



Introducing ten compelling Black, Asian and ethnically diverse writers

Jackie Kay offers you a guide to contemporary British writing

*Ideas for your next festival, reading programme,
or inspiration for your students*

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Your guide to contemporary British writing...

Looking to book inspiring writers for your next festival?

Want to introduce your students to exciting new writing from the UK?

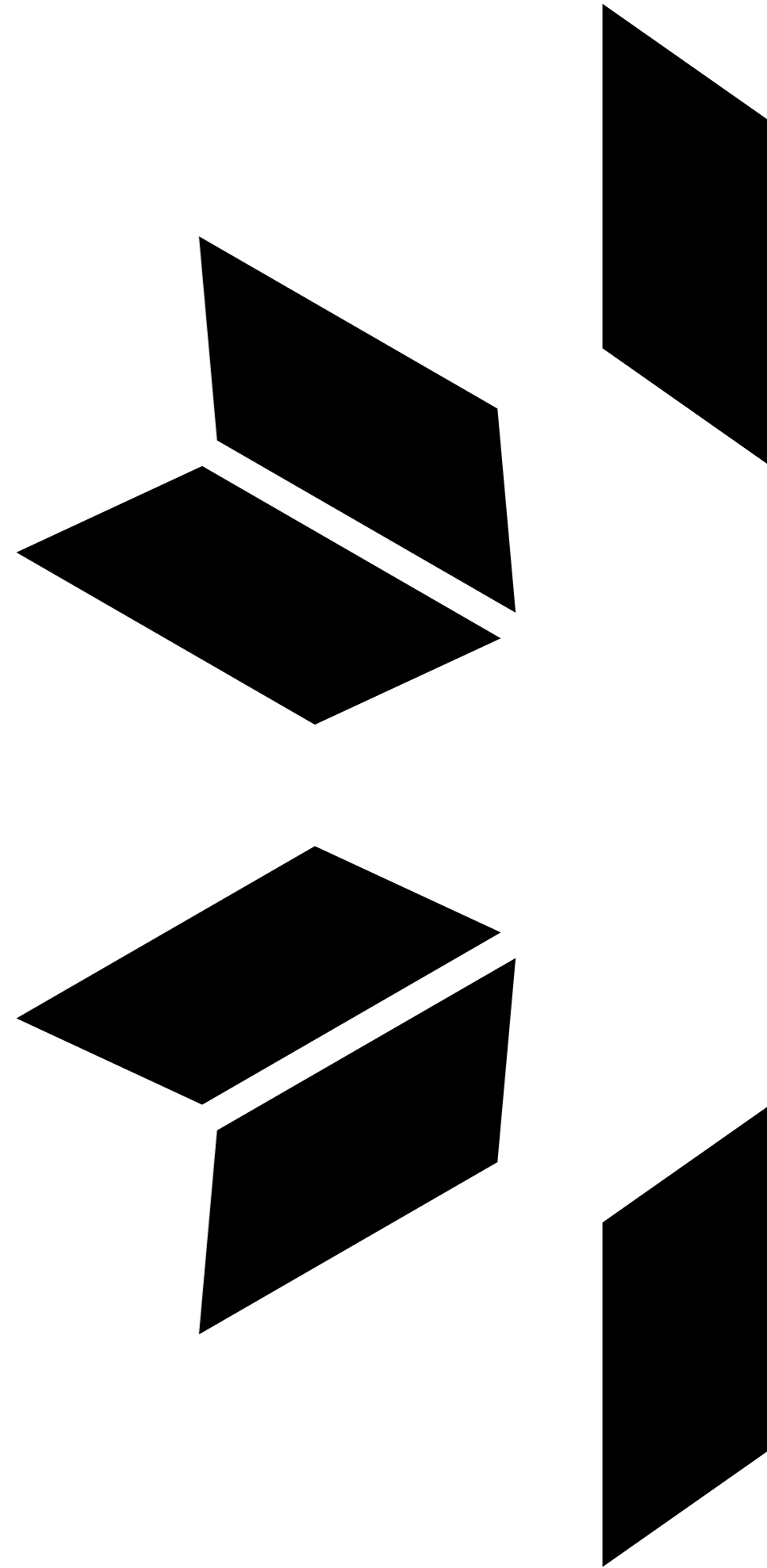
The International Literature Showcase is a partnership between the National Centre for Writing and British Council. It aims to showcase amazing writers based in the UK to programmers, publishers and teachers of literature in English around the world. To do so, we have invited six leading writers to each curate a showcase of themed writing coming out of the UK today.

