance writer and facilitator, I've also come to learn that maintaining a sense of creative authenticity can have real, practical consequences. Authenticity can mean turning down a big opportunity that doesn't align with your values. Authenticity can even mean challenging or unpacking the more painful sides of the very communities you inhabit, love and seek to uplift. These can be difficult crossroads for any creative to meet on their journey and may even feel like barriers to our creative success at times.

Additionally, if the communities we inhabit have been historically excluded from the arts, we may feel the added pressure to be a "good representative" in creative spaces. I do not have enough fingers to count how many times I have looked around a room and been the only Black or global majority writer present, and the sense of isolation and pressure this can create. On top of this burden, we may also find ourselves having to navigate the minefield of pre-existing ideas that others have about our communities. Even the most well-meaning creative bodies can make the mistake of parachuting in with their assumptions of what a group wants, feels or needs, without considering the unique perspectives, priorities, and stories that make up the group in question. While it's undeniable that a sense of community is often rooted in shared experiences, these one-size-fits-all approaches can deeply undermine our ability to show up as authentic individuals. Soon enough, the very authenticity that once made you feel so seen in your artistry can begin to feel like a cage.

Ultimately, the pressures of remaining authentic to myself and my community as a writer eased once I came to a vital realisation: *Writing with authenticity is a community practice.*

While writing can often feel like a task we undertake alone, be that under blankets in a messy bedroom or in the privacy of our Notes app, our creative ideas do not emerge in a vacuum. The words and images that find their way onto our pages are cultivated in the communities we occupy throughout our lives: in the sprigs of thyme your grandma stored in glass jars above the stove, in the mean comment your school crush made 20 years ago that you still can't shake, in the smile of a little girl who waved at you on your commute home. When we write with authenticity, community is not something we need to force into our work: *it is already there.*

In the same way that we may have to make some difficult choices to remain authentic to ourselves and our communities, we can also make incredibly rewarding ones. In 2024, I joined forces with fellow Black creatives to co-found the Nottingham Black Creatives Network, which continues to support and connect artists of African-Caribbean heritage across the city. I am also an Assistant Producer of GOBS, a Nottingham-based spoken word collective I joined in 2021 to find my own creative community, and which I am now able to nurture in return. All of these groups have played an integral role in my creative journey and are a testament to how creativity and community can serve and nourish one another.



So, final answer: can you really have creative freedom while remaining authentic to yourself and your community?

To be honest, I'm not sure how creative freedom can exist without it.

Cara Thompson is a writer, performer and artist based in Nottingham, UK. A proud descendant of Jamaican migrants who came to Britain as part of the pioneering 'Windrush generation', Cara's work explores the richness and complexities of her Caribbean-British heritage while inviting audiences to unpack our shared histories, heartaches and humanity.

Cara's poetry has been featured and commissioned by Penguin Random House, HuffPost, Oxfam, the NHS Leadership Academy, UNESCO, Simon and Schuster and more. In 2021, Cara won UNESCO Cities of Literature's international slam poetry competition Slamovision with her poem 'Island Screams (Where Are You From)'.

Outside of poetry, Cara is also a musician, facilitator, programmer, and an active member of Nottingham's creative community. Since 2023, Cara has been an Assistant Director of Nottingham Poetry Festival. In 2024, Cara served as Lead Artist of the Nottingham based poetry collective, GOBS, co-directing their development programme and live showcase 'Earth' at Nottingham Playhouse. Cara is also a founding member of the Nottingham Black Creatives Network, and hosted the group's debut residency at Saltbox Presents throughout April 2024.

I'm the daughter of Greek Cypriot immigrants who came to England in the 1960s, part of the broader wave of post-war Commonwealth migration. I grew up above my parents' fish and chip shop in Nottingham, raised on a diet of earthy, salty, lemony foods and a steady stream of family stories about Cyprus and its turbulent history. It's hardly surprising that I return to Cyprus again and again as a source of writing inspiration. On its small stretch of land, Cyprus has seen colonial rule, civil unrest, and still lives with the consequences of an invasion in 1974.

My latest novel, *Where the Earth Holds Secrets*, is due to be published next spring by Claret Press. It's a book about the search for the graves of missing people on the island. It took me six years to complete, the story inspired by the disappearance of my father's brother in 1974. It's not my uncle's story but shaped by the emotions surrounding such a loss: the silence, the unanswered questions, the ache of absence that travels through generations.

