

ESCALATOR

New Writing Fellows

Emerging Voices in Fiction From the East of England

2025–26

E. Abdeni-Holman • Boakye D. Alpha • Esther Cann • Kitty Edwards • Lucy Fielding
Amy Honeywell • Sophie Yan Yee Lau • Dana Moss • Eve Smith • Esohe Uwadiae

N National Centre
for Writing

NORWICH
CITY OF
LITERATURE



Welcome

On behalf of the National Centre for Writing (NCW), I am proud to introduce the Escalator New Writing Fellows 2026: ten outstanding early-career fiction writers from across the East of England whose voices, perspectives and stories reflect the richness and diversity of the region.

The Fellowships support writers who are under-represented in UK publishing, providing time, space and expert guidance to develop their craft and build sustainable creative careers. Through tailored mentoring, peer support, and opportunities to connect with industry professionals and public audiences, the programme helps create pathways for new voices to shape the future of literature.

For more than 20 years, Escalator has supported hundreds of writers across the East of England. More than half of our alumni have gone on to publish acclaimed fiction, while many others have built successful careers in writing, performing, teaching and the wider creative industries. 85% report increased confidence in their writing, and every Fellow remains actively engaged in their creative practice.

We are delighted to share the work of this year's Fellows through this publication. Their writing is urgent, imaginative and deeply rooted in both personal and collective experience. Together, their stories offer a compelling snapshot of contemporary fiction, exploring themes that are at once intimate and universal, local, and global.

The achievements of this cohort demonstrate the exceptional creative talent emerging from the East of England and the vital contribution new writers continue to make to our literary landscape.

We invite publishers, programmers, editors, agents, and readers to discover the Escalator New Writing Fellows 2026. The pages that follow offer more than an introduction to ten remarkable writers; they are an invitation to new perspectives, new conversations and new possibilities for contemporary fiction.

Best wishes,

Paula Sanchez
Chief Executive & Creative Director
National Centre for Writing



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One small step: the true value of mentoring for writers

Today, Kate Worsley is the award-winning writer of two novels, *She Rises* and *Foxash*. But her journey as a fiction writer began more than a decade ago, when she was selected for Escalator. In this piece, she reflects on the profound impact of the Escalator Fellowships, exploring their vital role in building writers' confidence and helping them find their place within the literary landscape.

In the town where I grew up, there were two indoor shopping centres. Though only one, I remember, boasted two levels. And an escalator. To those trudging in wet and windswept, with bags and baby buggies, with sore feet and long lists and big dreams, it offered a solid steel escape from the everyday, a siren stairway to a sort of heaven. For tucked away on the upper floor were the non-essential shops, fashion and music and all sorts of indulgence. One small step... and you could take a moment. Set down your bags, take in the expanding vistas, scan for talent, close your eyes, open your mind.

In the town where I grew up, I quickly understood reading fiction to be an antisocial, pretentious, non-essential habit. And, therefore, that writing the stuff would be beyond the pale, inviting ridicule, incomprehension and humiliation in equal measure; an activity as outlandish as wearing velvet in the rain, as attention seeking as running up the down escalator.

By the time I came to NCW's Escalator programme as a mentee, I had two degrees and a career in journalism behind me, but was still tripped up and burdened by that internalised resistance to doing what I love best.

All I had to do was step on. My mentor Tobias Hill sat down with me in the quiet back room of a huge beautiful pub and proceeded to take me and my writing seriously. He read, and listened, as a writer. I was up there, on the same level, often enough and long enough, to start to feel at home.

And in my fellow East Anglian mentees, I met others who dared call themselves writers. It was like coming out all over again. My novels have been rooted in the region, and to be joined on Escalator by a growing cohort of local writers has been both a comfort and an inspiration.

Escalator is not a fast track to literary success. It's no great glass elevator. And mentoring is not teaching,

or even editing. It's sharing space, experience, energy and attention. Building a relationship over time that helps a writer both to take their writing seriously, and get it out into the world to be read.

My first novel found a publisher just as I joined Escalator, while the novel I was mulling over with Tobias took much, much longer. A writing career is no travelator. Life gets in the way, throws you off. But having a mentor keeps you on track and moving. So now, as an Escalator mentor myself, I treasure all those setbacks and detours because I can share all the ways I have found to keep writing, and keep aiming higher each time.

These days, my mentoring is the escalator, really. It enables me to take a writer by the hand and invite them to step up. Whoever they are, wherever they come from, it can hone their writing, grow their confidence, connect them with the writing world, and, above all, keep them writing.

