



Introducing ten extraordinary writers asking the questions that will shape our future

Owen Sheers 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?

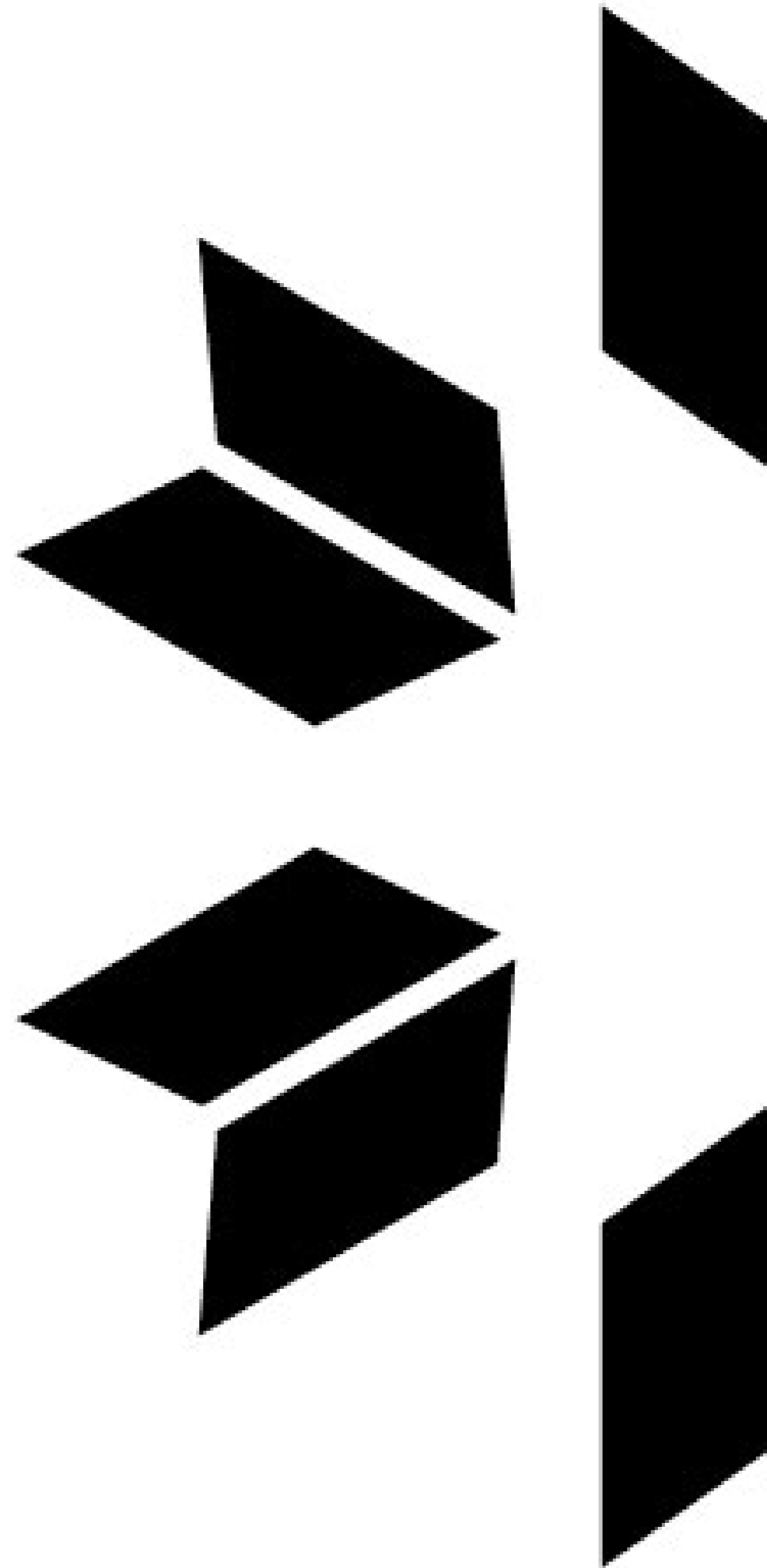
The International Literature Showcase is a partnership between the National Centre for Writing and the British Council.

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 five leading writers to each curate a showcase of themed writing coming out of the UK today.