Following the high-profile launch of Elif Shafak's showcase of women writers at London Book Fair 2019 and Val McDermid's showcase of LGBTQI+ writers at the National Library of Scotland, we have now revealed Jackie Kay's choice of ten Black, Asian and ethnically diverse writers. Three further showcases will take place next year.

Use this guide to find out more about these writers, read their work, understand how they relate to contemporary UK literature and consider working with them in the months ahead.

All contact details are included in this guide and if you have any questions please drop us a message at info@nationalcentreforwriting.org.uk

The International Literature Showcase is a partnership between the National Centre for Writing and British Council, with support from Arts Council England and Creative Scotland.





(c) Denise Elze

‘These writers open up the world to you and give you the world back’

Jackie Kay introduces her selection of ten compelling Black, Asian and ethnically diverse writers based in the UK today

I would have given a lot growing up to come across these writers.

When I was a teenager the only black writer I came across was Wole Soyinka in his poem ‘Telephone Conversation’. When I was seventeen, I went to University and did a course on the Indian Novel. I discovered writers like Anita Desai and Mulk Raj Anand. They were a revelation. Through reading, I travelled half way across the world. A little later, I found Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, James Baldwin, Gloria Naylor. I found that reading helped me understand myself, and my complex identity. It helped me piece myself back together again. Books kept me company in the dark. I suddenly found characters that looked like me and asked some of the same questions. I was not alone anymore. I had the very finest of company. It took me a long time though to find writers of colour from this country. The first writer I came across was Buchi Emecheta back in the late seventies; then I found a whole family of Caribbean poets – writers like James Berry, Grace Nichols, Fred D’Aguiar, Jean Binta Breeze. It was like extending your family. Good writers offer the reader something so deeply affecting that the impact stays with you for a very long time. Books you love become part of you. You are partly formed by them.

These ten writers open up the world to you and give you the world back. There’s a worldly-wise wisdom in their work, as well as an abundance of humour. They are bold. They often tackle difficult and dangerous themes with an extraordinary grace and lightness of touch. They are all writers who make the reader ask questions of themselves and their place in the world, and they are all writers that give us back the world in all its complex glory. Sometimes witty, sometimes elegiac, sometimes uncomfortable, sometimes unnerving, sometimes hilarious, sometimes euphoric, these ten writers offer the reader a whole range of experience.

Many of these writers write across forms and across times – using the past to hold up a mirror to our own time. Many of these writers have experienced one or more forms of discrimination and have found a way of writing about it in original and authentic ways. I’m excited to introduce these writers not just because they challenge received wisdom, not just because they give us a new way of looking at the old, not just because they offer us insight and understanding, not just because they often make us laugh, but because they are good. Bold, brilliant and brave, these ten writers give us a real idea of the range of talent writing in the UK today. All of them are interested in language, in memory, in time – and all make us think deeply about what it means to be a human being alive in Britain in the 21st century. The future is complex; the future is hybrid. These ten voices make me feel hopeful about our future and give me back some of my past.

