



Introducing ten compelling LGBTQI+ writers

Val McDermid 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?

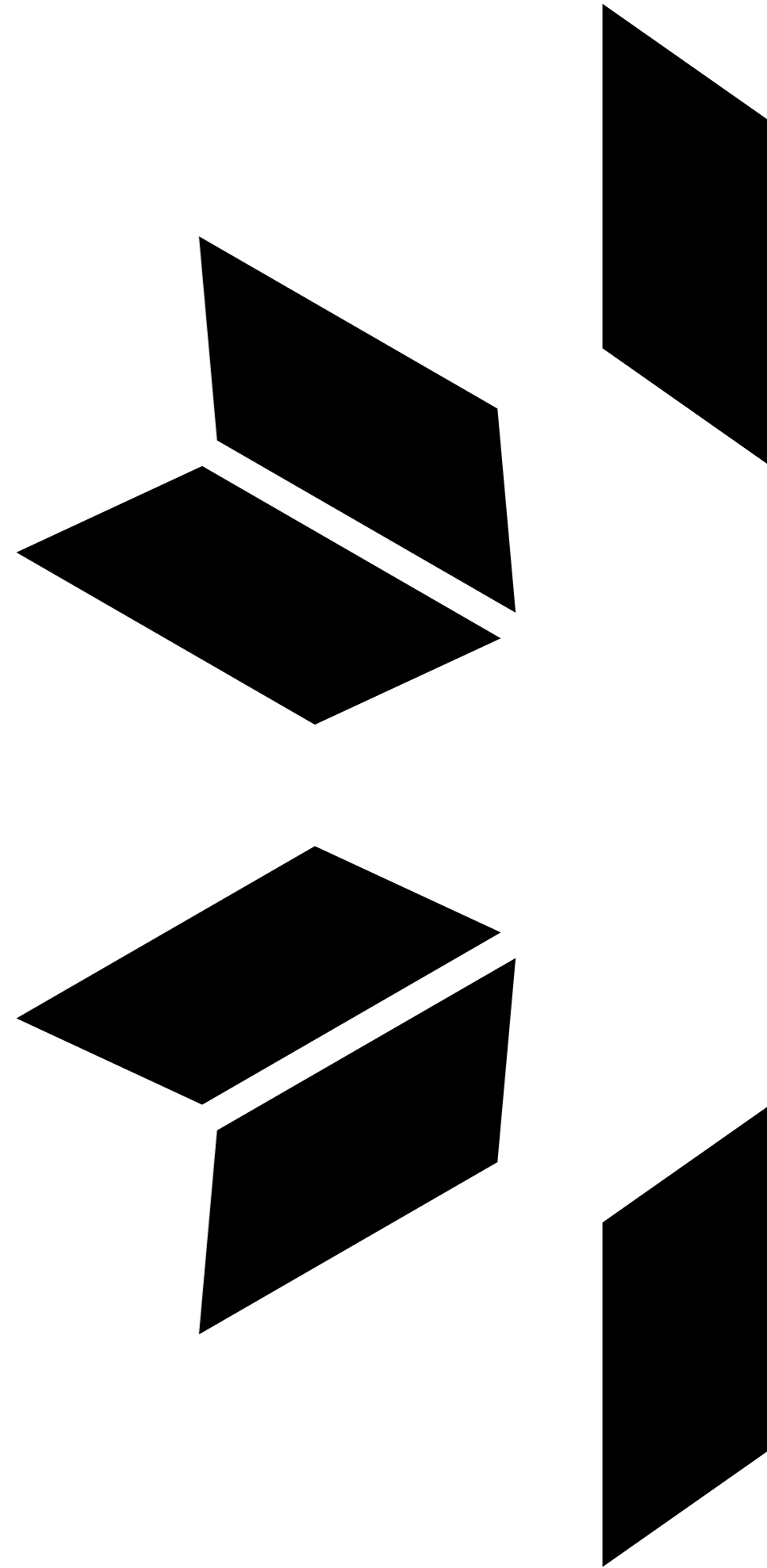
The International Literature Showcase is a partnership between the National Centre for Writing and British Council. It aims to showcase amazing writers based in the UK to programmers, publishers and teachers of literature in English around the world. To do so, we have invited six leading writers to each 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, we have now revealed Val McDermid's choice of ten lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (LGBTQI+) writers. In October, Jackie Kay will reveal her selection of ten writers of colour working in the UK who most excite her.

