

ESCALATOR

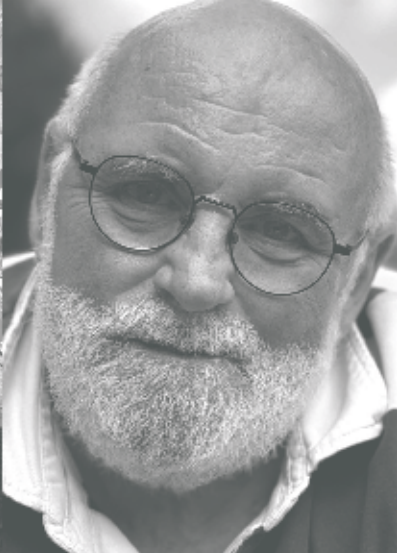
New Writing Fellows

**Emerging
Voices in
Fiction From
the East of
England**

2024–25

Muti'ah Badruddeen • Kieran Costello • Moharem El Gihani • Liv Hewkin • Margaret Loescher
April McIntyre • Nic O'Keeffe • Bryan 'Paddy' McNerney • Fritha Waters • SWG

N National Centre
for Writing



Welcome

On behalf of the National Centre for Writing (NCW), I am proud to introduce this year's Escalator New Writing Fellows: ten talented, early-career fiction writers from across the East of England whose voices, experiences and stories reflect the depth and diversity of this region.

The Fellowships are designed to support writers who are under-represented in UK publishing, offering them time, space and expert guidance to develop their craft and navigate the industry, creating space for new voices that can shape the future of literature.

Since 2004, we have supported over 160 writers from the East of England, with over half of the programme alumni progressing to publish acclaimed fiction, alongside those who have built sustainable careers in writing, performing, teaching and beyond.

Each Escalator New Writing Fellow receives a year of tailored support, including professional mentoring, industry insight sessions, peer connection, and opportunities to share their work with industry and public audiences.

We're delighted to share these ten writers and their work through this publication. Their stories are urgent, imaginative and rooted in personal and shared lived experience. Together, they offer a vivid portrait of contemporary fiction that speaks to personal, universal, local and global themes.

We invite publishers, programmers, editors, agents, and readers to discover the Escalator New Writing Fellows 2024–25. The writing that awaits is an introduction to how these writers can enhance your events, lists, conversations and imagination.

Best wishes,



Peggy Hughes

Chief Executive
National Centre for Writing

Bridges of feeling: what mentorship taught me about writing

Over a decade ago, Michael Donkor began his writing journey as an emerging talent selected for Escalator. Today, he is the acclaimed author of two novels, *Hold* and *Grow Where They Fall*. In this piece, he reflects on the profound personal impact of the Escalator Fellowships — and their vital role in shaping the wider literary landscape.

It's a strong, appealing image isn't it? The Escalator. It immediately brings to mind pleasing connotations of smooth motion, sleek progress — elegant ascension to glittering heights...

In 2014, I was awarded a place on the Escalator scheme. I was soon reminded that the process of writing is rarely smooth, sleek or elegant. Before my first session with peerless mentor Daniel Hahn, I'd given him my hefty 130,000 word manuscript to look over. I'd been working on it for more than six years. In response, in our meeting — me tucking into a chocolate muffin and nervously getting crumbs everywhere — Danny cheerfully encouraged me to get rid of the first 30,000 words. He thought that, as things stood, the first chapters were obscuring a leaner, more inviting opening to the novel that could be got at with a harsh — but liberating? — chop.

I can now look back on my initial, colourful and theatrical paroxysms of grief for each one of those cut 30,000 words with a smile. I look back, too, with a lot of gratitude to Daniel and his sage advice, then and throughout that year of mentorship. His challenge — which at the time seemed truly



unthinkable — ultimately affirmed for me that a spirit of experimentation, of playing with the material, is integral to the writing process. I know and believe that very deeply now. Throughout the scheme I learnt, too, that the kind of flexibility Daniel was advocating can reanimate both the writing and the writerly imagination. Cutting the beginning of the book excitingly encouraged me to see, sparkingly afresh, the entirety of this narrative which went on to become my debut novel.

Fast forward — or loop back, round in a circle?

Now, more than ten years later, I find myself in Daniel's shoes. I'm a — proud! — Escalator mentor for the fifth consecutive year. The ethos of how Daniel and I worked with each other — through open conversation, with faith in the idea that the novel can be stretched, plied, teased, tickled, expanded and contracted to become anything we might want it to be — is central to how I've worked with my mentees too.

Over the decade that I have been part of the Escalator family, I've often been heartened by attempts within publishing to ensure it isn't a closed shop which showcases only a narrow selection of faces, experiences and stories. Nevertheless, there remains so, so, so much more work to be done in this regard. It can still be an inordinate struggle for new marginalised and underrepresented writers to navigate the intricacies of the industry. And to catch the attention of agents and editors can seem impossible. If those hurdles are scaled and eventually publication beckons — Glory be! — writers from these backgrounds still face challenges in terms of getting their novels widely publicised. Finding ways of sustaining their literary careers beyond Book 1 can be hard too. Along with tailored guidance and enthusiastic support, Escalator gives its mentees, who come from all backgrounds, an empowering awareness of their own talent and promise to help guide them through what can be difficult terrain.