Jackie Kay is the third modern Makar, the Scottish poet laureate. A poet, novelist and writer of short stories, she has enjoyed great acclaim for her work for both adults and children. Her first novel *Trumpet* won the Authors’ Club First Novel Award and the Guardian Fiction Prize. She is also the author of three collections of stories with Picador, *Why Don’t You Stop Talking*, *Wish I Was Here*, and *Reality, Reality*; two poetry collections, *Fiere* and *Bantam*; and her memoir, *Red Dust Road*. She is Professor of Creative Writing at Newcastle University, and divides her time between Glasgow and Manchester.

Jay Bernard



‘Their poems sing with outrage and indignation, with fury and passion...They have brio, they have brilliance, they are breathtakingly brave’

— Jackie Kay



Jay Bernard (FRSL FRSA) is a writer from London. Their work is interdisciplinary, critical, queer and rooted in the archive. They won the 2018 Ted Hughes Award for *Surge: Side A*, a cross-disciplinary exploration of the New Cross Fire in 1981. Jay’s short film *Something Said* has screened in the UK and internationally, including Aesthetica and Leeds International Film Festival (where it won best experimental and best queer short respectively), Sheffield DocFest and CinemAfrica. Jay is a programmer at BFI Flare, an archivist at Mayday Rooms and resident artist at Raven Row.

Their first collection, *Surge*, is out with Chatto and Windus in 2019.

Read more about Jay [online](#).

(c) Joshua Virasami

Contact

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Publisher

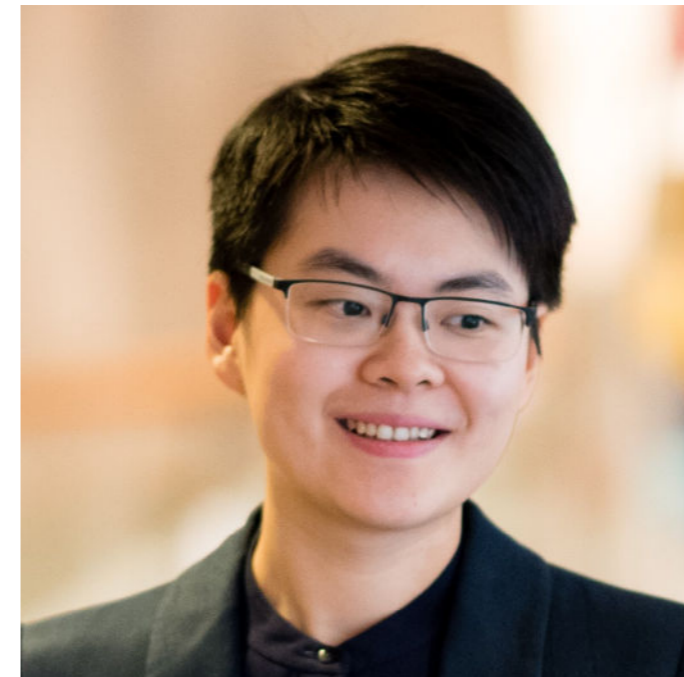
Penguin Randomhouse: MQuibellSmith@penguinrandomhouse.co.uk

Mary Jean Chan



‘A poet of our time — she captures the newness of everything... Her poetry is psychologically astute and culturally complex.’

— Jackie Kay



Poet, editor, academic. Proudly queer and BAME. Londoner from Hong Kong.

Mary Jean Chan was born in Hong Kong in 1990. Her debut collection *Flèche* is published by Faber & Faber (2019). Her debut pamphlet, *A Hurry of English*, was selected as the 2018 Poetry Book Society Summer Pamphlet Choice. In 2017, she was shortlisted for the Forward Prize for Best Single Poem and came second in the National Poetry Competition. She is a Ledbury Poetry Critic, editor of *Oxford Poetry*, advisory board member at the Poetry Translation Centre and member of the Folio Prize Academy. Mary Jean is a Lecturer in Creative Writing (Poetry) at Oxford Brookes University and lives in London.

Read more about Mary Jean [online](#).