Impact of Escalator

21
YEARS

36%
AGENTED

58%
PUBLISHED

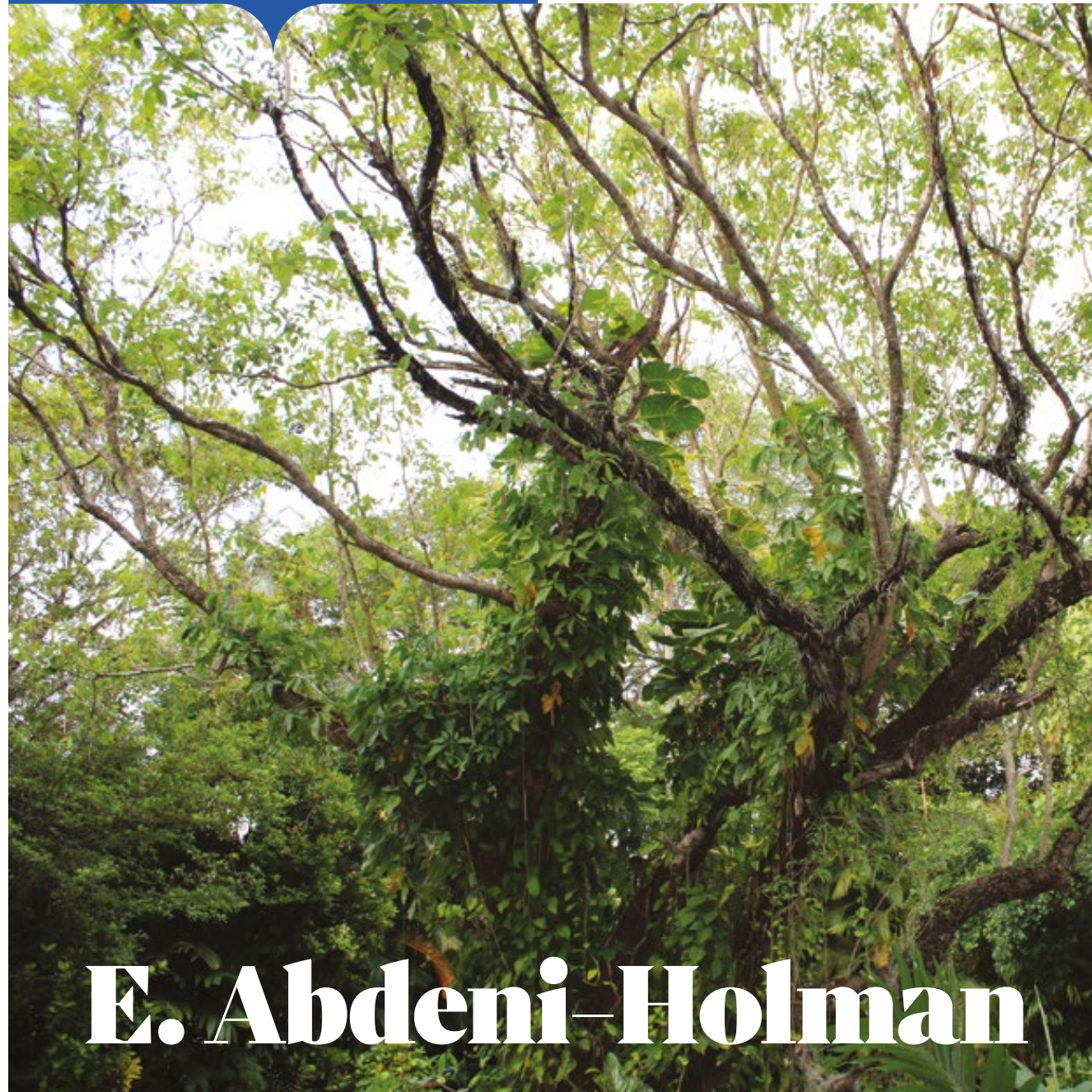
40%
RECOGNISED IN
LITERARY AWARDS

170+
WRITERS

85%
MORE CONFIDENT
ABOUT WRITING AND
DOING NEW THINGS

70%
MORE CONNECTED
WITH OTHER PEOPLE IN
LITERATURE AND WRITING

100%
ARE STILL WRITING



E. Abdeni-Holman

E. Abdeni-Holman is the author of *Body Tectonic*, a work of ‘news poetry’ and ground-level account of Lebanon’s socioeconomic crisis (Broken Sleep Books, 2024). *Experiencing Ways Through Words: On Our Relationships with Language (and so Literature)*, a work of critical theory, was published in 2025 by Palgrave Macmillan. Her short story, ‘Yair’, was shortlisted for the 2025 BBC National Short Story Award and chosen for the Best British Short Stories 2026.