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.





(c) KT Bruce

Good writing knows no borders

Val McDermid introduces her selection of ten compelling LGBTQI+ writers based in the UK today

My first novel was published in 1987. It was the first British crime novel with a lesbian detective. The only route to publication was via an independent feminist publisher. Back then, there were a few radical bookshops that stocked titles like mine. But getting mainstream shops to stock it was an uphill struggle. Finding representations of queer lives took dedication and stubborn persistence.

Gradually, that has changed. Now our words are part of the mainstream of British literary life. LGBTQI+ writers are not only published by mainstream publishers and stocked by libraries, bookshops and supermarkets; they win major prizes. For so long conspicuous by our absence, we are now conspicuous by our presence.

I wrote a lesbian heroine because I'd grown up in a time and place where there were no templates for the life I wanted to live. The queer struggle for self-definition has been pursued in no small part so that the next generation has a springboard for imagining how to live. Every literary movement requires pioneers to kick open the door a crack. Others spot the opening and push the door wider. Then, at last, there's room for everyone to walk through and write the lives they want to write.

The ten writers featured in this showcase reveal the quality and breadth of current LGBTQI+ writing in Britain today. From novels to memoirs, from short stories to film scripts, from poetry to plays, their work covers a broad spectrum of form, style and content. There is, genuinely, something here for everyone.

Because these writers are writing for everyone. These are not words for a niche readership. These are not writings for a ghetto. These are the works of writers who have something to say that can be – and should be – heard by as many people as possible. Although their words will have particular resonance for some readers over others, isn't that what good writing always does?

LGBTQI+ writers have forced their way out of the dark corners where we were pushed by a society that didn't want to be reminded of our existence. Thanks to writers such as Ali Smith, Alan Hollinghurst, Russell, T Davies, Carol Ann Duffy and many more, LGBTQI+ writers are everywhere. And deservedly praised everywhere too.

Some might say the battle is won, the war is over. But a quick scan of news headlines and social media on any given day gives the lie to that. LGBTQI+ people are still bullied at school and in the workplace. We are still the targets of hate crime. In many places around the world, our very identity criminalises us.

Auden was wrong when he claimed 'poetry makes nothing happen.' Words do change the world, reader by reader. They open our eyes, they provoke thought, they make us uncomfortable in our entrenched positions. The work of these ten writers will do all of those things. But most of all, they will awaken in us fresh delight in the wonder of words.

Val McDermid's novels have been translated into 40 languages, and have sold over 16 million copies worldwide. She has served as a judge for the Women's Prize for Fiction and the Man Booker Prize, and was Chair of the Wellcome Book Prize in 2017.

Colette Bryce



‘The deceptive simplicity of her language disguises a profound engagement with identity’

— Val McDermid



Poet – lover of the singing line – long lost Derry girl

Colette Bryce is a poet from Derry, Northern Ireland. She has lived in England since her student days and has published four collections with Picador, including *The Full Indian Rope Trick* (2004) and *Self-Portrait in the Dark* (2008). Her latest, *The Whole & Rain-domed Universe* (2014), which draws on her experience of growing up during the Troubles, received a Ewart-Biggs Award in memory of Seamus Heaney. *Selected Poems*, drawing on all her books, was winner of the Pigott Prize for Poetry 2018. Colette was Poetry Editor at Poetry London from 2009 - 2013, and currently works as a freelance writer, mentor and editor. A new collection, *The M Pages*, is forthcoming in 2020.

Read more about Colette [online](#).

(c) Bev Robinson

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Juno Dawson



‘A School Role Model for LGBTQ charity Stonewall and runs writing and story-telling workshops in underprivileged schools’

— Val McDermid



A contemporary voice in journalism and cutting-edge YA fiction

Juno Dawson is a bestselling novelist, screenwriter, journalist, and a columnist for *Attitude Magazine*. Her writing has appeared in *Glamour*, *The Pool*, *Dazed* and the *Guardian*. She has also contributed to news items on *BBC Women's Hour*, *Front Row*, *ITV News*, *Channel 5 News*, *This Morning* and *Newsnight*. She is presently adapting her 2019 novel, *Meat Market* for television.