Cyprus is a unique example of post-conflict humanitarian cooperation, where representatives of two formerly warring communities work side by side under UN auspices to recover and identify the remains of people who disappeared during the island's troubled years.



EVE MAKIS

Writing Between Worlds: On Being Both an Insider and an Outsider

How do I feel about the book finally making its way into the world? Pleased, of course. But uneasy too, that I may have made mistakes culturally and factually. Although I am of Cypriot heritage, I was born and raised in England, far from the daily realities of life on a divided island. I do not live the politics. I do not live under occupation. I haven't lost my home to war. I am, in that sense, an outsider.

I didn't set out to write a political book. What interested me was the emotional terrain. What happens when a loved one goes missing? What happens when individuals from opposite sides of a military divide are forced to confront a difficult, shared past? But when writing about Cyprus, a place where there are two distinct sides, two narratives, politics becomes unavoidable.



“Readers want to be transported by a story, but they also want to trust that the lives and worlds they encounter feel true.”

The book is partly told through the eyes of a Turkish Cypriot journalist, a character inspired by the real-life investigative reporter Sevgül Uludağ, renowned for her work on locating the graves of missing people. Over time, I’ve come to know Sevgül personally. She has answered my questions, challenged my assumptions, and pointed out when I got things wrong—factually, politically, historically. Getting to know Sevgül forced me to confront my own biases about people on the other side. It was part of my work as a writer. Necessary.

The novelist, Linda Grant, said, *‘The whole point of fiction is that you make it up, but at the same time readers have become passionate for authenticity, for hearing the truth of other voices, other lives - and for treating them, at times, like autobiography or non-fiction, the novel as learning aid, in history and geography.’* Readers want to be transported by a story, but they also want to trust that the lives and worlds they encounter feel true.

In my search for truth, I researched extensively, interviewed families of the missing and travelled to Cyprus with the support of Arts Council England. I wrote multiple drafts, revised the plot, changed my protagonists, went from third to first person and back again, shelved the novel for a year. I carried on, believing I’d make it work, eventually. Writing can sometimes be an act of blind faith. I *had* to tell this story but I also wanted it to be fair, accurate, and emotionally truthful. I felt a responsibility to the island, to the complexity of its history and social dynamics.

That challenge of writing across cultures and experiences raises broader questions. Who gets to tell which stories? What responsibilities come with writing into cultures that are not entirely our own? Can outsiders ever truly do justice to the lives and histories they represent?

Even writers with seemingly close cultural ties to their work can get it wrong. One of my favourite authors, Elif Shafak, published *The Island of Missing Trees* in 2021, a novel set in Cyprus. It was widely acclaimed, but some Turkish Cypriot writers and readers were disappointed. The Turkish Cypriot writer and academic Dr Alev Adil, writing in the *TLS*, noted: *‘The novel is strong on ecological research, but its grasp of Cypriot history and the distinctiveness of Turkish Cypriot culture leaves much to be desired. Greek Cypriot culture, meanwhile, isn’t represented at all.’*

Shafak, a writer of Turkish origin, might have been assumed to be an insider. But the response to her work shows how easily cultural missteps can occur, even with the best intentions and literary skill.

So, what diligence do writers owe to the cultures they depict? Does my background as a British Cypriot give me more agency to write about Cyprus? Does empathy and commitment outweigh ethnicity and origin? Is the voice of an insider inherently more authentic, or is authenticity also about care, craft, and accountability?

These are the questions I’ve wrestled with, and I’m not sure I have all the answers. But I do believe that if a writer approaches a culture with humility, curiosity, and a willingness to be corrected, if they research extensively, consult those with lived experience, and engage in dialogue then they’ve done as much as they can do.

As the novelist, Hari Kunzru says: *‘Good writers transgress without transgressing, in part because they are humble about what they do not know. They treat their own experience of the world as provisional. They do not presume. They respect people, not by leaving them alone in the inviolability of their cultural authenticity, but by becoming involved with them. They research. They engage in reciprocal relationships.’*

Kunzru’s words are a call to approach storytelling with curiosity, due diligence and care.

I believe fiction and the act of writing itself can offer something politics often can’t. A space for empathy, nuance, and emotional truth. It can give voice to those denied a place in society, even people who have vanished from the world. In the case of Cyprus, it can challenge assumptions about the ‘other side’ and hopefully, sow a tiny seed of understanding in our increasingly divided world.