E. selected the image above to accompany her biography in place of an author photograph.

E. was mentored by Ayanna Lloyd Banwo.

Extract from *FLOAT*

A woman is wrapping her country in paper.

A woman, on her knees, wrapping something floundering and elusive in newspaper, the way fish and chips might have been once. The thing being wrapped is slippery, hard to pin down, and the paper trying to cover it is leaving its mark: smudges of print, a cloying feeling of smudges and waste on the woman’s hands. She is bent over, trying to wrap, trying to coddle and contain and soothe. What is being wrapped is alive, but it will not be held. It baulks at its swaddling, the woman cannot rock it, or lift it, or pat it, or take it with her when she goes. It will not be carried. It won’t fit snugly on her shoulder, or let itself be borne in her arms. She wraps it in paper, the thing that is neither food nor baby nor gift. The edges of the paper will not close.

‘*FLOAT* is not a novel, a memoir, or an essay, but something else entirely.

It defies the borders of genre in the same way it questions what it means to be at home and not, in ‘one nation’ or many.

This hybrid work is urgently contemporary, compellingly human, and beautifully written. It has been a pleasure to help it find its way.’

AYANNA LLOYD BANWO,
MENTOR



Boakye D. Alpha is a Ghanaian interdisciplinary creative whose works include poetry, prose, screenplays, creative non-fiction, and filmmaking. His writing has appeared in *Lolwe*, *The Shallow Tales Review*, *Lɔ̀unlɔ̀un*, among others and is forthcoming elsewhere. His essay was included in ‘Afrocrtik’s 50 Notable Essays from Africa.’ He has been longlisted for the Commonwealth Short Story Prize, Simon & Schuster’s New Chapter Prize; won the Tony Elumelu Storytellers Prize, MoveAfrica Grant, et al. Boakye is also a two-time nominee of the Caine Prize for African Writing. He was mentioned in CPG’s Top 20 Ghanaian Writers of 2025. He completed an MA in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia.

Alpha was mentored by Yvvette Edwards.

Extract from *All Our Dark Tomorrows*

It is quarter past midnight, the witching hour. A crimson moon, shrouded in shadows of dark clouds, peers through the sky, indifferent. Yinmaale walks through thorny shrubs and rows of trees, hauntingly big and tall, with branches twisted into snakelike curves that make them appear alive, moving, slithering. The chirp chirping of crickets and croak croaking of frogs fill the air, creating a pulsating ambience for the night, like the melodies of the yuum yidima, whose ballad-songs brought feet together, moved heads side to side, and shifted bent waists into dance each time they played at the village square. Yinmaale meanders through knee-level shrubs, trying and failing to avoid the thorns piercing her long dress. Finding herself in an open field, the trees less clustered, she stops short and lowers herself to hold her knees for balance. Her chest heaves up, down, up, down, as if in its own dance with the woodsong. Yinmaale yanks off her headwrap and wipes off the sweat dripping down her forehead. Loud, screeching cries pierce her ears from above. She raises her head and sees a flock of black birds circling the blood moon. As she shudders at the uncanny sight, a thunderous babbling calls her attention. Yinmaale follows the sound; the tail of her flip-flops, hitting her soles, *flap-flap flap-flap*.



‘Alpha brings a light touch and a strong, confident voice to this ambitious project, centring the witch camps of Ghana and the women who reside in them. His writing soars with lyricism, metaphor and wonderful use of African proverbs, creating unfamiliar yet vivid landscapes within a story that is engaging, compelling and unforgettable.’

YVETTE EDWARDS, MENTOR



Esther's short fiction has been published in various journals, and her stories have been shortlisted for the Anton Chekhov Prize for Very Short Fiction, twice shortlisted for the Bridport Prize and longlisted for Mslexia's Short Story Competition. Her writing has been kindly supported by Arts Council England and Jerwood Arts.

Her current work in progress is an upmarket novel following three women as they fight for freedom in societies determined to deny it. From ancient Greece to Georgian Edinburgh and modern Saudi Arabia, each woman is pushed to her limits. Esther's other work in progress is *Red Fruit*, a novel about West Papua.

Esther was mentored by Yvvette Edwards.

Extract from *Woman afloat*

Amal leans against the balcony wall, opening to the memories which lie in wait for her on the rooftop. In the remembering, her first kiss is hazy and smudged, her vision and cognition at the time reduced by the intensity of other senses.