Read more about Juno [online](#).

(c) Jack Latham

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Rosie Garland



‘A poet, short story writer and novelist whose work also incorporates a wide range of performance’

— Val McDermid



(c) Rachel Saunders

Will take you to strange places, yet bring you back safely

Novelist, poet and singer with post-punk band The March Violets, Rosie Garland has a passion for language nurtured by public libraries. Her work appeared in *Under the Radar*, *The North*, *Spelk*, *Rialto*, *Mslexia* and elsewhere. Her debut novel, *The Palace of Curiosities*, was nominated for both The Desmond Elliott and Polari First Book Prize and *Vixen* was a Green Carnation Prize nominee. Her latest novel *The Night Brother* is described by *The Times* as ‘a delight: playful and exuberant... with shades of Angela Carter.’ She’s performed internationally as The Time-Travelling Suffragette and infamous alter-ego Rosie Lugosi the Lesbian Vampire Queen.

Read more about Rosie [online](#).

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Juliet Jacques



‘Combines critiques of trans theory, literature and film with a personal story of transition’

— Val McDermid



(c) Pal Hansen

Trans writer and filmmaker, inspired by modernism and socialism

Juliet Jacques (b. Redhill, 1981) is a writer and filmmaker. Her most recent book is *Trans: A Memoir* (Verso, 2015), an account of transition building on her Transgender Journey series in the *Guardian* (2010-12). Her short fiction, essays and journalism have appeared in *Frieze*, the *New York Times*, *Granta*, *London Review of Books* and other publications. Her short films have screened in galleries and festivals worldwide. Her next book will be a volume of short stories documenting trans/non-binary life in the UK since the Victorian period, written as part of her recently completed Ph.D. at the University of Sussex.

Read more about Juliet [online](#).

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Keith Jarrett



‘A poetry slam champion both in the UK and internationally’

— Val McDermid



(c) Ajamu

Cross-genre writer & performer; British and Caribbean history, sexuality, religion...

A UK and International Poetry Slam winner, Keith Jarrett has published two books of poetry and has been commissioned by the Royal Festival Hall, the British Museum, and Heritage England. With UK-wide performances, from arts institutions to the Houses of Parliament, his international work has included bilingual performances in Bilbao and Madrid, and British Council trips to Uganda and Brazil.

His play, *Safest Spot in Town*, was aired on BBC Four, and performed at the Old Vic in 2017. He is a regular contributor to BBC Radio, and a PhD scholar at Birkbeck University, where he is completing his first novel.

Read more about Keith [online](#).

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Publisher

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Kirsty Logan



‘She reworks folk tales, fairy stories, myth and magic to explore desire, identity and our hidden queer lives’

— Val McDermid



(c) Simone Falk

Professional daydreamer; creator of queer feminist fairytales

Kirsty Logan is the author of three short story collections, two novels, a flash fiction chapbook, and a short memoir. Her collaborative work includes *Lord Fox*, a show of spoken word, song and harp music with Kirsty Law and Esther Swift; and *The Knife-Thrower's Wife*, a music album with Kathryn Williams and Polly Paulusma. Her books have won the Lambda Literary Award, Polari Prize, Saboteur Award, Scott Prize and Gavin Wallace Fellowship. Her work has been adapted for stage, recorded for radio and podcasts, exhibited in galleries and distributed from a vintage Wurlitzer cigarette machine.

Read more about Kirsty [online](#).