It feels trite to say that I have learnt as much from my mentees as I hope they have learnt from me — even though I really do hope this is the case! What I can certainly say with full-throated confidence is that whenever I've had a slow or seemingly unproductive writing day, helping my mentees better understand the stories they are trying to tell has reminded me about the enduring value of what we do: this often very tough, always very curious business of making sentences that are bridges between ourselves and others, bridges of feeling and understanding. The dedication of the mentees I've encountered have invariably made me think more ambitiously about my own practice when I have doubted myself — and emboldened me to set my own sights higher, higher, higher.

Impact of Escalator

20

YEARS

160+

WRITERS

42%

AGENTED

85%

MORE CONFIDENT
ABOUT WRITING AND
DOING NEW THINGS

57%

PUBLISHED

70%

MORE CONNECTED
WITH OTHER PEOPLE IN
LITERATURE AND WRITING

30%

HAVE WON
LITERARY AWARDS

100%

ARE STILL WRITING



Muti'ah Badruddeen

Muti'ah Badruddeen is a Nigerian writer based in Norwich, exploring African and Muslim womanhood through fiction and creative nonfiction. Her work addresses themes of autonomy, relationships, motherhood, and subfertility. An alumna of the UEA Creative Writing MA and Curtis Brown Creative Breakthrough programme, her debut novel *Rekiya & Z* won the 2022 Spring Women Author Prize. Her short fiction has appeared in *the other side of hope*, *Brittle Paper*, and *Orca*, earning Pushcart and Best Small Fictions nominations. She was longlisted for the 2022 Commonwealth Prize and shortlisted for the Women's Prize Discoveries 2025.

Muti'ah was mentored by Michael Donkor.

Extract from *A Bowl of River Water*

This, the interlude between night and day, was Yónmi's favourite time of the day.

The moments between her waking up and getting up. Before everyone else – even the birds – polluted the space with the sight, smell, and sounds of their everyday living, Mèdèyónmi Àbèké could almost believe she was alone in existence. The near total darkness of the room aided this voluntary delusion. If Yónmi couldn't see her sister, Sessi, and baby brother where they lay on their respective mats as she went about her morning preparations, who is to say they were there? That anyone else, any other world, existed beyond this cocoon of darkness she alone inhabited?

She remained on her mat a moment longer, conscious of the ground beneath her, and everywhere it touched her body, the only evidence of material existence outside herself. She had been conceived on this floor; it was where she was born, where she had slept every night of her life. Would she miss it when she leaves in two days, during the many uncertain nights to follow? Was she being brash with this decision? Was there another way out of this, one she hadn't thought of? Should she tell her father what Hosu had overheard? Would he run contrary for once and help her?

These questions had plagued her incessantly in the two days since Hosu told her his story.