She can't remember, now, how many nights she and Nadeen passed together up here, with the wind and birds and telephone wires. A week, at most ten days before they grew bolder, lounging in the majlis during late afternoons while Umm Malik went shopping and the boys were at football practice.

The day Amal lost her best friend and only lover had contained no hint of the evil eye, as it swivelled its gaze towards her. She and Nadeen had been snacking on fried watermelon seeds and halva, talking about a novel they were both reading. The kiss itself was brief and glancing, a carefree moment born of wondering how halva might taste on another person's lips. Nobody's shirt was unbuttoned, there were no hands sliding to places of softness but none of this mattered, because when Umm Malik returned for her forgotten sunglasses, it was the beginning, the middle, and the end of the end.

'Esther brings a clear, clean, confident voice to her ambitious project, interweaving the stories of three women from different eras, countries and cultures. Her characters are finely wrought, with great depth of interiority. Her landscapes are closely observed, atmospheric and vividly realised. She is a talented and engaging writer with exciting potential.'

YVETTE EDWARDS, MENTOR



Kitty Edwards is a fiction writer based in Hertfordshire. She spent much of her childhood in the Herbarium of Manchester Museum, where her father worked as a botanist. Her novel in progress was longlisted for the MsLexia Novel Competition 2025, the Bridport prize 2019, and won the Owned Voices Novel Award 2021. It was also selected for the Asian Women Writers programme 2022.

Kitty was mentored by Ayanna Lloyd Banwo.

Extract from *The Herbarium*

The Herbarium was silent, apart from the ticking of the clock in the main hall and the creaking of the tall, white cabinets. The old wood shrank in the cold, thin shelves rattling in loose joints. Etta sat at her microscope, one hand resting on the ribbed metal of the focussing wheel and the other clutching a pencil hovering over a half drawn sketch. Her jaw was set and her features calm, her breathing slow and steady. Beneath the lens, a hidden world unfolded. A landscape of ridges and bumps, shadows and light.

On the slide, was the petal fragment she'd left to soak in her office. Eyes pressed against the rubber rims, she searched for hairs, grains of pollen or star shaped crystals, any identifying markers that could help her name this plant. Usually, before she looked down the lens she'd be pretty sure of the Latin name, family and genus. It took little more than a touch here, a glance there, for the knowledge to form in her mind. Today, though, she had nothing. It wasn't a feeling she liked. As though she was on a sailing boat in the middle of the ocean, with no GPS.

'Kitty has created an endearing protagonist in Dr Etta Vine – a quietly brilliant botanist estranged from her own mysterious past and desperate to save a historic botanical collection at the core of her academic work from closure. The writing is heartfelt and quietly assured with a keen eye for lush, luminous detail; a truly emotional tribute to the magic and wonder of the natural world.'

— AYANNA LLOYD
BANWO, MENTOR



Lucy Fielding is a third-culture kid and child of third-culture kids. She wrote her first short story when she was seven, and it was terrible. But that didn't matter, because back then becoming a writer was just a dream. Still, as she has found over the course of her fellowship, dreams have a way of seeding themselves in the most unexpected places. Thanks to Escalator, she has finally written her first novel, *Stalks*: a story about wishes, bad decisions, and the unreasonable treatment of potatoes.

Lucy was mentored by Kate Worsley.

Extract from *Stalks*

'How do you make paper?'

'It comes from trees,' explains Sylvia, and suddenly my sap surges, flooding the hallway. 'You take the wood, and you chop it up into tiny pieces and mix it with water, then roll it out flat and let it dry.'

'Oh,' says Charlotte, and concentrates on finding the end of the sleeve with her indelicate fingers.'

Oh.