(c) Jack Latham

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Eric Ngalle Charles



‘His voice reaches out across the divides, across the lands, from Cameroon, to Russia to the UK, taking it all in’

— Jackie Kay



A story-teller par-excellence with many tales to tell, a unique theatrical voice

Eric Ngalle Charles is a Cameroon-born writer, poet, actor and playwright based in Wales. A fellow of the leadership network British-American Project, he currently sits on the Board of Directors for Literature Wales. Ngalle Charles is one of the Hay 30 young writers who will help shape the world over the next three decades. He holds a Creative Wales Award from the Arts Council of Wales for his research into migration, memory and trauma. His most current work is the Wales Cameroon anthology *Hiraeth-Erzolirzoli*. His plays have been performed at London Southbank Centre, Hay Festival and Llandeilo Festival.

Read more about Eric [online](#).

(c) Suzy Fernandez dos Santos

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Imtiaz Dharker



‘Her poetry shines a light in the dark... You cannot hear her perform without being somehow transformed by the experience’

— Jackie Kay



Poet, pen-and-ink artist, video film maker, escaped shapeshifter

Imtiaz Dharker is a poet and artist, awarded the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry 2014. A Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, she has been Poet in Residence at Cambridge University Library and worked on several projects across art forms in Leeds, Newcastle and Hull, as well as the Archives of St Paul's Cathedral. Her six collections include *Over the Moon* and the latest, *Luck is the Hook*, and her poems have been broadcast widely on BBC Radio 3 and 4 as well as the BBC World Service. She also scripts and directs video films, and has had 11 solo exhibitions of drawings.

Read more about Imtiaz [online](#).

(c) Ayesha Dharker and Majorelle Gardens

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Publisher

Bloodaxe Books: Christine Macgregor publicity@bloodaxebooks.com

Michael Donkor



‘His work has an immediacy and a warmth to it and his is a world you want to enter’

— Jackie Kay



Easily distracted expert distractor, enthusiastic (Ghanaian!) jollof eater, determined listener, flustered teacher

Michael Donkor was born in London, to Ghanaian parents, and teaches English Literature in West London. Many of the issues explored in his debut *Hold* are close to his heart, and his writing won him a place on the Writers’ Centre Norwich Inspires Scheme in 2014, where he received a year’s mentoring from Daniel Hahn. In 2018 he was named as one of *The Observer*’s New Faces of Fiction.

Read more about Michael [online](#).

(c) David Yiu

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Diana Evans



‘A brilliant craftswoman, a master of the form, she makes the reader ask important questions of themselves and makes them laugh at the same time’

— Jackie Kay



Aiming for a perfect balance between narrative drive and close attention to language

Diana Evans is the award-winning author of *Ordinary People*, *The Wonder* and *26a*. Her prize nominations include the Guardian and Commonwealth Best First Book awards, and she was the inaugural winner of the Orange Award for New Writers. A book of the year in the *New Yorker*, *Ordinary People* received the Southbank Sky Arts Award, and was shortlisted for the Women’s Prize for Fiction, the Rathbones Folio Prize and the Orwell Prize for Political Fiction.

Read more about Diana [online](#).

(c) Nick Tucker

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Nadine Aisha Jassat



‘A fearless poet, who boldly takes on difficult themes... reasserting her right to speak out about those things that are often hidden from view’

— Jackie Kay



Writer building bridges made of stories, connecting people through words

Nadine Aisha Jassat is a poet, writer, and creative practitioner, whose work explores storytelling and social justice. She has been published widely online and in print, including in Picador’s essay anthology *It’s Not About the Burqa*, and 404 Ink’s *Nasty Women*. Her work has drawn significant acclaim: in 2018, she received a Scottish Book Trust New Writers’ Award, won British Council’s Discover Project UK Open Call, and was shortlisted for the prestigious Edwin Morgan Poetry Award. Her debut poetry collection, *Let Me Tell You This*, was released to great praise in March 2019 with award-winning publisher 404 Ink.

Read more about Nadine [online](#).