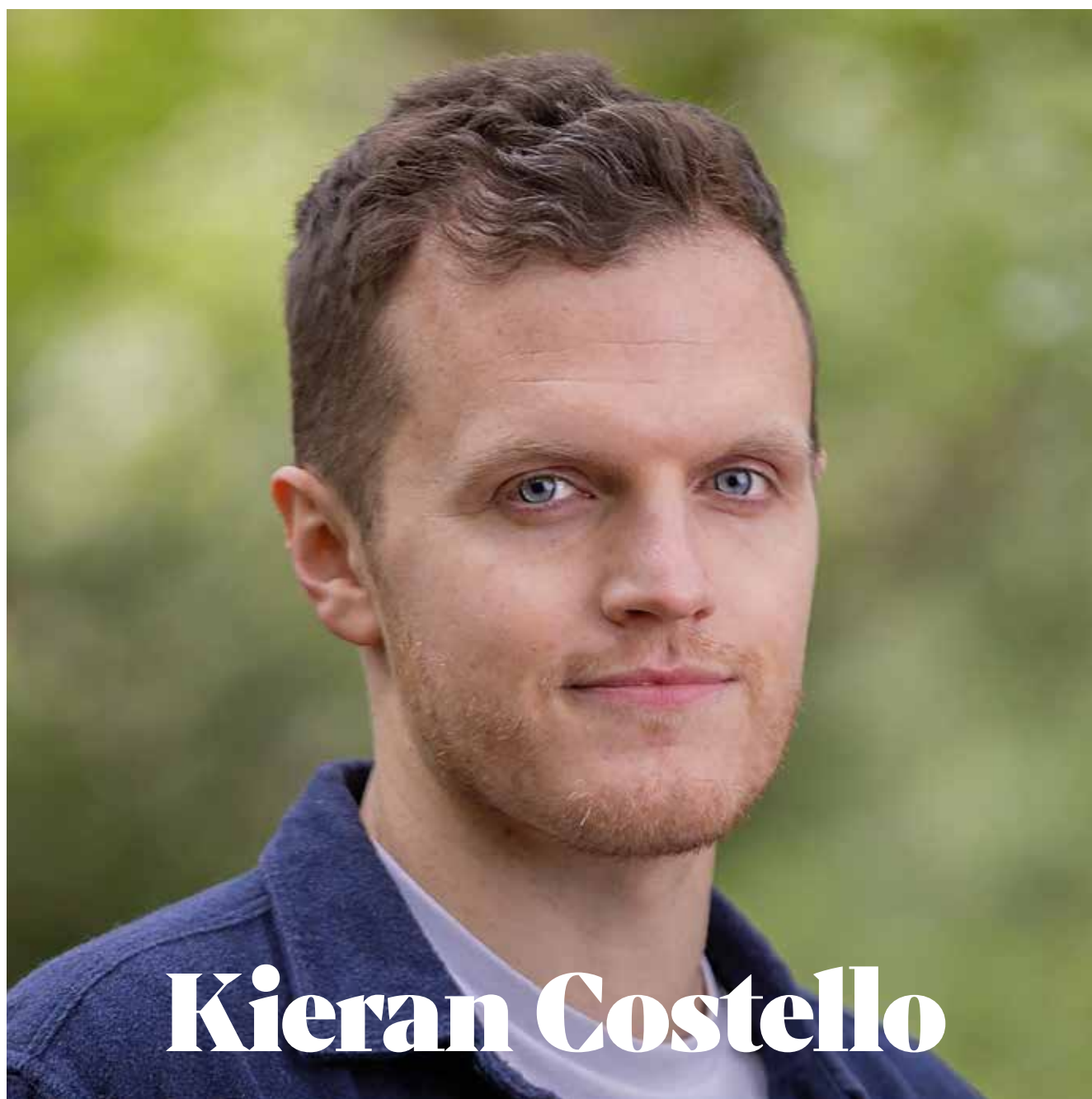
There were no answers now, either.

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'With its subtle and quietly wise narrative voice, *A Bowl of River Water* beguiled me instantaneously. Keenly aware of West African storytelling conventions and imaginatively reworking these, Muti'ah's accomplished narrative depicts the ingenuity of a Nigerian woman navigating patriarchy and tradition. Abeke, the steely yet sensitive protagonist, is a masterful creation; truly a heroine for the ages.'

MICHAEL DONKOR,
MENTOR



Kieran Costello

Kieran Costello is a writer from the West Midlands. He has spent over a decade as a freelance writer and communications consultant and is a recent graduate of UEA's Creative Writing Prose MA. His short stories have appeared in Writers' Forum, and he is currently working on his first novel – which, like much of his writing, explores our evolving relationship with the natural world.

Kieran was mentored by Ayanna Lloyd Banwo.

Extract from novel in progress

In the morning Margaret's greeted by the first whispers of spring, winter softening its grasp. She lies there to receive it through her bedroom window. She presses her hand to her head and caresses the plaster, the slight laceration like an opening to strange sounds, thoughts. In dreams seeing herself underwater, walking the streets of drowned places, opening doors, cupboards, looking up to see the underside play of sunlight. Fractal radiance like the shadow of a promise, threaded through but unable to reach. Inducing a waking peace that is belied by her body. By the something that is going on, that she won't put a name to. Death on her mind, on the news. In the air, the pub, the aisles of the supermarket, the faces of the attendants and customers alike. It's the abstraction, abdication, the looking out to look in, the future a frightening place and the past an impossible one.

But peace Margaret, she says, catching herself in the mirror. In her there's her sister. Her mother, fingerprints upon her nose, eyes. Generations forming her skin, and now she's the last. The end of an almighty effort to persevere; a light that's punctured the dark for as long as it's able, now waning.

'Haunting and beautifully written. Set in a Norfolk seaside town worn down by coastal erosion, political neglect and the merciless march of time, it is an urgent reminder of all we have to lose, all we owe to each other and the fragile places we call home.'

**AYANNA LLOYD BANWO,
MENTOR**



Moharem El Gihani

Moharem El Gihani is a fiction writer from Cambridgeshire. He is of mixed Arab and English parentage, with an academic background that spans Chemistry and English Literature. His writing explores the liminal space between fact and fiction and has previously been shortlisted for the Fish Short Story Prize. He is currently editing a novel that examines the history of the Arab world in the latter half of the twentieth century through a story of rival composers and artistic censorship, set against one artist's desire to preserve her legacy in song.

Moharem was mentored by Ashley Hickson-Lovence.

Extract from *Encore in Absentia*

That, then, was our narrative. What was less obvious was the fact that it was not Zarqa the person, but her voice, that would emerge as the film's main protagonist. A voice that was broadcast live on the radio in the 1950s but not always recorded; a voice that graced the Albert Hall in the spring of 1962, but like countless other concerts, experienced only by those who were there. Although many of Zarqa's songs were indeed preserved, it would be a voice that found itself trapped on a tape, choking in the dusty rubble of Lebanon's civil war.