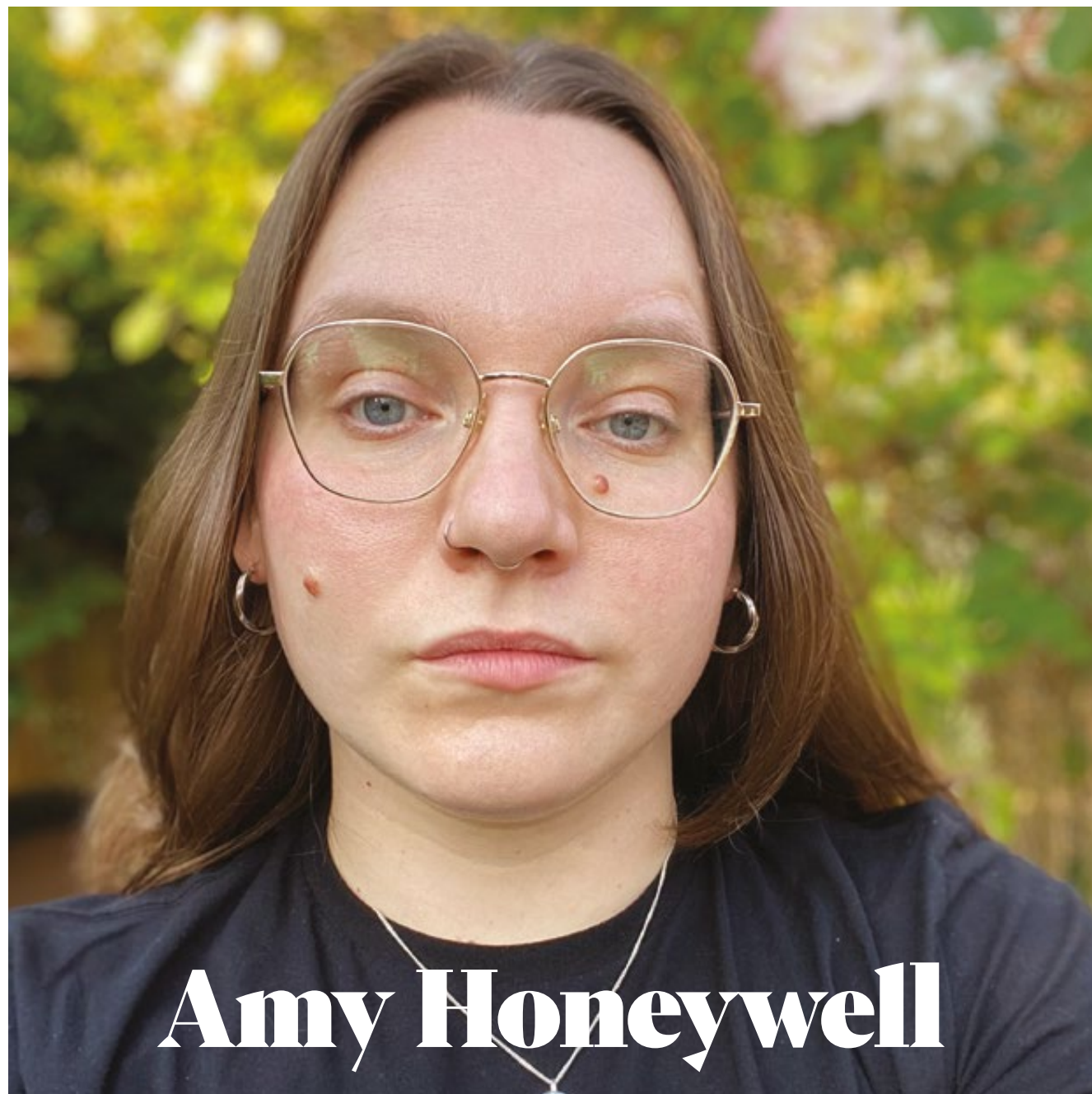
And that is that, because Charlotte is only five, and is not a tree, and therefore does not have to process the depth of this new truth, that trees are not just firewood and timber, but they are paper too: broken down into unrecognisable fragments and washed and dried until every element of them is rendered away into blank sheets...until everything that makes them tree is taken from them. And they are never given back to the earth, never allowed to rot and decay and feed the next generation as mould and humus, never allowed to pass on their essence and their memories to fresh shoots. They are stacked on stuffy shelves and tossed into waste-bins and trapped forever in something that is worse, so much worse, than a pot.

I think I would rather burn.



'Lucy was born to write. Pearl-like, her literary imagination has only matured over many years, while nestled away within a work world of science. And I have been lucky enough, as her Escalator mentor, to behold her first extraordinary novel: a tour de force, a torrent of talent.'

KATE WORSLEY, MENTOR



Amy Honeywell is a writer living in Norwich, where she completed an MA in Prose Fiction at UEA. She won the Alpine Fellowship Writing Prize 2025, has been shortlisted for the Bridport Short Story Prize 2025, and longlisted for the Bristol Short Story Prize 2026. Her short stories and essays have been published in magazines and journals including *Porridge* and *Disappointment Magazine*. Her essay, 'After Dart', is due to be published in 2026 in an anthology by River River Books. She has run community creative writing workshops in partnership with Queerfest Norwich and Norwich Trans Pride.

Amy was mentored by Michael Donkor.