Eve Makis is the author of four novels published by Transworld and Sandstone Press. Her last book, *The Spice Box Letters*, was shortlisted for the Jerwood Fiction Uncovered Prize and the East Midlands Book Award. In 2016, she co-wrote the screenplay *Boy on the Bridge*, adapted from her third novel, which went on to win 28 international film awards. As part of an Arts Council project in 2019, she co-authored *The Accidental Memoir*, a life-writing guide later published by HarperCollins. She has worked widely with marginalised groups through Inspire Libraries and Nottingham City of Literature, and teaches fiction on the MA in Creative Writing at Nottingham Trent University. Her books have been translated into eight languages. Eve’s new novel, *Where the Earth Holds Secrets*, will be published by Claret Press in April 2026.

OLIVER CARMICHAEL & SARAH MACALLISTER

Celebrating the Aurora Prize 2024



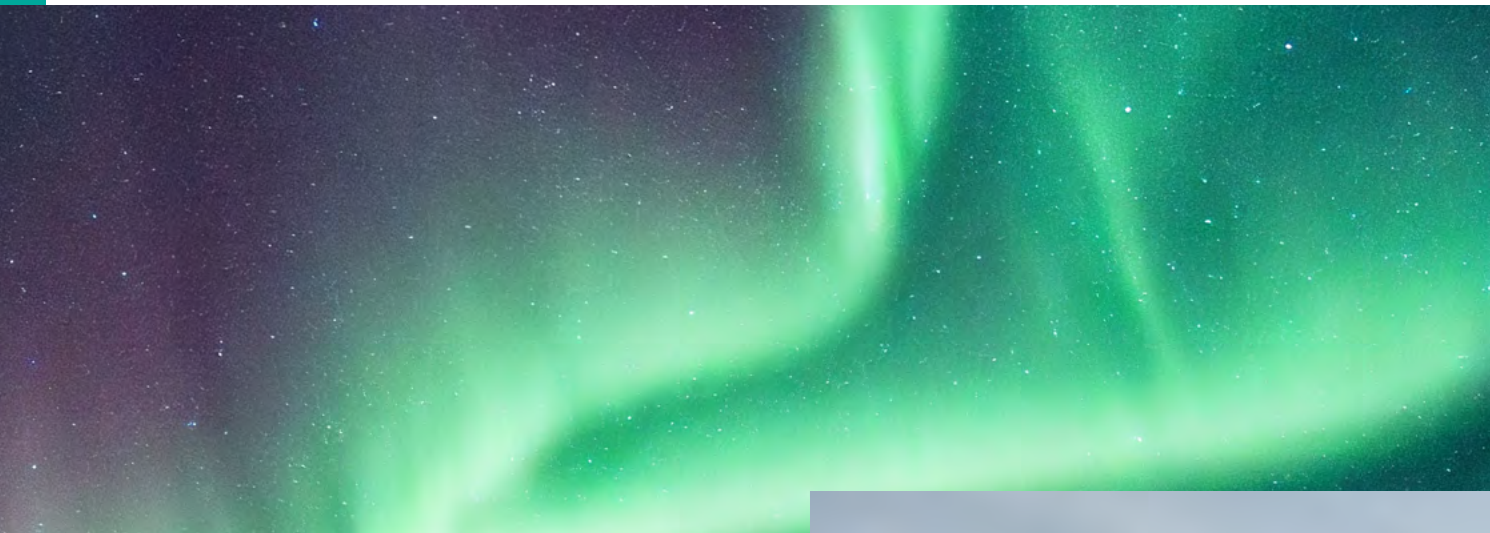
Oliver Carmichael is a poet based in North East England. In addition to the Aurora Prize for Poetry, he won the 2024 Winchester Poetry Prize and was longlisted in the 2025 Disabled Poets Prize. As the recipient of the Michael Donaghy Award, he is currently part of the 2024-2026 cohort of Arvon's Advanced Writing Programme. This has offered him an exciting opportunity to learn from experienced tutors and to continue to develop his craft and engage with his writing in new ways. He is currently working on his first collection.

With the reveal of our 2025 winners on the horizon, we thought we'd look back to last year's Aurora Prize for Writing and celebrate the writers that secured first place in 2024. Both the poem and short story below share their own deeply powerful truths, and we hope you are as moved by them as we were last year and still are today.