There was much in the story that was not included for artistic reasons of self-censorship: material that was part of our own personal and filmmaking experience, but not strictly part of the filmic narrative. Naturally, it's never possible to present a totalizing picture of any subject, but I felt there was a real risk of elision if this additional – I shall not call it ancillary – material was simply condemned to an archival store.

Drawing on these experiences, as well as on my father's memoirs from his early years in Beirut, this account, seen through the kaleidoscope of my own accumulated thoughts and sensibilities, is ultimately an attempt to capture what it's like to hear Zarqa sing.

'Moharem writes with striking assurance. His novel is layered and resonant, brimming with emotional and intellectual depth... urgently contemporary and enduringly timeless.'

**ASHLEY HICKSON-LOVENCE,
MENTOR**



Liv Hewkin

Liv is a writer from Wolverhampton, based in Ely, with degrees in English and Cultural Heritage Management, from the Universities of Birmingham and York respectively. Visiting museums from childhood onwards opened Liv's world to history, cultures and mythologies beyond the doorstep. She writes fiction in the gaps between work and daily life, exploring identity, magical realism and the complex nature of human relationships. Liv's debut novel-in-progress is inspired by her Irish roots – examining the legacies of poverty, religion, and living folklore within a culture famous for its tenacity and playful, wry humour.

Liv was mentored by Yvvette Edwards.

Extract from *Cabbage and Cigarettes*

They sleep two to a single bed: six in the girls' room, three in the boys'. A baby shifts restlessly in it's make-shift crib; the bottom drawer of the dresser in their parent's room.

Colette wakes early. She's trained her body to wake before the others rise, securing precious time to practice her cello, running through the fingering without her bow, producing small, muffled notes that only she can hear with her ear close to the fingerboard.

But today she's woken in the pitch dark, and the air doesn't feel like morning. It will be a few hours before the sun rises over Cork city, routing the mist that drapes itself heavily over the valley of the River Lee. She hears the infant next door, her mother shifting to prevent its snuffling becoming a full-blown cry. The baby quiets, and the danger passes.

Colette is about to shut her eyes again when she realizes what has woken her: an unpleasantly damp sensation in her crotch area. At thirteen, her period is an affliction she's not long been grappling with, and she's not used to the ebbs and flows of her own body. She's leaked onto the bed.

'Liv Hewkin's confident voice is steeped in authenticity, fictionalising real-life events in a style shored up by realism. She has a keen eye for both the fine detail that elevates her writing and the dark humour that underpins it.'

YVETTE EDWARDS,
MENTOR



Margaret Loescher

Margaret is a queer writer with a background in documentary filmmaking. Raised in the American Midwest Midwest, USA, she now divides her time between Norwich, where she graduated from the University of East Anglia, and Cambridge, where she is raising three children. Her work explores recurring personal, familial, and global trauma within the American landscape. Her current novel, set across America and the UK in 1984, post-9/11, and 2021, follows diverse characters navigating love, loss, and identity. From domestic intimacy to geopolitical unrest, it tells a story of queer love and fractured histories.

Margaret was mentored by Michael Donkor.

Extract from *Jackson's Road*

Ida held Barbie's fixed beauty in her fist and drew her thumb across the brush-like fibres of the new haircut. In between the tufts that she had now created, Ida could see the scalp. The hair came out of the head in little bunches through holes. It felt creepy and she wanted very much to cut up the holes. But can holes be cut? The horrendous feeling was tingling along her arms as if she had holes, itchy ones that tiny creatures might emerge out of. She imagined cutting up the entire doll into smaller and smaller pieces until she disappeared entirely, became one big hole. Barbie looked so friendly throughout this deathly thought. She even seemed to like her new haircut.

The holes in Barbie's scalp must be a terrible disease from which the doll would die sooner or later. And there was the possibility that Barbie was full of something that might come squeezing out of the holes, something other than blond hair. It was necessary for Ida, who was in charge here at the hospital-cum-mortuary-cum-porch in the sunshine, to slice her open and take a look.



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'Thrumming with feeling and bursting with originality, the thematic range of Maggie's writing here is ambitiously wide. An unusual state of the nation novel of sorts, it's written in a beautifully enigmatic style.'

MICHAEL DONKOR,
MENTOR



April McIntyre

April McIntyre is a Cambridgeshire-based writer. Born to military parents, April's childhood included Bath, Spain and Lancaster, before settling in Norwich. Today, their writing is rooted in the natural world, local folklore and the drive to celebrate queer stories. Their current project is imbued with horror as it explores trauma and queer relationships, inspired by the works of Julia Armfield, Juno Dawson, Deesha Philyaw and Michelle Paver. April has had previous articles published in *Hey U* and *Take One Cambridge*.

April was mentored by Kate Worsley.