Extract from *Inheritants*

Isobel woke to a grinding low in her stomach. Reaching for the switch on the body of the lamp, she knocked a glass of water off the bedside table. When it came, the light was disorientating. She jumped at movement in her periphery, only to realise her reflection cast in the full-length mirror across from the bed was also reaching down for the fallen glass, the water leaving a dark patch on the carpet. The walls must have been recently painted, the chemicals souring her mouth and making her want to spit. Beyond the heavy lined curtains and through the open window, Isobel could hear the bodies of trees straining against the wind. A loud gust ballooned the curtains one moment and sucked them flat the next. She tried to breathe slowly. When she pushed herself up in bed her thighs slipped together, her pyjama trousers cold and stuck to her skin. Beneath the duvet she was haloed in blood.

'Amy has been excellent, entertaining, inspiring company throughout this year. I really admire the vastness of her ambition and dedication to her project. She approaches storytelling with such wonderfully brimming gusto, with a palpable and shining delight in the pleasures and potential of the novel form.'

MICHAEL DONKOR, MENTOR



Sophie Yan Yee Lau is a writer, linguist, and educator particularly interested in exploring language/s and identity through her work. Her personal essays have been published by PEN Transmissions, *Pit Magazine*, and gal-dem, amongst others, and her poetry is featured in several anthologies, including *WHERE ELSE: An International Hong Kong Poetry Anthology*. She won The Book Edit's Writers' Prize 2025, received Highly Commended in Faber's FAB Prize 2024, and has completed residencies with Bothy Project, Metal New Artist Network, Studio 459, and Amplify Bookstore. When not writing, Sophie facilitates creative translation workshops, and she can be found either spending quality time with her two dogs in Norwich or chaotically solo-travelling the world.

Sophie was mentored by Ashley Hickson-Lovence.

Extract from *Art and Seoul*

Towards the end of the call, Ava had a chance to speak to Maa Maa alone. For the first few moments, she stayed silent. She didn't know what the care home would be like, and she wanted to imprint the image of Maa Maa well-fed and comfortable into her memory, just in case.

She wanted to remember Maa Maa exactly as she'd always been—her wrists encircled in jade; her curved, crescent-moon eyes smiling behind the thin wire frame of her glasses; her wrinkled hands clasping a mug of warm water. She was sitting in her favourite dining room chair—the one with the red velvet seat cover embroidered with a swooping gold dragon. Whenever Maa Maa sat upright, its head peeked over her left shoulder, like her very own guardian spirit.

Ava asked Maa Maa how she felt about the move.

'*Bou bui*, no matter how I look at it, I don't like it.' Maa Maa frowned. 'It's just not very easy on the eyes, is it?'

It was the first time Maa Maa had been so frank. And, ever since, Ava's heart has felt heavy.

'Sophie is a hard-working and versatile writer, nearing completion on several exciting projects. Her writing has real range, moving confidently between the poignant, humorous and romantic. Her descriptions of food are especially epic and vivid! She is thoughtful, receptive to feedback and always willing to push her work further. I'm very proud of what she has achieved and excited to see where her writing career takes her.'

**— ASHLEY HICKSON-LOVENCE,
MENTOR**



Dana Moss is an Essex-based writer currently working as an editor. Previously, she lived in Ann Arbor where she gained her PhD in nineteenth-century British poetry from the University of Michigan.

Dana is currently working on her debut novel, *I Took Your Face into My Dreams*. The novel follows two members of rival outlaw gangs—one capable of altering his appearance at will, one perhaps capable of resurrection—as they struggle between the allure of their fantastical abilities and the loyalty they owe their vengeful leaders. She describes it as *Red Dead Redemption 2* meets the filmography of David Cronenberg.

Dana was mentored by Kate Worsley.

Extract from *I Took Your Face into My Dreams*

Maud was always reading poetry. She told Evander once about an English poet and his sister who would lie together in ditches and pretend they were dead, bodies excavated of everything except base sensations. She dreamed of the open wounds of graves, the lush and devastating intimacy of two people decomposing into one. At the time he found it morbid; he suspected it had something to do with her gravedigger father, whose spectre dogged Maud across the country and who she cried over often. But when she asked if he would do it with her—lie in a field, play dead—he agreed. He wanted to be close to her.

She called it death play.

He and Maud never made their relationship official; perhaps that was his mistake. It meant that technically nothing changed between them except she no longer shared his tent. When they laid in that field together, years ago, he would cheat and glance over at her, thrilling at the spill of her hair against the ground, her pink cheeks and red mouth, the rise and fall of her chest. His body shivered with the desire to touch her. He didn't know how to touch her now.

'Dana has taken the hybrid fantasy/game/novel genre to new levels in her utterly unique debut novel. Somehow she has managed to infuse it with the academic ambition and subtleties of her academic work on 19th-century poetry and 'noncathartic intimacies' and the result takes my breath away.'