To The Trans Man Who Sees My Therapist After Me

after Kim Addonizio

if you've ever grown sick of the waiting lists ever
worn a binder so tight it deformed your ribs thought
about performing top surgery on yourself avoided
having a PAP smear wondered where a man who bleeds
hides his tampons tried to starve away your hips flinched
or fainted at the sight of a needle self-medicated considered
you might grow more butt hair than beard experienced dysphoria
euphoria over-dosed on the pain been ridiculed out of the boy's bathroom
girl's bathroom held it in so long you got a UTI had your aim
fail while using an STP worried your packer looks like a semi
used a rolled up sock because it's cheaper been told
to man up heard the chat-up line I don't date men
but I would date you debated if you should come out before
or after the first kiss wished they already knew received the reply
I would never have guessed disgust regret a glass bottle
to the face felt frustrated by the lack of feeling
in a strap-on cursed god nature the newspapers the trans
chasers feared the smell of the urinals hated what was assigned
to you at birth cut open your skin because how else
are you to crawl out if you detest the term dead name
because you've dug in and carried on so many times you're so far
from fucking dead / listen we change the world



An excerpt from 'Arctic Circle'

by Sarah MacAllister

Hungry and cold after many hours I suggested we return to the station and analyse the data, much to Duncan's delight. Once settled with his laptop and a bag of nuts, Duncan frowned at his screen; lower teeth crammed out in a show of helpless vexation.

"Professor Peer..." He spoke without taking his eyes from the offending screen. "There's something wrong here. The infra-red gas analyser must be off. Rates of photosynthesis are weird for S.A 2451."

"That's *Salix arctica*," I said. Typical of Duncan to show off naming equipment, which everyone else called the IRGA, and neglect naming the actual plant.

Professor Peer glanced up, his face aglow with blue light. He asked for the dataset title, then tapped to change the code and analyse it differently. He examined a graph and tutted, typing fast.

"Who recorded the original data?"

"Harri."

Harri squirmed under the Professor's gaze.

"What a pity we have to decide how to spend the rest of our lives in our twenties," said Professor Peer. "Let's move on. We'll put a question mark over this dataset. Ask Mother to show you how to use the IRGA properly. Smile sweetly. Watch her melt like she does when I ask her to do something." Professor Peer winked at me.

Harri and I worked in the kitchen, boiling spaghetti, and sizzling venison meatballs in canned tomato juice. We all ate together at the small round kitchen table. After washing the dishes, we left them to air-dry. Across the cabin, Professor Peer brought out his bottle of Laphroaig and offered a glass to Duncan as they discussed data patterns by the stove.



"I like whisky," said Harri. Her voice carried above the clanking cutlery over to the corner. The professor's glasses twinkled in the firelight as he turned his head.

"Indeed," he said with a small smile, "Duncan, did you hear that? She likes whisky. Well, my dear, you may help yourself." The professor indicated the bottle on the table by thrusting his chin in its direction, then returned to face Duncan and resumed their low, urgent talk.

Harri strode over and poured a generous measure into a mug. She tipped her head and drank it all in one gulp, spluttering afterwards. They ignored her.

"I'm going out," she said. When she didn't return after an hour, I hoped she had found drinking buddies among the gawky science lads. Someone her own age who could cure her of this infatuation with indifferent authority.

Cold winds drove through the glacial valley and howled through the night. Fatigue weighed me down. The light was unfriendly. I closed my eyes and slipped away into jumbled corridors, searching for ways out.

"Harri's still gone," Duncan said, ripping through my sleep.

A lump settled in my stomach as I joined the search party, telling the gathered scientists and technicians that the missing girl was twenty-two years old with dark hair. My voice sounded weird, dry. Rotor blades droned overhead, and a blue-black helicopter beetled in the sky, scanning for a lost human instead of gathering images of the landscape.

But I found Harri, shivering beside the dark lake, staring across the water. I walked up behind her, hesitating to disturb the quiet sound of lapping waves.

"Harri, we've all been looking for you. Are you ok?"

She didn't turn around.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm stupid. Stupid, stupid, stupid."

"Harri, you wouldn't be here if you were stupid."

She said nothing.



Agents' Corner

JANE COMMANE

What I'm looking for:

Poetry is an interesting genre, as it tends to be less likely to be shaped by trends in the same way prose fiction tends to be. However, it's worth knowing what sort of things an editor is looking for in poetry – for instance, we're looking for an interesting and lively voice at work in the poems. Making sure your poems make deliberate decisions is also important – what forms or formats, stanzas or line breaks (if any) have you chosen, for instance? And of course – language; how fresh, powerful and memorable are the images, metaphors and similes, sounds and rhythms have you put to work in your writing? This can really help your work to stand apart from the crowd.