(c) Chris Scott

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404 Ink: Heather McDaid heather@404ink.com

Zaffar Kunial



‘Kunial traces the roots in language to then track the roots in his mixed-race identity, effortlessly transporting the reader from one place to another’

— Jackie Kay



Subtle poet whose writing addresses language, family, heritage, nature and time

Published by Faber & Faber, Zaffar Kunial’s debut book — *Us* (2018) — was shortlisted for the T. S. Eliot Prize, the Costa Poetry Award and the Rathbones Folio Prize, and was a Poetry Book Society Wild Card Choice. Born in Birmingham to a Kashmiri father and an English mother, Zaffar has been poet in residence for the Wordsworth Trust and the Bronte Parsonage. He wrote an essay on trees in *Arborea* (Little Toller) and his title poem ‘Us’ appears at the end of Carol Ann Duffy’s chronological anthology of British poetry, *The Map and the Clock* (Faber & Faber).

Read more about Zaffar [online](#).

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Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi

‘Witty as well as deeply affecting, Makumbi is as comfortable in the grand sweep of the epic novel as she is in the powerful shot of the short story’

— Jackie Kay



(c) Mark Rusher

Ugandan writer keen on folklore, feminisms, masculinities reenergising readerships for African fiction

Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi is a Ugandan fiction writer. Her first novel, *Kintu*, won the Kwani Manuscript Project in 2013. Her short story ‘Let’s Tell This Story Properly’ won the regional (Africa) and Global Commonwealth Short Story Prize 2014. Her collection of short stories, *Manchester Happened* (for the UK/Commonwealth) and *Let’s Tell This Story Properly* (for US Publication) came out in Spring 2019. She is a Cheuse International Writing Fellow (2019). She has a PhD from Lancaster University and lectures at Manchester Metropolitan University. Jennifer is a recipient of the Windham-Campbell Literature Prize 2018.

Read more about Jennifer [online](#).

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Olumide Popoola

‘She is fascinated with the spaces in between culture and form, and she is adept at moving between Nigeria, Germany and the UK’

— Jackie Kay



(c) Naomi Woddiss

Feminist exploring innovative writing and accessibility, committed to voice(s) and representation

Nigerian-German Olumide Popoola writes essays, poetry, short and long fiction. She has also published a play and recorded spoken word in collaboration with musicians. Olumide holds a PhD in Creative Writing and has lectured at various universities. In 2018 she curated Berlin’s inaugural international African Book Festival, Writing in Migration. She created and led an Arts Council funded mentorship scheme for emerging LGBTQ+ writers. ‘The Future is Back’ is now in its second year.

Her critically acclaimed novel *When We Speak of Nothing* was published by Cassava Republic Press in 2017. She will be the writer-in-residence at Greenwich University 2019/20.

Read more about Olumide [online](#).

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‘Without the work of these writers, the story of our nation is incomplete’

Ellah Wakatama Allfrey contextualises Jackie Kay’s selection of compelling Black, Asian and ethnically diverse writers working in the UK

I struggle with the awkward-in-my-mouth feel of the acronym BAME. It is both unwieldy and inadequate, seeking as it does to corral together in four too-small letters a multiplicity of identities, a universe of experiences and histories. Nowhere is this inadequacy more evident than in Jackie Kay’s glorious list of authors who represent the range, power, bold ambition and relevance of contemporary British writing.

Viewing the writers listed here it is clear just how important the recognition of a selected group can be. This list serves as a sign-post and a celebration – an invitation to explore further the diverse communities, individuals, histories and possible futures that make up a full and complete truth of contemporary British experience. Without the work of these writers, the story of our nation is incomplete.