Extract from novel in progress

It's quite easy to trick them really. I only need one, one idiot stupid enough to follow that light. To forget their bearings, to forget they have something to live for. To pull up the bogged mud with their thick tread boots which I will fill again, no breadcrumb trail to find. Deception is the only thing they can be sure of. Keep going. A child is stuck; I mimic its sad cry as its lungs fill with water. Deep sucking breaths and panic as they all rot and feed me. A nightmare with a panoramic view. I'll make you think you're safe. But you're not.

Even as I slip away beneath the surface, I am here. When each hare boxes and dies and rots, when you hear the lapwing's penny whistle song, each brazier illuminating me, every story told of me, the bodies found in me, the bodies saved by me. The history and pain and evil that I hid beneath my surface, until you unleashed it, broke it apart. I will remain unyielding like the mighty yew, pulling you into the dark, into the soil. Burying you in sedge and peat and earth.

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'April's writing aims to interrogate the whole notion of 'core' as an identifier. She writes with a playful verve that simultaneously engages and wrongfoots the reader, and seduces with a smile.'

KATE WORSLEY,
MENTOR



Originally from Sunderland, Nic is a Norwich-based writer working across prose, stage, and screen. A UEA MA Prose Fiction graduate, she was a Penguin WriteNow 2023 finalist with her debut novel — a queer rom-com inspired by *Much Ado About Nothing* — and was shortlisted for the 2024 Alpine Fellowship Short Story Prize. Her work explores queer, northern, and working-class identities, with themes of shame, disconnection, and self-discovery. Her short film *Sparklers* (BBC iPlayer) won the 2021 Broadcast Digital Award, and her play *Wyrn* was produced by Live Theatre Newcastle.

Nic was mentored by Ayanna Lloyd Banwo.

Extract from novel in progress

White tile, fluorescent strip-lighting, polished porcelain. The bathroom floor was streaked red, a gory arrow pointing to a boy at the most central sink, hunched so his face was practically in the bowl. From the doorway all I could see was his back, curling inwards like a desiccated spider, sharp shoulder blades showing through a thin white dress-shirt. I stepped inside. Little of his profile was visible – his hands cupped most of the lower half of his face – just a scrunched brow, downcast eyes, a shock of dark curls. He seemed to be suffering a remarkably heavy nosebleed. In the stark bathroom it looked particularly vivid, cartoonishly scarlet, dripping through his fingers into the sink in thick rivulets. His shirt was ruined. I wondered if he regretted choosing that particular day to wear white. It was a lot of blood. I'd never seen anyone have a nosebleed quite like it.

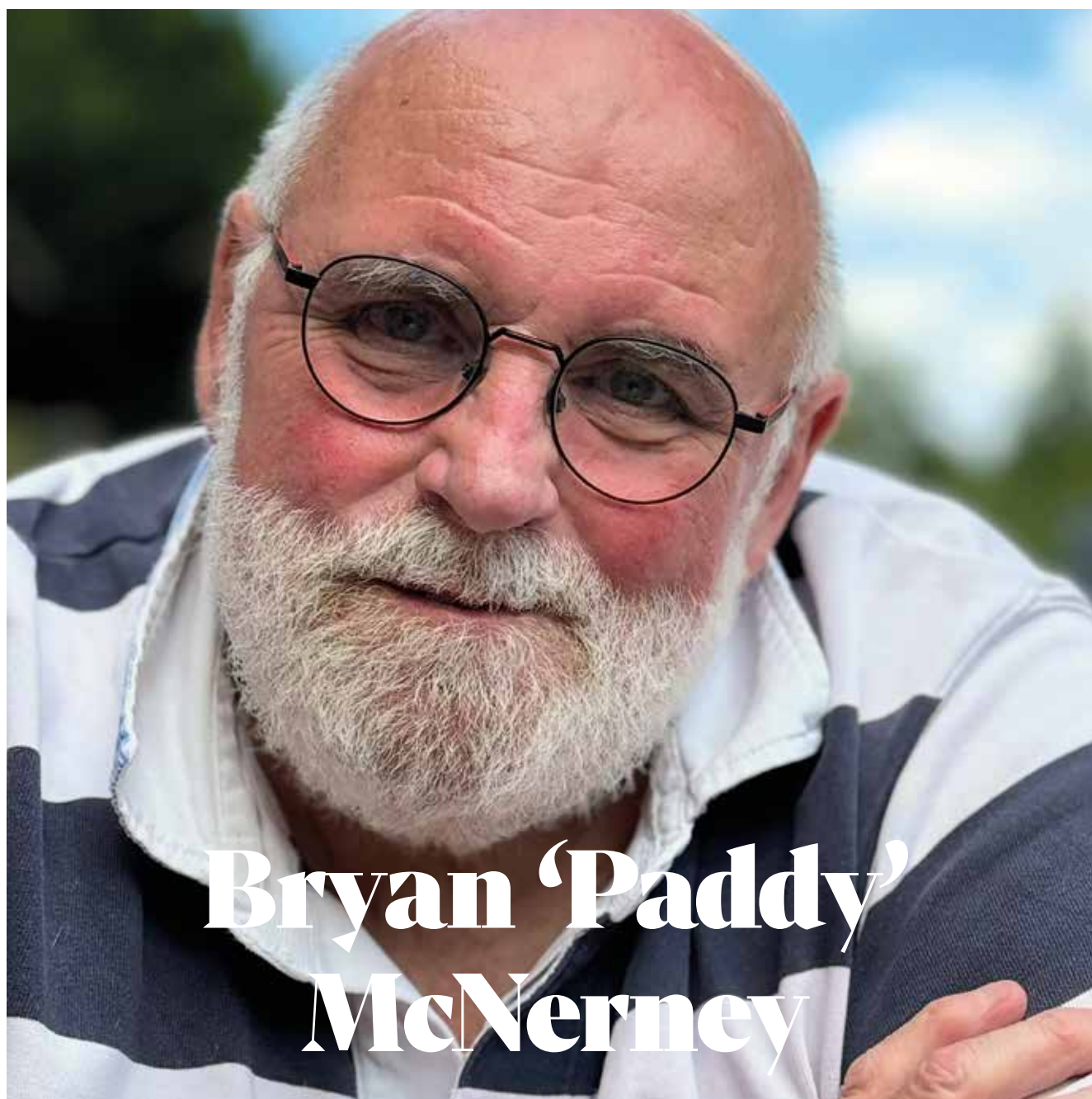
'Fuckin' 'ell.' Before I could stop myself it slipped out, part relief that he hadn't slit his wrists, part horror at the sight of that much blood. It came out pure Mackem – I was too shocked to smooth down my accent. I was suddenly feeling very much awake.