KATE WORSLEY, MENTOR





Eve Smith is a writer, artist and workshop facilitator based in Cambridge. She studied at Trinity College Dublin, where she specialised in Creative Writing, and was Editor-in-Chief of *Trinity Film Review*. She was selected to be an Emerging Writer with The London Library 2025/6 cohort, and she is currently working on her debut novel. In her work, she looks to playfully examine gendered dynamics and vulnerability, the perceived division between people and the natural world, and how hope and togetherness might be found when all seems lost.

Eve was mentored by Michael Donkor.

Extract from *All That Carrion*

Grace, Terry, Mam said, pushing past him into the house with the bags. Terry, Grace.

Terry put his cigarette in between his lips and held out his hand.

The famous Grace, he mumbled. Terry.

I shook his hand. When he breathed in, the end of his cigarette lit up orange.

What's that for? I said.

He held the air in his lungs for a moment and then let it out in a rush of smoke that stifled his voice.

Keeps me busy.

Can I try it?

He shrugged, tapping his forefinger against it so curls of dust fell to the floor before he handed it to me. I took it, held it like a straw and sucked, hard. My throat clenched tight and my lungs seized as heat shot down into them, then I coughed and coughed until I thought my head might pop.

What are you doing, Mam cried, rushing out and yanking the cigarette out my hand. Jesus, you'd think this was your first day on Earth, Terry.

Sorry, he said, laughing. I didn't think she'd actually—

Yeah, well, she did, Mam said, stomping the cigarette out into the gravel. Meet your niece.



'Throughout our wonderful time together, Eve's already sharp literary instincts and understanding of story have only deepened. She has worked with remarkable sensitivity and openness to possibility to produce writing that is enviably incisive, incredibly wry and light on its feet.'

MICHAEL DONKOR, MENTOR



Esohe Uwadiae is a multidisciplinary creative. Her debut play, the five-star *SHE IS A PLACE CALLED HOME*, was hailed by critics for being a ‘thought-provoking’, ‘powder-keg of a play’. It earned nominations for Stagedoor’s People’s Choice Award and VAULT Festival’s Origins Award.

Her other work has featured at theatres including the Almeida, Greenwich and the Duke of York’s. She has been shortlisted for awards including the Women’s Prize for Playwriting, the Alfred Fagon Award, and the Book Edit Writers’ Prize. Previous programme experience includes institutions such as the Royal Court, the Almeida, the Old Vic, HighTide and the London Library.

Esohe was mentored by Ashley Hickson-Lovence.

Extract from *Iniono* (*The Root of a Child*)

At 4pm, the sun was beginning its descent through the sky. It filtered through the identical floral net curtains that hung in nearly every room, yellowed with age, but clean, casting a trail of golden across the living room floor, like Dorothy’s yellow brick road beckoning me to follow.

At the end of its trail was Nosa, his fists buried in the deep corduroy of his trousers as he processed the story I’d just finished telling. A story marked by witchcraft, indoctrination and eventually death. One that explained how my mother ended up dead and why my sister killed her. He was unsurprised given his own experience and the newly dead sister who was haunting him.

He didn’t look at me, staring deeply at the contours of the ceiling, where a spider’s web floated aimlessly, pushed on by a breeze I could not identify. The golden sun illuminated his profile in a way I could only describe as striking.

He turns towards me suddenly. ‘In three weeks, your sister will die an agonising, painful and avoidable death at their hands’.

Onyx eyes drill into mine.

‘Unless we find her first’. He smiles. It’s acidic. ‘And make them pay’.

‘Esohe is a multi-disciplinary and hugely talented writer. Her novel-in-progress is thrilling, fast-paced and full of energy, with dialogue that feels consistently sharp and convincing. She has been thoughtful and receptive to feedback throughout and I’ve enjoyed every single supervision. She is undoubtedly a writer with a very bright future.’

— ASHLEY HICKSON-LOVENCE,
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.



© DAVID YIU

Michael Donkor

Michael was raised in a Ghanaian household where reading was vigorously encouraged. Following participation in Escalator as a writer, he published the 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.



© ELLA EDWARDS

Yvette Edwards

Yvette 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. Her second novel, *Good Good Loving*, was released in 2026.



© ANNA DAVIDSON

Ashley Hickson-Lovence

Ashley was born in London but emerged as a writer in Norwich. He is the author of the poetry collection *Why I Am Not a Bus Driver*, the acclaimed novels *The 392*, *Your Show* and *About to Fall Apart*, and the 2024 prize-winning YA novel in verse *Wild East*. He has lectured English and Creative Writing at Brunel University, Arts University Bournemouth, University of East Anglia, and the University of Suffolk.