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Andrew McMillan



‘He explores marginal lives and masculinity as well as his own lived experience as a gay man from the North of England’

— Val McDermid



Manchester poet exploring the intersections of Masculinity, Sexuality and Violence

Andrew McMillan's debut collection was the multi-award winning *physical* (Guardian First Book Award, Eric Gregory Award, Somerset Maugham Award, Fenton Aldeburgh Prize, Northern Writers' Award.) It's shortlistings included the Dylan Thomas Prize, the Costa Poetry Award, The Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year 2016 and the Forward Prize for Best First Collection. *physical* has been translated into Norwegian (Aschehoug, 2017), French, (Grasset, 2018) and Galician (A Chan da Polvora, 2019). His second collection is *playtime*; it was a PBS Recommendation for Autumn 2018, Poetry Book of the Month in both *The Observer* and *The Telegraph* and a Poetry Book of the Year in *The Sunday Times*.

Read more about Andrew [online](#).

(c) Urszula Soltys

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Fiona Mozley



‘Lyrical, ethereal and sometimes brutal, it’s an intense exploration what it means to be different’

— Val McDermid



Fiona Mozley's debut novel, *Elmet* (JM Originals, 2017), was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize, the RSL/ Sunday Times Young Writer of the Year Award and the Ondaatje Prize. It won a Somerset Maugham Award and the Polari Prize, and was longlisted for the Dylan Thomas International Prize and the Women's Prize. She has had writing published in *British Vogue*, the *Guardian*, *The Financial Times*, *The New Statesman*, and elsewhere. She lives in Edinburgh.

Read more about Fiona [online](#).

(c) Aleks Maciejewska

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Mary Paulson-Ellis



‘Firmly rooted both in the secret lives of Edinburgh and what she calls ‘the murderous side of family life — the dark, the quirky and the strange’

— Val McDermid



**Edinburgh novelist of the overlooked.
Likes to wander in graveyards**

Mary Paulson-Ellis is the author of two novels, *The Other Mrs Walker*, a *Times* Bestseller and Waterstones Scottish Book of the Year, and *The Inheritance of Solomon Farthing*. Both feature detectives who are not really detectives and deal with what happens if you die with no next of kin. In 2017 she was shortlisted as a Breakthrough Author in the Books Are My Bag Readers Awards, and Highly Commended as a Rising Star in the DIVA Literary Awards. She lives and works in Edinburgh, where her novels are set.

Read more about Mary [online](#).

(c) Chris Scott

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Luke Turner



‘Marries nature writing with his struggle to reject the binary and accept his internal contradictions’

— Val McDermid



**A writer exploring complexities and
seeking nuance in binary times**

Luke Turner's first book *Out of the Woods* is a critically-acclaimed memoir that explores sexuality, shame and surviving sexual abuse against the backdrop of the landscape of Epping Forest. Along the way, it asks questions of how we conceive of 'nature', both in terms of the world around us and human behaviour. Turner is co-founder and editor of influential online music culture magazine *The Quietus* as well as a freelance writer and broadcaster. In 2019 he is co-curator of The People's Forest. Part of London's first Borough of Culture, this year-long artistic programme explores the complex relationship between city and woodland.

Read more about Luke [online](#).

(c) Eva Vermandel

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‘It is in literature that all readers can find their home’

Sian Cain contextualises Val McDermid’s selection of compelling LGBTQI+ writers working in the UK

In 1988, Michel Foucault observed: ‘People can tolerate two homosexuals they see leaving together, but if the next day they’re smiling, holding hands and tenderly embracing one another, then they can’t be forgiven. It is not the departure for pleasure that is intolerable, it is the waking up happy.’

Could Foucault have imagined that, three decades on, gay people – and also the bisexual, non-binary, transgender and everyone inbetween – could not only wake up happy, but also write about being so? For the International Literature Showcase, Val McDermid, one of several acclaimed LGBTQ authors writing in Britain right now, has selected ten writers, spanning different levels of fame, sexualities and genders, who all show how far LGBTQ rights have come in Britain and abroad, but also where they need to go.

Perhaps the most joyful measure of how far we’ve come since Foucault’s lament is the poet **Andrew McMillan**, whose debut collection *physical* documents the wonders of gay domesticity; I recall seeing him at a reading where, upon delivering his poem ‘Urination’, the room united in a sigh of longing – at a poem about a man holding his lover’s penis as he does a wee. His recent followup, *playtime*, is a candid study of gay adolescence – a more cheerful take on a turbulent period than **Luke Turner**’s *Out of the Woods*, a memoir that charts Turner’s growing understanding of his bisexuality through his youthful encounters with strangers in London’s Epping Forest. One cheerful account, one troubled, but both mainstream and overwhelmingly acclaimed: gay love, and happiness, are now not only tolerated but even enviable.