Following the high-profile launches of Elif Shafak's showcase of women writers at London Book Fair 2019, Val McDermid's showcase of LGBTQI+ writers at the National Library of Scotland, and Jackie Kay's showcase of BAME writers at Cheltenham Literature Festival 2019, we have now revealed Owen Sheers' selection of writers asking questions that will shape our future.

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





(c) Charlotte Medicott

‘Who do we want to be?’

Owen Sheers introduces his selection of ten writers asking the questions that will shape our future

What is the role of a writer at times of transition and change? How might their work contribute at a turning point in history when the choices we make today will so significantly affect the kinds of lives we live tomorrow? Perhaps the answer to these questions is no more than a continuation of the primary duty of any writer – to try to be good. To write whatever you’ve chosen to write to the best of your ability.

But what if that isn’t enough? What if a writer also wants to illuminate the fault lines of the moment, embody an injustice or humanise an issue burning within them? Then the challenge becomes more complex and, I’d say, considerably more demanding. To write a piece of work that rides an issue without being submerged by it. To give literary shape to the climate crisis, sexism, racism, inclusivity, yet still make good art. To avoid didacticism or polemic and create a poem or story that carries us effortlessly – through craft, imagination and empathy – into the beating human heart of a matter. A work that penetrates the gauze of the present moment to make us witness and feel anew and therefore question anew as well.

All the writers on this list have, in a variety of ways, met that more demanding challenge with brilliance and verve. The forms in which they’ve done so are equally various – from travelogues to poems to memoir to YA and adult fiction. What they share, across that array of form and approach, and what makes them so well equipped for inclusion in this list, is primarily an ability to see clearly into the connective tissue of their subjects. By writing with a quality of attention that breaks down inherited norms and perspectives they create narratives that join the dots; that follow threads of consequence and causality through the fabric of society to render the experiences of others or themselves in such a way as to make them live afresh on the page.

Forster’s ‘only connect’ then. Well, yes, and maybe that’s another way of describing these writers, as ten of the most inspirational ‘literary connectors’ at work in the UK. But for me it’s what they do with those connections that marks them out as voices to which we should pay special attention. By creating stories and poems which offer us glimpses of how we might reposition ourselves in relation to the natural world and each other, they also invite us to imagine other ways to be, not through explicit direction but via the subtle enquiries and empathies of narrative suggestion.

In 2016 I wrote a film-poem about the founding of the NHS, *To Provide All People*. As part of my research I read Aneurin Bevan’s seminal collection of essays, *In Place of Fear*. It’s book which came to mind again as I read the work of these ten writers. Because that is the other thing the questions they ask offer us – an alternative response to so many of our contemporary fears about the future, from climate collapse and immigration to motherhood, technology and nationalism. Bevan’s essays also asked a question of his time, one that was perhaps made most manifest in the creation of the NHS – ‘Who do we want to be?’ Ultimately, that is also what the work of these writers is asking us now. Who do we want to be? What kind of a humanity do we want our children to inherit? How we answer – as individuals, nations, a species – will shape our future.

Owen Sheers is an author, poet and playwright and Professor in Creativity at Swansea University. His landmark television drama *To Provide All People*, starring Michael Sheen, celebrated 70 years of the NHS and highlighted what is possible when radical ideas for change gather political momentum.

Raymond Antrobus



‘Imbued with the directness of performance, the authenticity of experience and the touch of a master craftsman, *The Perseverance* is a book that resonates with a reader long after the last page is turned’
— Owen Sheers



Searching, reflective, sanguine, vulnerable, direct, historical, relevant, multi-textural, rhythmical, intersectional

Raymond Antrobus is a British poet with Jamaican heritage and is the author of *The Perseverance*. In 2019 he was a recipient of the Ted Hughes Award and won the Sunday Times/University of Warwick Young Writer of the Year Award. He was also the first poet to be awarded the Rathbone Folio Prize.

Read more about Raymond [online](#).

(c) Caleb Femi

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Laura Bates



‘Brilliantly harnesses the empathy and insight of the novel to challenge the restrictions and injustices of patriarchal societies’
— Owen Sheers



Gender equality activist and author making the invisible visible

Laura Bates is the founder of the Everyday Sexism Project, a collection of hundreds of thousands of women's experiences of harassment, discrimination and abuse with branches in 25 countries worldwide. She works closely with governments, police forces and schools to tackle gender inequality. She is the bestselling author of *Everyday Sexism*, *Girl Up* and *The Burning* and her new book, *Men Who Hate Women*, will be published in 2020. She writes for the *New York Times*, *Guardian* and others, and has received a British Press Award, a British Empire Medal, and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.