These are writers reclaiming histories, telling stories in the first person. In her acceptance speech for the Sydney Peace Prize, the writer Arundhati Roy disputed an often too-easily used phrase: ‘There’s really no such thing as the ‘voiceless’. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferably unheard.’ Here are writers creating links from across the globe (reaching back to ancestral homes) and linking back to our own shores, widening our borders of imagination. Their journeys here (sometimes their own, sometimes those of a previous generation) span the globe: Cameroon, Ghana, Germany, Hong Kong, Iran, Nigeria, Pakistan and Uganda. In a moment in our history, when political and economic uncertainty and a lack of honourable leadership have seen a lurch to right-wing isolationism and nationalism, these writers challenge readers to think of expanded borders, of migrations and sojourns and homecomings, of the truth that human beings have always journeyed. And more than that, the writers here demonstrate just how vibrant culture and art can be as a result of that very movement.

Half of the writers listed here are poets – as much a reflection of Kay’s own focus of interest as it is testament to a booming market responding to readers’ desire, with sales of poetry collections increasing by 66% in the last five years. Perhaps, in times of global uncertainty and fear for our future we respond to the poet’s ability to clarify and distil. **Jay Bernard’s** work ranges from a re-imagined Arthurian legend featuring a black knight to a lament for those



(c) Charlie Hopkinson

lost in the tragedy of Grenfell. Here is a writer who reveals in searing verse the souls and lives of black folk through time. Fellow poet **Mary Jean Chan** revels in the complexities of language with verse that explores body and being, a self that is made across continents and languages. The intersection of race, gender identity and sexuality in this list is worth noting. For me there is clear instruction here: see how the work here resists boxing-in, see how a diverse range of experience distilled results in excellence.

Imtiaz Dharker (who is also an artist and film maker) traverses continents and identities in work that asks us to consider the nature of God and our impulse to religion, revelling in contradiction and a writerly political consciousness. **Nadine Aisha Jassat** a relative newcomer whose debut collection was published this year. This is the poetry of resistance, the vibrant craft of a defiant feminism through the prism of verse. Weaving paths through linguistic inheritances and memory, with subtle manipulations of form, **Zaffar Kunial’s** work offers both intimacy and humour. Here too Kay’s list invites exploration; these poet encourage readers to range wide from the capital, from the Englishness of the establishment to the voices of the north – via the Commonwealth.

‘These writers challenge readers to think of expanded borders, of migrations and sojourns and homecomings’

In the novels of the three African women featured, this selection draws on the writing of ordinary lives and universal themes: **Diana Evans**, a novelist of delicate sensibilities whose books offer a chronicle of a particularly black and British lived reality that has been proven to resonate across all communities; the Ugandan-born Mancunian **Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi** whose historical novel debut found readers internationally and whose short stories of migration, romance, betrayal and family are a snapshot of immigrant life; and the urban realities of **Olumide Popoola’s** work that interrogates what it is to be an African and a European.

Michael Donkor’s debut novel – a story of displacement that explores family, sexuality and class – provides further evidence of the breadth of approach and the layered interrogation of the writers listed here. And for **Eric Ngalle Charles** one medium of expression is inadequate for what he has to say. Playwright, poet, novelist – across art forms his work is the memory of forced migration, the search for home, the state of being a stranger in a strange land and the holder of multiple identities. It is work that allows readers and audiences to witness the humanity of the migrant and refugee in the first person. And for all these reasons it is essential work particularly at this moment in time.

Ellah Wakatama Allfrey, OBE, is Editor-at-Large at Canongate Books and was the founding Publishing Director of The Indigo Press. She was a judge for the 2017 Dublin International Literary Award and the 2015 Man Booker Prize. She is former deputy editor of Granta magazine and senior editor at Jonathan Cape, Random House. She is the editor of Africa39 and Safe House: Explorations in Creative Nonfiction. Her journalism has appeared in the Telegraph, Guardian and Observer newspapers and in Spectator and The Griffith Review. She is featured in the 2019 New Daughters of Africa anthology. She is a trustee of The Royal Literary Fund and sits on the Advisory board for Art for Amnesty and the Editorial Advisory Panel of the Johannesburg Review of Books. In 2016 she was Visiting Professor and Global and Intercultural Scholar at Goshen College, Indiana and Guest Master at the Gabriel Garcia Marquez Fellowship in Cartagena, Colombia.