Some of McDermid’s ten do not write about LGBTQ life at all: **Mary Paulson-Ellis**’s *The Other Mrs Walker*, for example, her astoundingly-assured 2016 debut, is a mystery about mistaken identity and family secrets. Paulson-Ellis has been favourably compared to Sarah Waters – maybe for her period setting, but certainly not for any identified LGBTQ characters. Then there are authors like **Fiona Mozley**, who self-identifies as ‘queer ... as a woman, but with caveats’, who has declared that she ‘could never write a novel which didn’t have queer characters at its heart’. Daniel, the young protagonist of her Booker-shortlisted novel *Elmet*, has no comprehension of gender theory but finds freedom in this, growing his hair long and keeping his shirts cropped in the Yorkshire copse he lives in with his sister and their ‘Daddy’ – a masculine, muscular presence who nonetheless loves his feminine son.

But there is also a great liberation in not having to bear the burden of representation; as **Keith Jarrett** has said: ‘That burden of ‘representing’ doesn’t belong to you. You cannot be the spokesperson for your community.’ Jarrett,



a young, gay, poet of colour, never shies away from this burden, in his performances or his debut collection, *Selah*. His poems about gang violence, religion and his dual roots in London and Caribbean culture, are confident and unsparing – and often subversive and funny, like in ‘A Gay Poem’, which he wrote after being asked if he had one: ‘Excuse me, poem, are you gay? / Have you grown up contrarily to what I wanted you to say?’

From the generation before Jarrett, Northern Ireland’s **Colette Bryce** has interwoven both the personal and the political in her 20-year career. But the constant through it all – from her acclaimed verse about the Troubles to cheekier poems like ‘Car Wash’, in which two women indulge in a romantic encounter in their sudsy car – is her light touch, and the sensuousness of her language. Bryce was mentored by Carol Ann Duffy, and it shows in their shared humour, but there is something of the dreamlike tones of Helen Dunmore here too, and their shared ability to pinpoint small, transformational moments in daily life.

Perhaps the most exciting leap since Foucault’s observation is the emergence of a British transgender canon, with writers like **Juno Dawson** and **Juliet Jacques** putting their own lives up for scrutiny for a greater good:

normalising the presence of trans men, women and everyone in between through their writing. Dawson, in particular, has taken on the role of educator with vim and candour, having transitioned publicly while writing 17 books in seven years. *The Gender Games* and *This Book is Gay* are no-nonsense guides to gender and sexuality for both adults and young people, but Dawson’s fiction specialises in giving voice to a particular kind of young woman: often precocious, a little entitled, almost all cisgender, but painfully and universally uncomfortable in their bodies. Jacques also transitioned very publicly, having documented the process in a regular *Guardian* column, and later reflecting on it in *Trans: A Memoir*.

There is so much potential for play, and some LGBTQ writers are having great fun weaving in the fantastical, like **Kirsty Logan**, the bisexual Scottish writer who won the Polari First Book Prize for her story collection *The Rental Heart*. Her fiction often looks at schisms, whether they are at a global level, like in her watery dystopia *The Gracekeepers*, or at an intimate human level, like in *The Gloaming*, a ‘queer, mermaid love story’. In the latter, Logan uses myths of selkies and sirens to playfully dismiss the concept of binaries: you might be neither male or female, or both human and fish. And **Rosie Garland**’s *The Palace of Curiosity* is similarly magical realist, but set around a Victorian freakshow that provides a home for the misfits forced out of ‘normal’ society.

And it is in literature that all readers can find their home; as a vilified minority, LGBTQ readers even more so. So should it matter, then, if a queer writer writes about topics aside from their queerness? Do they have a duty to explain the joys and challenges in their existence, especially now, in a time where hard won rights and freedoms are under attack? Perhaps they do, in that every book is a link in a chain that extends back into the past, to those pioneering British LGBTQ writers who came out on the page – EM Forster, Virginia Woolf, Mary Renault – and trails into the future, when a future canon will be built on stories written today.