Read more about Laura [online](#).

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Elizabeth-Jane Burnett



‘A work of illuminating grace and observation that offers us glimpses of new ways to know ourselves and to be’

— Owen Sheers



English-Kenyan writer whose creative and critical work explores environmental themes

Elizabeth-Jane Burnett is an author and academic. Her creative and critical work has a largely environmental focus. Publications include the poetry collections *Swims* (2017) and *Of Sea* (2021), the monograph *A Social Biography of Contemporary Innovative Poetry Communities: The Gift, the Wager and Poethics* (2017) and nature writing memoir *The Grassling* (2019). She holds a BA in English from St. Peter's College, Oxford and an MA in Poetic Practice and PhD in Contemporary Poetics from Royal Holloway, University of London. She is Associate Professor in Creative Writing at Northumbria University.

Read more about Elizabeth-Jane [online](#).

(c) Graham Shackleton

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Garrett Carr



‘Approaches his subject both from across history and from within the immediate moment of his travels to produce a particularly timely and resonant travelogue’

— Owen Sheers



Through mapping and writing, I consider how we shape landscape and are shaped by it

Garrett Carr is a writer and map-maker. He grew up near Ireland's border and much of his work focuses on the region. For *The Map of Connections* he charted unofficial and previously unmapped paths and bridges crossing the border. The process was the subject of a BBC radio documentary. *The Rule of the Land: Walking Ireland's Border* was published by Faber & Faber in 2017 and was a BBC Radio 4 Book of the Week. It is a portrait of the border its history, people and culture. Garrett is a regular contributor to radio, TV and the press. He lives in Belfast.

Read more about Garrett [online](#).

(c) Ende Bowe

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Alys Conran



‘A novelist of rare accomplishment and skill whose use of language and characterisation effortlessly carries readers away’

— Owen Sheers



(c) Anna Milner

I build homes of voices, each word a stone

Alys Conran's first novel *Pigeon* (Parthian Books) won the Wales Book of the Year Award 2017 and was shortlisted for the International Dylan Thomas Prize. It also won the Rhys Davies Trust Fiction Award, The Wales Arts Review People's Choice Award and was longlisted for the Author's Choice First Novel Award. Her second novel *Dignity* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson) was published in 2019 to critical acclaim. She is the Hay Festival International Fellow for 2019-20. She also writes poetry, short stories, and creative essays.

Read more about Alys [online](#).

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Nikita Lalwani



‘Welsh author Nikita Lalwani deploys an acute insight into human nature to explore the blurred edges of kindness and compassion’

— Owen Sheers



(c) Vik Sharma

I often write in an attempt to answer something confusing

Nikita Lalwani was born in Rajasthan and raised in Cardiff. She has written three novels: *You People* (2020), *The Village* (2012) and *Gifted* (2007), which was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize, shortlisted for the Costa First Novel Award and won the Desmond Elliott Prize. She was also nominated for the Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year Award. She lives in London and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. Her work has been translated into sixteen languages. *You People* has been optioned for television by World productions with Lalwani attached as screenwriter. She has also written an episode of a forthcoming television series entitled *The Offenders*, to be broadcast on BBC1 and Amazon Studios, with the series creator, Stephen Merchant.

Read more about Nikita [online](#).

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Hannah Lavery



‘Lean and challenging, her work is driven by an honesty and energy of surprising power and immediacy’

— Owen Sheers



Daydreamer. Sometimes angry, always hopeful. Writing in the margins. Dancing in the kitchen

Hannah Lavery is a Scottish writer, poet and playwright. Her pamphlet of short fiction, *Rocket Girls*, was published by Postbox Press (2018) and her poetry pamphlet, *Finding Seaglass: Poems from The Drift* was published by Stewed Rhubarb Press (2019). *The Drift*, her autobiographical play, was produced by the National Theatre of Scotland for a nationwide tour in 2019. Her most recent play, *The Lament for Sheku Bayoh*, was commissioned by the Royal Lyceum Theatre for the Edinburgh International Festival. She was awarded a New Playwright Award from Playwrights Studio Scotland and was named as one on BBC Writers Room Scottish Voices of 2020

Read more about Hannah [online](#).