Reception

The launch of Jackie's selected writers at Cheltenham Literature Festival 2019 generated a great deal of discussion online and in the national and international press.

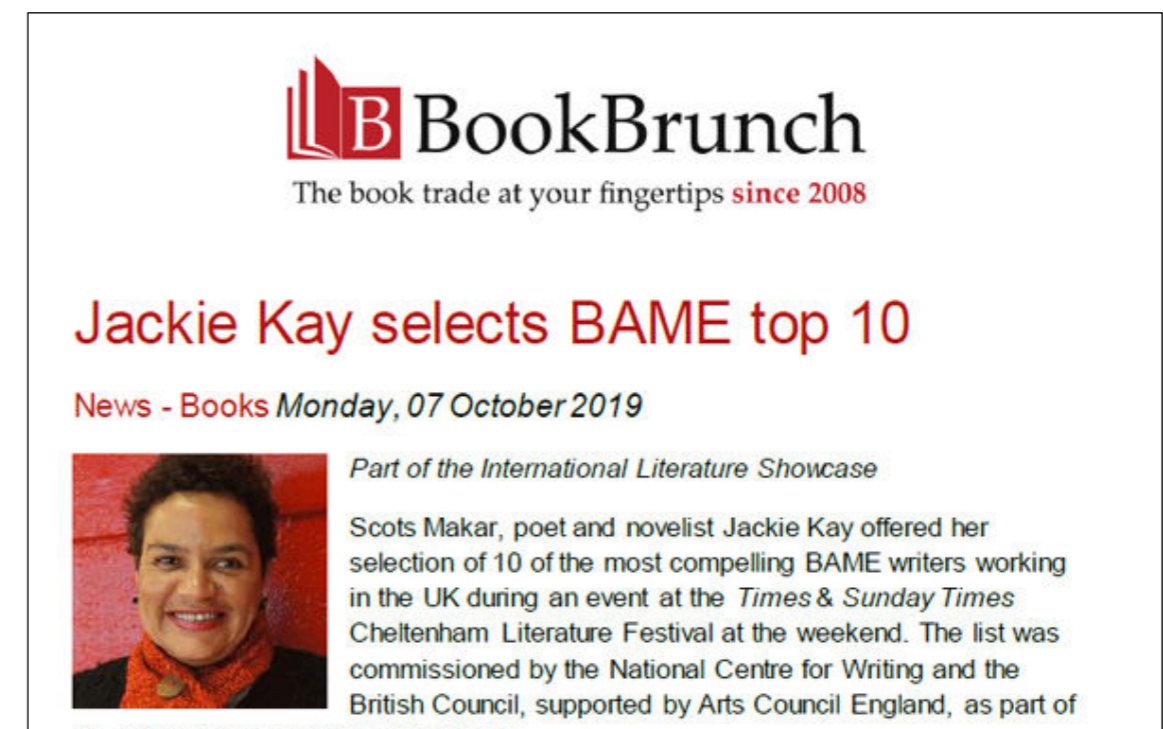


Jackie Kay selects Britain's 10 best BAME writers

The acclaimed poet and author introduces favourite authors who 'open up the world to you and give you the world back'

▲ 'Bold, brilliant and brave' ... (from left) Olumide Popoola, Jay Bernard, Jennifer Nansubuga. Composite: Alamy/Alicia Canter/Murdo MacLeod

When I was a teenager, the only black writer I came across was Wole Soyinka in his poem *Telephone Conversation*. When I was 17, I went to university and did a course on the Indian novel and discovered writers such as Anita Desai and Mulk Raj Anand. They were a revelation; through reading, I travelled halfway across the world. A little later, I found Toni Morrison, Audre Lorde, James Baldwin, Gloria Naylor. I found that reading helped me understand myself, and my



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Jackie Kay selects BAME top 10