Sian Cain is the Guardian’s books online editor. In charge of commissioning the newspaper’s news, interviews and features on books, she is a host of the Guardian’s books podcast and also chairs events with authors, including Philip Pullman and Sebastian Barry.

Val McDermid discusses LGBTQI+ writers with Sian Cain

Val and Sian spoke via Skype a few days prior to the launch of the second International Literature Showcase at the National Library of Scotland. In this abridged version of their interview, they discuss Val's selection of LGBTQI+ writers and the themes of their work. You can listen to the full conversation by clicking below.



[Listen online](#)

Sian: I was amazed to read about your story and the fact that your crime novel was the first British crime novel with a lesbian detective – and that was in '87, which was not that long ago.

Val: It never occurred to me that Lindsay Gordon wouldn't be a lesbian. One of the reasons it felt important to me was that when I was growing up there were no lesbian templates, so for me it was a real struggle to understand the possibilities of my sexuality, and then to come to grips with them. There were no books, no films, no TV, no lesbian sports stars, no lesbian pop stars – it felt very isolating and I felt very isolated. So one of the things behind the creation of Lindsay Gordon was the idea that there would be something that people could turn to and see a reflection of a possible life, I suppose.

Sian: It's interesting that you use that word 'template'. You're setting the precedent for the writers that would come after you. That's why I was so pleased when I saw the ten writers that you chose for the showcase – that they're all relatively young, relatively new.

Val: It's important that people see a continuity going forward; that there are continuing to be new LGBTQI voices out there, taking it forward, talking about what it's like right now to live in that place in the world. Not necessarily books that are specifically about being gay, trans, or lesbian, but that they have those characters within the landscape of the world they're writing about. What excited me particularly about this list was the range

of subject material, the range of styles. We have poets, playwrights, short story writers, novelists. The exciting thing is that all those voices are finding a space in the literary world today.

S: Well, let's talk about some of them. I want to start with one of my favourites: Andrew McMillan.

Val: When I think back to the kind of coded messages that poets like Tom Gunn and WH Auden had to pass on – who were forced by the conventions of the time into lines we all learned to read between – in those terms Andrew McMillan's work is all the more astonishing. In his latest collection, *playtime*, there's such tender insight into the process of growing into himself. There's no shame. No sense of looking over his shoulder to see if he's going to get into trouble for writing so openly. I think that's a great indicator of where we've come.

I think the beauty of this tender and fierce poetry about men loving each other is that it's written in the same terms that a heterosexual poet would have at their disposal. There's no sense that these are things I can't say because I'm gay. It's delightful. It's the way that men have written about women, and indeed women have written about women, over the years. It's without shame and it is what it is, exactly what it is.

Sian: Let's talk about someone who can perhaps be posited as an opposite. Luke Turner, *Out of the Woods*. This is a memoir and it's looking at his youthful encounters with men in London's Epping Forest, and you do get the sense that he's quite troubled by his sexuality.

Val: At the beginning of the book he's come out of a five year relationship with his girlfriend, and he's very clearly feeling cast adrift. He's lost his home, he's lost the relationship that was the centre of his life. Even though



L-R: Mary Paulson-Ellis, Val McDermid, Kirsty Logan and Juliet Jacques (c) Chris Scott

he knew it had issues he didn't want it to end the way that it did. He turns to Epping Forest as somewhere he's known since childhood, as a way to almost explore what's ailing him, and the forest and its environment felt like almost an extended metaphor for a sense of loss and his need to explore the side of himself that had failed to find full expression in the past.

It's not just sexuality that drives this memoir; it's the relationship between history and the present, between the grotty side of urban life and the weirdly uneasy atmosphere in the forest. It's really not an idyll, and I think it's very brave of him so vulnerable.

Sian: How about Mary Paulson-Ellis? I actually hadn't heard of her until you put her on your list.