Jane Commane is a poet, writer, and Editor / Director at Nine Arches Press. She is based in the midlands, and is also co-editor of *Under the Radar* magazine, and *How to be a Poet* (with Jo Bell). Her poetry collection *Assembly Lines* is published by Bloodaxe, and she was awarded the Jerwood Compton Poetry Fellowship in 2018 and the Cholmondeley Award from the Society of Authors in 2025.

KATE BARKER

What I'm looking for:

I look for pace and a story that grips me. Either a character or a subject that I care about, and ideally something I haven't read about many times before. My taste in fiction is quite broad, from the very commercial to novels that might sit on the Women's Prize shortlist. Romantasy is huge currently but I'd be careful about switching if you're currently writing something else. There is a lot of it in the pipeline and trends always change. I wish I could tell you what will take off next year but I don't know! That said, with the world in a terrible state escapism seems like a good bet. I'd love to find a wonderful love story. I'm always on the lookout for a brilliant thriller too – escapism comes in many forms and can be deliciously dark as well as cosy and romantic.



Kate Barker has worked in book publishing for over 20 years as a literary agent, commissioning editor and ghostwriter. She represents novelists and non-fiction authors and welcomes approaches from new and established writers for adults.

We approached four literary agents and publishers and asked them what they're looking for in a submission. Whether you want to get published, or you find out what trends are up-and-coming in 2026, join us in the Agent's Corner and get your hands on some expert industry insights for writers of genre fiction, lit fic, nonfiction and poetry alike!

THE EMMA PRESS

What we're looking for:

The Emma Press selects books for publication through regular open calls for submissions. Right now, we especially keen to find original, lyrical and personal non-fiction that would fit well with our essay collections; titles like Maddie Ballard's *Bound: A Memoir of Making and Remaking*, Nina Mingya Powles' *Tiny Moons: A Year of Eating in Shanghai*, and Florentyna Leow's *How Kyoto Breaks Your Heart*. We try as clear as possible about what we're looking for and how to prepare your submission, and we offer lots of opportunities to ask us questions in the run-up to each submissions window. You can read more about how to submit here.



The Emma Press is an independent publishing house specialising in poetry, short fiction, essays and children's books. It was founded by Emma Dai'an Wright in Winnersh, Berkshire, in 2012 and is now based in Jewellery Quarter, Birmingham, UK.

OLI MUNSON

What I'm looking for:

I'm looking for speculative fiction and crime novels which move away from standard procedurals and psychological suspense. I'm never looking for fantasy and sci-fi which isn't grounded in reality although I've said this a million times and still get those submissions. A well-written, tightly-plotted novel which speaks of the world we live in is what I enjoy reading the most and I'm no different as an agent. I can generally tell if something is right for me within the first two or three pages so beginnings have to be as polished as possible. Obviously romantasy is still dominating the conversation as far as trends go and I expect that will continue into 2026. For the first time I can remember crime and thrillers are in-between trends and it's been generally trickier to sell even very good novels this year as a result. But writers should never be too led by current trends: by the time they've finished writing their novel, found an agent and publisher, and hopefully been published, two or three years will have gone by. A lot can change in that time, least of all readers' tastes.



Oli Munson is a director at A.M. Heath & Co where he represents a list of award-winning writers of crime and thrillers, speculative fiction and select non-fiction.



LOLA KENT

The Karen Becher Essay Prize Winners Announced!

Keen readers may remember from our last issue that we visited the National Holocaust Museum to find out more about one of their latest projects: The Karen Becher Essay Prize. Hoping to encourage reflective and analytical thought processes in young people, and inspired by the work of late Holocaust educator Karen Becher, the writing competition asked young people the question: 'Does free speech build or break a community?'

Just in time for this edition of Pulse, the winners have now been announced! To celebrate the achievements of the bright 16- to 18-year-olds who placed in the competition, we were lucky enough that the National Holocaust Museum sent over some of the winning extracts for us to share with our readers. Take a look below and find out what free speech means to the young people of today!