© STUART SIMPSON - PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE

Ayanna Lloyd Banwo

Ayanna 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 British Council. She is currently working on her second novel in Norwich.



© RICK PUSHINSKY

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 in 2023.

Meet novelist and Escalator alumna George Harrison, shortlisted for the 2025 Nero Debut Fiction Award

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

I finished *Escalator* in 2023 with a polished draft of *Season*, which was picked up by Eye Books early the following year. It felt like an interminable wait between signing the deal and the book coming out, but by industry standards, everything moved very quickly, and the book was released in January 2025.

There were some excellent reviews, a translation into Italian, and a few shortlistings for major literary awards. This is obviously dream stuff for any early-career writer, but I tried not to get too distracted and kept writing through it all. Not long ago, I finished revising the book which will hopefully become my second novel. At the time of writing, I'm pulling together ideas for another novel, working on some shorter pieces, and still doing events to promote *Season* where I can.

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

I went into Escalator with the sense that my creative career was on the launchpad. I had already spent years working independently on the craft, trying to write all the clichés out of my system, and I felt that I was almost good enough to be publishing my work. What I had been missing was an external critical perspective. Through Escalator, I found the

critical challenge I had been looking for, and I really grew as a writer. I loved being mentored, just as I still love being edited. I remember feeling that *Season* had evolved into a viable novel throughout my time as a Fellow, and I walked out of the showcase with the feeling that my writing career was slowly but perceptibly taking off.

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

Michael was an incredible mentor. He interrogated every aspect of my work, forcing me to drill down into my creative decisions and justify them to myself. This not only made *Season* a much better novel, but it helped me to understand some of the first principles of creative writing.



© JAMES AITKEN

Before *Escalator*, my writing was still quite self-conscious, and I had a habit of picking at the edges of my stories. Michael helped me work out where the real meat was and encouraged me to get stuck in in a way which has helped me with everything I've written subsequently. He also did me the credit of taking me and my work seriously, which is important (I think) for any young writer who wants to learn the craft.

Escalator champions writers from the East of England. Why is it important that opportunities like this exist outside London, and what can regional publishers and organisations offer that London-based ones might not?

London-centric publishing has bred a glut of London-centric stories, with the result that English literature doesn't really reflect the country as much as its capital. Not only is this boring for readers craving fresh voices, but it entrenches the kind of conformity and groupthink which is toxic for the arts.

There's a class perspective to this as well, with publishers disproportionately clustered in London (and staffed by the urban middle-classes) while working-class writers are more likely to be based beyond the M25. Think of all the huge, untapped talent across the rest of England, and then imagine how much more vibrant and vital our literary scene would be if these writers were supported and encouraged. There's a huge opportunity here for smaller, regional presses to tap into this vast reserve of literary potential and to promote voices which otherwise wouldn't get a hearing. I have to hope that in the long run, discerning readers will reward them for it.

Escalator supports underrepresented voices in UK publishing. How do you think the industry has changed in recent years?

I'm fortunate that *Season* was picked up by precisely the kind of independent, regional press

which does genuinely value underrepresented voices, so no complaints there. But in terms of the wider industry, I think publishing has a well-earned reputation for being out of touch with real England, and it'll take more than talk to change that.

Season explores loneliness and modern masculinity. What first drew you to those themes, and what impact and feedback have you received from readers?

I started working on *Season* not long after moving to Norwich, at a time when I was still reeling from the awful years of the pandemic. I'd hazard a guess that subconsciously, at least, this is where my interest in loneliness came from. I also knew I wanted to write about football. While it's an unfashionable subject for a literary novel, it's undeniable that football is central to millions of lives, and I think that our national sport tells us a great deal about the character of our nation. Football is still a male-dominated arena, and the study of two taciturn season-ticket holders seemed like a great way to explore bigger, broader questions of male inarticulacy and the way that men interact with one another.

Above all else, though, I wrote *Season* because it was a novel I'd want to read. And it turns out that plenty of other people wanted to read it too, which has been a pleasant surprise.

I've had a great reaction from readers all over the world, some of whom have shared their own stories about how footballing rituals have helped to anchor and provide meaning to their own lives. I've also been very pleased to hear from quite a few readers who can't stand football – as well as from a number of men who don't typically read a great deal (and certainly don't read literary fiction) but who gave *Season* a chance and really enjoyed it. We hear a lot about how men ought to read more, and if my work can serve as a gateway novel to literary fiction, then I'm all for it.

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