Val: Her first novel, *The Other Mrs Walker*, was Waterstones' Scottish Book of the Year, and I think it's an extraordinary novel. It's a very distinct and unique voice. Her second novel, *The Inheritance of Solomon Farthing*, is this complex structure that moves back and forth in time. It deals with a web of relationships that span the centuries, from the First World War onwards. It's the interweaving of men's lives across three generations; the complex connections as lovers and friends, from boyhood to decrepitude.

I think one of the things also that Mary Paulson-Ellis does as a writer is that you don't have to be writing about gay

characters or gay issues to bring a different sensibility to the work. I think most LGBTQ writers have felt that 'outsiderness' probably from quite an early age. A sense of difference, but not always understanding wherein that difference lay. And that gives you precisely the detachment you need to be a good writer. To look at the world, to understand it emotionally, but also to be able to read it in a way that someone on the outside looking in sees things.

Sian: Let's talk about Fiona Mozley. She's another interesting young writer. Can you tell me what it was about her and about *Elmet* that made you want to put her on the list?

Val: I think it's an intense exploration of what it means to be different. And some of that difference is about gender and about the expression of gender, but a lot of it is about just being different in the world. You discover the truths of one family's life, within a sort of meditation on the Yorkshire landscape that unfolds. It's lyrical, it's ethereal and it's also brutal. It's a small, close family unit that has removed itself from the world, almost, and yet there's space within that for some kind of difference.

Sian: Let's talk about Kirsty Logan. She won the Polari First Book Prize for *The Rental Heart*. What was it about Kirsty that made you want to put her on?

Val: I chose Kirsty because I think her work is really

intriguing. It asks questions of us as a society but it also uses these ideas of myth and strangeness.

Her latest collection, *Things We Say in the Dark*, is fabulous in the literal sense. It's got feminist fairy tales laced with horrors that leap out of the dark and leave a sooty hand print on your soul. The stories are interspersed with what at first sight might be autobiographical notes on the author's domestic life with her wife, but that's as much a fable as everything else – or is it? We're left with all these questions at the end a book which seemed to be rooted in absolute, everyday reality. I think there's an exciting sense of always being wrong-footed by the possibilities here.

Sian: Rosie Garland. Similar taste for magic and the fantastical.

Val: Rosie's work has a sort of glitter – a fairground light to it. It's got that big, boldness in the way she addresses the fantastical, I suppose. She won the inaugural Mslexia novel competition with her first novel, *The Palace of Curiosities*. Sarah Waters described it as 'a jewel box of a novel'.

Her latest novel, *The Night Brother*, is bold and dazzling. It's a tale of hermaphrodite doubleness in fin de siècle Manchester. It's magical realism, I suppose, in the style and substance, but she uses the strangeness of that fantastical world to examine and explore notions of belonging and identity, gender and sexuality, and those big questions that we all go through at one time or another. How we define ourselves, how we define our place in the world.

Sian: Let's talk about poetry, then. Keith Jarrett.

Val: His writing is about finding himself, I suppose, in the contradictions and oppositions of his world. He grew up very much in the biblical tradition and that gave him the great, rolling music of words and stories, and then on the other hand you have south London youth culture with DJs and the different jazz of hip hop and heavy bass. I think the Caribbean of his roots and the outer-inner city of zones 4, 5 and 6 have this sort of collision that he's trying to find a way to meld together. It seems to me that there's a lot in his collection, *Sela*, about what it is to be a man, and what it feels like to be him. A foot in both camps, which many of us have at one time or another, can make it feel like we belong in neither, but he seems to be entirely focused on making a kind of new synthesis.

S: On poetry, Colette Bryce.

Val: A very, very contrasting poetic voice, but nevertheless I think extraordinarily powerful. Colette grew up in Northern Ireland and her poetry is deeply rooted in that place and its culture and its politics. She's one of these writers whose language seems quite simple, but actually what's going on there is a profound engagement with identity. She's a remarkable poet. But as well as the politics and the history element, there's a strong, autobiographical element to her work. She writes about Northern Ireland a lot, and she says that 'say nothing is still a powerful rule there.' She clearly believes in saying something, all sorts of somethings in fact, and as well as the politics she refuses to stay silent about emotional truth.