News - Books Monday, 07 October 2019

Part of the International Literature Showcase

Scots Makar, poet and novelist Jackie Kay offered her selection of 10 of the most compelling BAME writers working in the UK during an event at the *Times & Sunday Times* Cheltenham Literature Festival at the weekend. The list was commissioned by the National Centre for Writing and the British Council, supported by Arts Council England, as part of

Left page top: Guardian, 5 October 2019; left page bottom: The Bookseller, 8 October 2019

Right page top: BookBrunch, 7 October 2019



Phil Lawrence @piplaw21

Replying to @WritersCentre @rapclassroom and 3 others

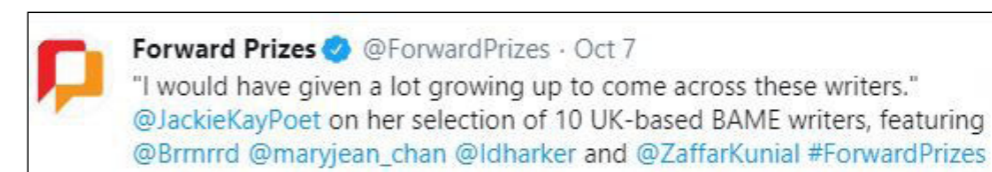
Very useful. I'm always looking for new BAME authors to tempt my reluctant readers.

11:27 AM · Oct 5, 2019 · Twitter Web App



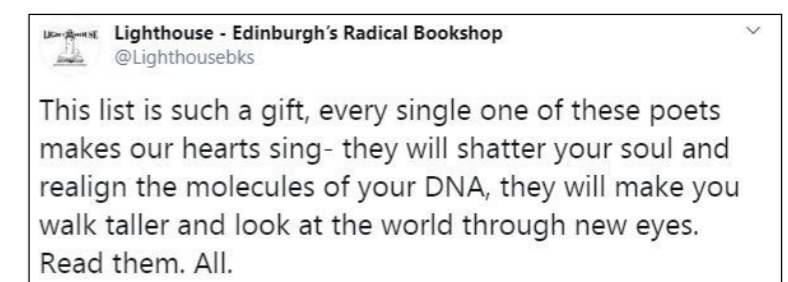
Sharmaine Lovegrove @SharLovegrove

I cannot tell you enough how much the joyous celebration of Black people past, present and future throughout October makes my heart swell to busting and is keeping me positive in these dark times... #BlackHistoryMonth #BlackWriters #BlackStars #BlackTalent @JackieKayPoet



Forward Prizes @ForwardPrizes · Oct 7

"I would have given a lot growing up to come across these writers." @JackieKayPoet on her selection of 10 UK-based BAME writers, featuring @Brmrrd @maryjean_chan @ldharker and @ZaffarKunial #ForwardPrizes



Lighthouse - Edinburgh's Radical Bookshop @Lighthousebks

This list is such a gift, every single one of these poets makes our hearts sing- they will shatter your soul and realign the molecules of your DNA, they will make you walk taller and look at the world through new eyes. Read them. All.



Cheltenham Festivals @cheltfestivals · Oct 5

Today @cheltitfest, @JackieKayPoet reveals her selection of 10 of the most exciting BAME writers in the UK today:



‘I see these women
writers as the voice of
our conscience’



Explore Elif Shafak’s selection of ten
of the most exciting women writers
working in the UK today

[Read more](#)



‘These are the works
of writers who have
something to say’



Explore Val McDermid’s selection of
ten of the most compelling LGBTQI+
writers working in the UK today

[Read more](#)

Coming soon

In 2020 we will shift the focus of the International Literature Showcase to look at genre, with reference to how society was, is and will be.

Looking for writers for your next festival event? Choosing texts for your literature course?

Stay-up-to-date with future showcases by subscribing to the [International Literature Showcase newsletter](#).

Read more about the writers at nationalcentreforwriting.org.uk/ils