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'Set in the shadow of the 1980s miners' strike, rich with the vernacular of the North East, this brilliant, queer, campus novel is a sprawling tale of class, grief and masculinity with characters readers won't be able to help rooting for.'

AYANNA LLOYD BANWO,
MENTOR



Bryan was the first in his family to attend university, having previously worked as a nurse, nightclub bouncer, and drayman. He studied History and Landscape Archaeology as a mature student at UEA, later lecturing there before joining the BBC as a writer and presenter of award-winning history programmes (1985–2010). An accomplished sean-nós singer, he once surprised Seamus Heaney, who mistook him for Irish — ‘Liverpool? Sure, that’s just East Dublin, son.’ Bryan’s Liverpool–Irish, working-class roots and historian’s eye shape his debut novel, *Killing Former Friends* — part of a trilogy exploring revenge, redemption, and forgiveness during Ireland’s War of Independence.

Bryan was mentored by Ashley Hickson-Lovence.

Extract from *Killing Former Friends*

‘My war’s over Aisling, but you, you’re still fighting yours aren’t you?’

‘I am. I’m still fighting to persuade Britain to leave us to govern ourselves. And our history’s taught us they’ll only be persuaded by force.’

She bit her bottom lip, regretting what she must say next.

‘So then, we’ll apply that force ‘til they give us our country back.’

Hers was a young woman’s voice, with all the softly spoken, breathlessness that might persuade a man to listen.

Now, for the first time, I realised why.

Aisling was using the practiced cadences of a woman who’d learnt that without those skills, she had no voice, might never be heard.

But there was something else beyond that. Something I’d never heard until now.

Listening to her I’d heard the far-off ringing-chime of a hammered-blade striking home, striking hard against armour.

I’d heard sword-sharp steel within Aisling’s quietly spoken words.

I knew it instantly. A leader’s voice, powerful, decisive; gently but determinedly rallying shaken soldiers in the smoke-grey confusion of battle. Steadying them, calming their fears, readying them to be led back into the fight. A fight she intended to win.

Hearing her, I realised that wherever she led, I would follow.

‘Bryan’s novel is a sweeping exploration of love and war. Rich in emotional depth, this historical tale paints a vivid, human portrait of those most touched by conflict and connection. It’s a story told with rare heart, unflinching honesty, and heaps of skill.’

ASHLEY HICKSON-LOVENCE,
MENTOR



Fritha Waters

A fiction writer based in Norfolk, Fritha describes herself as ‘a professional gardener most of the time and a mother all the time’, who writes as much as she can in between the two. She is currently working on a collection of short stories which are inspired by plants, human relationships, and the strange behaviour of both. Her writing has appeared in *Chapman Magazine*, and online through *Cut a Long Story Short*, *Hags on Fire* and *Bandit Fiction*. Fritha was the winner of the Unpublished Writers Jam Session in Edinburgh and came second in *Folly Journal*’s International Writers Competition.

Fritha was mentored by Yvvette Edwards.

Extract from *That's Just Her*

I knew I wanted to see you again even as I clambered out the toilet window of the restaurant. Spit 'n' Sawdust lived up to its promise of shabby-chic wankery throughout, from the exposed pipes behind the bar to the mildly erotic photos in the toilets. It was another finger-on-the-pulse-bistro-pop-up-fuck-up-original-space with great lumps of wood slung around as tables. The food arrived on squares of corrugated metal and the wine in old army munition tins, filled with ice. The hype was as huge as the portions were small; I arrived hungry and left famished.