MARCUS
1st Place Prize Winner

“Ultimately, free speech is crucial in the early stages of a community. During a vulnerable state, informed decision-making improves survival. By leading to the free exchange of ideas, free speech fosters trust, social equality, and democracy, helping decision-making. However, whilst gentle censorship may increase social cohesion and harmony by slowing the spread of minority viewpoints, this often leads to greater unrest and division in the long term. Free speech enables communities to adapt and evolve in response to changing circumstances, fostering trust, progress, and effective decision-making, essential for enduring unity and resilience. In contrast, heavy-handed restrictions, as in medieval Europe and the Soviet Union, weaken the very foundations of communities by stifling discourse and creating artificial, fear-driven unity. This has ultimately led to entrenched divisions and perceptions that mean these restrictions have continued to harm society, such as in the Troubles, which originated from sectarian divide in Northern Ireland. Therefore, despite the risk of divisive opinions, free speech remains essential to sustainable communities. Rather than breaking them, it allows them to rebuild, reform, and grow stronger.”

MAX
Joint 2nd Place Prize Winner

“Injustices cannot be fixed without a strong degree of free speech because it allows people to question and critique the societal conventions that perpetuate inequalities.”

MARITH
Joint 2nd Place Prize Winner

“Free speech allows us to build the complexity of our opinions and provides opportunities to hear from voices which otherwise may not get a chance to be heard.”

Write for Pulse

The next edition of Pulse launches in March 2026, and Writing East Midlands wants you to write for it! That's right: We're looking for a 500-word piece (or 30-line poem) to publish in both the print and digital copies of Issue No. 5.

Your submitted piece *might* respond to the themes raised in the latest edition, 'Writing the Truth', whether that's through the medium of creative nonfiction, flash fiction or poetry.

Or it might simply tell us what you thought of your favourite article, what you think a writer's responsibility is to the truth or what truths you aim to share in your writing. We want to know!

The successful writer will receive a commission of £50 for their piece. **Enter your writing by 17th December 2025 at 11.59 pm** for your chance to be considered.

Full details available on the Writing East Midlands website, or by following this link.

What does WEM do? It is a question that sometimes confuses me. I've felt our communications are pretty good. The website is clear and easy to navigate. The key messages and values are pretty much front and center. Sure, one must think about some of them, although that's no bad thing. Like, what exactly is an open society? And what has creativity got to do with it?

HENDERSON MULLIN

Writing East Midlands, a literature development agency

Our answer to that is it is a good sign when more people have access to creativity and ways of expressing theirs, should they want to. Which seems fair enough.

I now realize that the 'what does WEM do' question comes up because we do so many things. It really means *what is the main thing that WEM does?* That's easy. I slyly answer, "Writing East Midlands is the Literature Development Agency for the Region", knowing that this is what we *are* rather than what we *do*. There is a big clue in this though.





Originally, we were supported by Arts Council England to run creative writing activities around the region. This focused on increasing opportunities for aspiring writers to develop their craft and get paid work. We then realized that we weren't seeing many writers from some less visible, or less well-connected communities, which led to the more socially or community focused projects for which we are now perhaps best known. More than one hundred and thirty local projects with all sorts of communities in all sorts of areas have mostly been aimed at the idea of equity in the provision of creative opportunities, and at giving writers from various circumstances a chance to emerge. We've become pretty good at that.

If you are interested in a few past projects, [click here](#) or [here](#) for older ones.

Despite this, we'd like to think that the 'main thing that we do', what we in the office call our 'potato', is that we are an agency, perhaps even at times an 'agent.' I mean that the development of new writers and connecting them to opportunity is at our core. We are not though 'Literary Agents' as they specifically represent authors for a fee, pitch their works to publishers, producers, and studios and negotiate deals on their client's behalf. We do try to occupy the space before that by getting people ready.

You can find our agency activity in:

The Writers Conference which attracts around 250 emerging writers to learn together and have precious access to literary agents and publishers.

The much sought after *Mentoring Scheme* each year matches eight emerging writers with professional mentors for craft and career guidance while they work towards performance or publication.

The Free Reads Scheme, run in partnership with *The Literary Consultancy*, enables low-income writers to get their work rigorously critiqued again free of charge, so they are prepped for progression.

Routes to Writing offers writing surgeries, one-to-one sessions, as well as workshops and networking meet – ups across the region covering planning, craft development, writing in the digital environment, writing in schools, and script writing. As part of this we offer *advice on funding bids*, and for ACE's Developing Your Creative Practice scheme, which is becoming so important for that step-up.

As well as these programmes we aim to bring writers news about courses, submission calls, training and job opportunities, author events and book launches. We do this in a regular digital newsletter featuring our own news and that of other writing organisations from around the East Midlands and beyond.

A literature development agency is what WEM is, and this agency work is at the heart of what we do.

PUTS

WINTER 2025
ISSUE 4

TO WRITERS NOW
WHAT MATTERS



MAGAZINE