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Martin MacInnes



‘Martin MacInnes’s inventive and inquiring novels explore what it means to be human in the 21st century’

— Owen Sheers



Everyday life as science fiction

Martin MacInnes was born in 1983. His short story, ‘Our Disorder,’ won the Manchester Fiction Prize. His debut novel, *Infinite Ground*, won the Somerset Maugham Award. *Gathering Evidence*, his second novel, was published in 2020.

Read more about Martin [online](#).

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Clare Pollard



‘Wonderfully skilled and with a rare lyrical gift, her poems ask today the questions the rest of us will ask tomorrow’

— Owen Sheers



(c) Justine Stoddart

Poet, editor, critic. Looking at the stories we tell ourselves

Clare Pollard has published five collections of poetry, most recently *Incarnation* (Bloodaxe, 2017) and a pamphlet, *The Lives of the Female Poets* (Bad Betty Press, 2019). Her play *The Weather* (Faber, 2004) premiered at the Royal Court Theatre. Translation projects include a new version of Ovid's *Heroines* (Bloodaxe, 2013) which she toured as a one-woman show. Clare is the editor of Modern Poetry in Translation, and poetry editor for *The Idler*. Her latest book is the non-fiction title *Fierce Bad Rabbits: The Tales Behind Children's Picture Books* (Fig Tree, 2019).

Read more about Clare [online](#).

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Adam Weymouth



‘The human and ecological stories, connections and histories he reveals and weaves along the way come together to create a beautiful, devastating and painfully urgent piece of travel writing’

— Owen Sheers



(c) Chris Boulton

Telling stories at the overlap of the human and non-human worlds

Adam Weymouth is a writer and journalist, whose work has appeared in a wide variety of publications, including the BBC, the *Atlantic*, the *Guardian* and *Lacuna*. His first book, *Kings of the Yukon*, won both the Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year and the Lonely Planet Adventure Travel Book of the Year. It tells the story of his 2000 mile canoe trip across Canada and Alaska, charting the demise of the king salmon and the impact its collapse is having on the many people and ecosystems that depend on it. He lives on a 100-year-old Dutch barge on the River Lea.

Read more about Adam [online](#).

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The power of writers in the most extraordinary of times

Chitra Ramaswamy contextualises Owen Sheers' selection of writers asking the questions that will shape our future

In *The Plague*, a novel that has experienced a flare-up in the midst of another pandemic, Albert Camus poses a simple question. 'But what does it mean, the plague?' his unnamed narrator asks. The answer follows swiftly: 'It's life, that's all.'

It's the *that's all* that gets you, conveying both a shrug of the shoulders at life's absurdity and a shudder at its bottomless profundity. The entire human condition beats in those two small words, especially when you consider when Camus is said to have written them: in the traumatised aftermath of the Second World War. Six million Jews had been murdered by the Nazis. Much of Europe and Asia lay in ruins. Up to 60 million people were dead. Camus was laying down his prose in the midst of history, while he was living it. That's all. And all is everything.

Such is the power of writers to ask the right questions in the most extraordinary of times. Owen Sheers' 2020 selection of writers for the International Literature Showcase is revealed during the coronavirus pandemic, which is rewriting the future in ways we have yet to understand. Sheers' list reflects the deep moral responsibility of the writer in such a vexed moment, gifting us a reassuringly diverse and principled chorus of voices to guide us through dark waters. To address the times is one of the writer's roles and it goes hand in hand with asking questions that will shape our future. It is a kind of sleight of hand to be able to ascribe meaning to events as they unfold because writing is a slow mode of travel. It happens in the present and takes time to reach a future reader. By which time a hell of a lot more past has happened.

These ten writers hail from all over the country at a time when the UK, post-Brexit, is more divided than ever. The interrogation of place is a distinct theme, whether through the novels of **Alys Conran**, whose debut was simultaneously published in English and Welsh, **Clare Pollard** squaring up to late capitalism with her particular brand of confessional, dark 'poetic postcards from the edge', or **Elizabeth-Jane Burnett** rolling around in the fields of Devon to, quite literally, get closer to her father's farming ancestry.