The place was desperate and trying too hard, a lot like you. The evening was free-falling into predictability – my dress had grown uncomfortably tight in the hot summer air, my pants had cheese-wired my arse, and the restaurant was a fucking huge disappointment. Too much wine and too many fags had brought on a tight headache, which I hoped would go by the time the opportunity of blink-and-miss-it-sex occurred, but even that was off the cards now as I jumped from the toilet window, scooped up my shoes and padded on out, not bothering to duck under the window in the hope that you'd see me leaving.

'Fritha's short stories are unspooled with a momentum that maximises tension and intrigue. Flawed characters are steeped in mysterious circumstances and darkness is juxtaposed against humour, in a voice that is confident and consistent.'

**YVETTE EDWARDS,
MENTOR**



SWG is a writer, artist, and academic whose work spans poetry, short stories, journalism, and now a debut novel, a queer lyrical autofiction exploring how we live and love. They are the co-founder of a digi-tech agency and founder of an international public poetry library. SWG has lived and worked across the globe, including as a Visiting Research Scholar at San Francisco State University, where they developed a new digital archive for the American Poetry Archive. A former International Librarianship Fellow for IREX and the Gates Foundation, they've also worked as a journalist in Hong Kong and a performance artist in Leipzig.

SWG was mentored by Kate Worsley.

Extract from novel in progress

I will make us some tea, and bring it up? She says, pointing her finger first towards the kitchen ahead of us, then up towards the stairs, in front of me, and I nod, lifting my gaze into the unlit staircase, feeling a fear in me leap to the front of my chest and then adjust itself, as if to settle in for a long haul flight, stretching and extending its elements into unknown areas of my ambiguous self, and placing my left foot onto the second stair, as she turns her back to me and steps toward the kitchen, I push off from the ground and launch myself into air, lunging at the staircase, my feverish grip manhandling the balustrade as I lug myself up the first flight, where I stop, caught in the stare of the white throat of a gentian, its solitary erectness forking a torch for me with the gift of the window's blue-dark light, and my feeling of fear is about in its turning, shifting its shape into sinuous desire, as I am speared with a dense passion which draws open my throat as if I am gasping for air. I hesitate.

'SWG writes self-consciously, deliberately, and vehemently in the very best lyrical and sensual manner, to affirm the cis female queer narrator and in direct response to the work of Constance Debré. It is ambitious, meticulous and passionate work that demands the reader pay attention to each and every quiver of feeling and meaning.'

**KATE WORSLEY,
MENTOR**

Our experienced Escalator mentors each work with two writers, providing practical guidance and in-depth creative feedback through one-to-one support over an eight-month period.



Michael Donkor

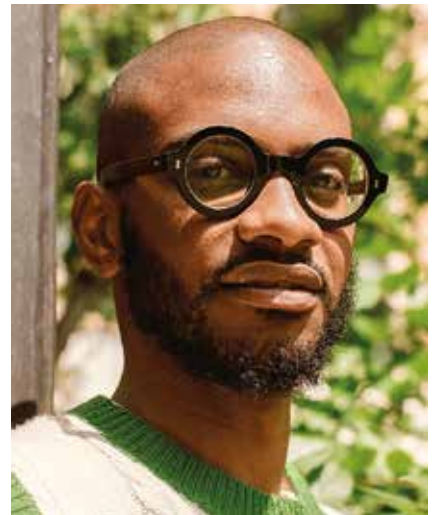
Michael was raised in a Ghanaian household where reading was vigorously encouraged. Following participation in Escalator as a writer, he published acclaimed debut *Hold* (4th Estate, 2018), exploring questions of sexuality, identity and sacrifice. It was longlisted for the Dylan Thomas Prize and shortlisted for Desmond Elliott Prize. Michael regularly writes for the *Guardian*, *Telegraph*, BBC, and *Independent*. His second novel, *Grow Where They Fall*, was released in 2024.



ANDI SAPEY

Yvette Edwards

Yvette Edwards is a British author of Montserratian heritage. Her work has been nominated for the Writers' Guild award, Man Booker Prize, NAACP Image Award, Commonwealth Writers' Prize, Hurston-Wright Legacy Award, International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award and the Waverton Good Read Award. She is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.



PETER ARKLEY-BLOXHAM

Ashley Hickson-Lovence

Ashley was born in London but emerged as a writer in Norwich. His debut novel, *The 392*, was published by OWN IT! in 2019, followed by *Your Show* (Faber, 2022), longlisted for the Gordon Burn Prize. His young adult novel-in-verse *Wild East* (Penguin, 2024) won the East Anglian Book Awards Book of the Year 2024. Ashley teaches at the University of East Anglia and is a qualified football referee.



PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE

Ayanna Lloyd Banwo

Ayanna Lloyd Banwo is a writer from Trinidad & Tobago. Her debut novel *When We Were Birds* won multiple awards, including the OCM Bocas Prize for Caribbean Literature 2023. She is the 2023 winner of the Eccles Centre & Hay Festival Writer's Award and was named a 2024 'Rising Star in UK writing' by the National Centre for Writing and The British Council. She is currently working on her second novel in Norwich.



RICK PUSKINSKY

Kate Worsley

Kate is an internationally published award-winning novelist, experienced writing mentor and teacher. Her latest novel *Foxash* was a Times Book of the Month, Bookseller 'Pick of the Year' and won the East Anglian Book Awards Fiction Prize, 2023.

Meet fiction writer and Escalator alumna Lauren Van Schaik, recently shortlisted for the 2025 Women's Prize x Curtis Brown Discoveries Prize

Tell us about your writing journey since completing the Escalator Fellowship.

I was fortunate enough to receive a scholarship to do the Creative Writing MA at UEA. I credit Escalator and UEA with convincing me to take fiction seriously. Previously it seemed like a pipe dream.

I then followed the very American path of apprenticing myself to short stories. I did a tour of the shortlists of UK short story prizes (The White Review, Galley Beggar Press), building confidence, and submitted stories stateside as well, securing a couple of prestigious publications and earning an honourable mention in Houghton Mifflin Harcourt's annual *Best American Short Stories*.

During Escalator I was writing the fumbling beginnings of my abandoned first novel. That manuscript taught me so much about how not to write a novel, which I've applied to *Seven Sweet Nothings*, a much tighter project.

Looking back on your time as an Escalator Fellow, what were the key takeaways from the experience?

In retrospect, I was perilously young, at 24, and



I didn't know if I *could* be a writer or how one went about that, especially in this country where I'd crash-landed with a visa two years before. I didn't know how you got a novel from the back of the napkin idea to Foyles and what other opportunities were out there. Escalator gave me that knowledge.

I didn't have a defined literary voice or much idea of what I wanted to write; that would come later. Escalator gave me the confidence to write to figure those things out — and some idea about where to send that work once I had.

You were mentored by Amy Sackville. How did that mentoring relationship influence your craft, or shape your perspective on life as a writer?

Amy was extremely patient and encouraging, especially because I was such a babe in the woods. I'd written short stories and taken some creative writing classes at university but was very unformed. It was edifying and exciting to have her engage with my work. She also provided this model for what a writing life could look like, with craft and teaching co-existing.

How important is it to shine a spotlight on writing talent from outside London? What can regional publishers and organisations offer that London-based ones might not?

I live in London but grew up in Rust Belt Ohio so I'll forever feel like an outsider here and have an affinity with the regions. I chafe against the idea that those places are cultural wastelands.

Local creative infrastructure opens opportunities to people who might otherwise feel daunted and not apply, submit, or turn up. My first major US publication was in *The Cincinnati Review*, which is based at the University of Cincinnati and has an outsized reputation for publishing great literature. For me, it felt approachable because it was in my hometown backyard.

Norwich is wonderful because it doesn't feel a satellite in orbit to London, but rather its own self-sufficient literary world.

Escalator focuses on supporting underrepresented voices in UK publishing. From your perspective, how has the landscape changed in recent years?

I've noticed a conscious effort among publishers and prize committees to amplify marginalised voices; to make bookshelves and shortlists reflect today's Britain. I hope publishing continues to be courageous, especially in an increasingly totalitarian political environment, where opposition to war and genocide is being tarred as prejudice and terrorism.

One positive development has been the normalisation of virtual alternatives in creative spaces. Zoom is much maligned, but it's made opportunities accessible to so many more people, including those with disabilities and caring responsibilities and postcodes outside London. I have a small child and a dysfunctional hip, so as much as I love an in-person literary event, a virtual alternative is often a better fit for my life.

Unfortunately, there's still a fetishisation of youth and literary *wunderkinder*. That doesn't align with the way people, particularly women, lead their lives, especially amidst the housing and cost of living crises. Joanna Walsh did some great campaigning about age restrictions in arts opportunities through @noentry_arts.

My own writing career has taken several detours, due to divorce, a serious hip condition, and recently motherhood and childcare. Back when I did Escalator a decade ago, I would have been horrified to hear that I'd be 35 without a published novel. But those detours made me a better writer — or at least one who's not in so much of a rush to prove myself.

Support the writers of tomorrow, today

2025 marks the 20th Anniversary of Escalator. To continue supporting writers in a rapidly changing world, we need your support more than ever.

The National Centre for Writing seeks generous and visionary supporters who value new writing and diverse stories.

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To make a donation visit **nationalcentreforwriting.org.uk/escalator-donation**, or scan the QR code above.

'Escalator New Writing Fellowships are embedded in their longstanding mission to improve access to disparate and marginalised voices in the publishing world. This is a mission we fully support and will continue to do so in the future.'

ALLAN REEVES, PATRON OF THE REEVES AWARD

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