Sian: Let's talk about our last two from your ten. This is part of something that I think is hugely exciting, which is that we're starting to see a British transgender canon. The two writers that you have on your list are Juliet Jacques and Juno Dawson.

Val: In her professional life Juno Dawson was a teacher, then moved into journalism. I suppose when you work in close contact with young people, you understand the paucity of what's available to them in terms of helping people to understand their lives, and that's clearly been a big driver for her. Her work is never coy about queer in all its rainbow colours. She's frank about difficult subjects. I think for adolescents struggling with their identity, it's so affirming to read work that includes people of every part of the rainbow spectrum. No matter what it is that's bothering you, in terms of gender and sexuality as an adolescent, you will find something in Juno's books that will ease your sense of isolation and your sense of loneliness, and also open up possibilities for a future life.

The other thing that's really key about the way she writes about these things, is it's never the only aspect that defines a character. The people she writes about are not simply there for the cipher for the trans character, or the queer character, or the bisexual character – it's just part of who they are.

Sian: So Juliet Jacques, then.

Val: Juliet is a filmmaker and journalist, writing across the spectrum of literature, film, art, music, politics, gender, sexuality and football. Her memoir, *Trans: A Memoir*, combines critiques of trans theory with literature, with film, but there's also the very personal story of her transition. There's real clarity and candour in the way that she writes. Too often the idea of transitioning is seen as black and white, but Juliet explores the grey areas

between the absolutes, and reveals the possibilities where we all might fit on what I think we all agree is a continuum of gender and sexuality. Too often people try to make it binary: if you're here then you can't be here. You can't have a wee bit of either.

What I also loved about it as a memoir is that it's a vivid portrait of searching for queer in the 90s and 2000s, and I have to say having lived in Manchester in the 1990s I recognise so much about that environment and that world. It's more than one person's journey. It's an exploration of attitudes and social change.

Sian: At the start, we were talking about establishing that template and making a space for people who come after you, and you do get the sense that people like Juno and Juliet are making a space; that we're going to see a lot more writing from transgender writers. I'm excited for the idea that it won't necessarily be memoir. I think at the moment, and it's such a brave thing, that they're documenting their own lives and they're putting their lives up for scrutiny, but the idea that they perhaps don't have to do that in the future is a really exciting prospect.

Val: I think there's always the forefront, the phalanx, out there ahead who are brave enough to push open the

doors for the rest of us to follow. Some people say, you know, the battle is won, the war is over, but you look at the news headlines and social media on any given day and you know that's really not true. LGBT people are still bullied at school, they're still bullied at the workplace, they're still bullied in their social lives. They're still the targets of hate crime in so many places around the world. Our very identity, just who we are, criminalises and condemns us.

We have to keep moving forward, and these are the books that are not just for LGBT readers. These are books for everybody. It's not just niche anymore. It's not just a ghetto writing. It's just part of the landscape that everybody should be reading, that everybody is reading. Writers like Ali Smith, Jeanette Winterson, Alan Hollinghurst, writers for screen like Russel T Davis, are opening the horizons. You can't dismiss those writers as being irrelevant at all.

WH Auden claimed that poetry makes nothing happen, and I happen to think that he was a bit wrong about that. I think words change the world, reader by reader. That's why we need to read these books, and put them in hands of other people who are readers, who may not have come across these writers. We need to get these words out there, for everybody.

Watch: Val McDermid presents...

Val revealed her ten chosen LGBTQI+ writers at an event at the National Library of Scotland on 10 August 2019, where she was joined in conversation by Kirsty Logan, Juliet Jacques and Mary Paulson-Ellis. Watch a recorded live stream of the event by clicking below.



[Watch online](#)

In the press

The launch of Val's selected writers at the National Library of Scotland generated a great deal of discussion online and in the national and international press.



Top left: Publishing Perspectives, 13 August 2019

Bottom left: BookBrunch, 12 August 2019

Top right: Guardian, 10 August 2019

Bottom right: The Bookseller, 10 August 2019



Coming soon

Later this year we will continue our focus on representation with the brilliant novelist, poet and Scottish Makar Jackie Kay showcasing her selection of writers of colour.

In 2020 we will shift a 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