Sheers' list proves the point that where we come from, even more so in polarised times, is both integral to who we are and a springboard to the world. Take **Nikita Lalwani**, a novelist born in Rajasthan and raised in Cardiff, whose most recent novel, *You People*, is set in a south-west London pizza joint run by immigrants. Or **Hannah Lavery**, whose performance poetry monologue *The Drift* is a manifold examination of race, belonging and identity in contemporary Scotland. Then there's **Raymond Antrobus**, whose creative response to the erasure of people of colour in mainstream culture, or widespread discrimination against people with disabilities, or pervading class inequality in



Britain, is playful, incisive, and profoundly moving. His debut collection, *The Perseverance*, included a redaction of an entire Ted Hughes poem... and won him the Ted Hughes award. These may be marginalised voices, but they are in no way marginal. In a world fracturing before our very eyes their work reminds us that when the centre cannot hold and things keep falling apart we remain the focal points of our own stories.

In a globalised world **Martin MacInnes**, a writer born and bred in the Scottish Highlands, is just as influenced by Clarice Lispector and how gut microbiology might constitute a new science of the self. **Garrett Carr** may be a map-maker who in the run-up to the EU referendum, and two decades after the Good Friday Agreement, walked the Irish border from Carlingford Lough to Derry, yet his open-minded perspective looks to borders – and walls – contested and redrawn all over the world. **Clare Pollard's** voice might be borne, specifically, out of the cynicism and hedonism of late nineties Blairite Britain but her witty dispatches penned by Greek heroines to their absent menfolk are sent from another place, and another time.

Another common thread is activism. **Raymond Antrobus'** poetry is propelled by a politics of empathy: for giving voice to that which has been silenced for centuries.

Elizabeth-Jane Burnett is an eco-poet

whose first non-fiction work, *The Grassling*, is as much a dictionary of the soil as a memoir of her late father. **Adam Weymouth**, whose prose has been described as reminiscent of a young Robert Macfarlane, started out as an environmental activist. His debut *Kings of the Yukon*, in which he paddles two thousand miles through remote North America, home to the world's longest salmon run, is a kind of direct action in itself. And **Laura Bates**, whose most recent work is a YA novel interweaving witch-hunts from our own century and its 17th century equivalent, is best known as a feminist campaigner and founder of the game-changing Everyday Sexism project.

'In a world fracturing before our very eyes their work reminds us that when the centre cannot hold and things keep falling apart we remain the focal points of our own stories'

These are writers impossible to pin down in a fast-moving world. In their words we might find reflections of our own lives. We might find solace, challenge, understanding, escape, humanity, hope, and possibly even some answers to the eternal question of how we and the world that makes us might look in that foreign country known as the future. What we will certainly find, as Camus wrote, is life. And that's all.

Chitra Ramaswamy is an award-winning journalist and author. Her first book, *Expecting: The Inner Life of Pregnancy*, was published by Saraband in 2016. It won the Saltire First Book of the Year Award and was shortlisted for the Polari Prize. She contributed an essay to *Nasty Women*, *The Freedom Papers* and *Message From The Skies*, and writes mainly for the Guardian.

Reception

The launch of Owen's selected writers generated a great deal of discussion online and in the national and international press.

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Owen Sheers selects 10 writers shaping the UK's future

The author explains his choice of writers meeting the challenge of giving literary shape to the climate crisis, sexism, racism, inclusivity, and still making good art

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Sarah Perry @sarahgerry1 · May 23
This is so wonderful and so full of hope and life

Jonathan Coe Retweeted
Guardian Books @GuardianBooks
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BookBrunch @BookBrunch · 2h
Author, poet and playwright @owensheers names 10 to inspire with @WritersCentre, including @RaymondAntrabus and @EverydaySexism...
bookbrunch.co.uk/page/article-d... (£)

Jackie Kay @JackieKayPoet · May 23
Congrats @HanLavery! Good choice Owen!

National Centre for Writing @WritersCentre · May 23
Two fantastic writers, both featured on #LitShowcase lists... Nadine... selected by @JackieKayPoet as one of 10 exciting UK #BAME writers... @HanLavery by @owensheers as one of ten inspiring writers asking questions that will shape our future- you should check them out! 🌟
twitter.com/nadineishaj/s...

Left: Guardian, 23 May 2020
Below: Bookbrunch, 25 May 2020



‘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

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‘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

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



Explore Jackie Kay’s selection of
ten of the most compelling BAME
writers working in the UK today

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Coming soon

Our final International Literature Showcase will take place in late 2020/early 2021.

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

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

