

New Narratives for the North East: Fifteen new commissions reconsider the region's past, present and future

Fifteen writers have been commissioned to create new work about the North East in an ambitious project from New Writing North and the North East Culture Partnership. David Almond, Andrew Hankinson and Carmen Marcus are among those writers selected for the project.

Late in 2019, New Writing North launched a call-out for New Narratives for the North East with the statement:

“We believe that in order to thrive we need strong narratives and stories, which help shape our collective imagination. We believe that the North East needs new narratives to tell its story and to help shape its future.”

The project was announced following major political events for the region, including the Brexit vote and the 2019 General Election. The commissions were made during a global pandemic in which areas of the North East have been amongst the worst hit in Britain.

Yet, the writers are asked to “look beyond the flux and rhetoric of the current moment” to capture something deeper and more lasting about the contemporary North East and its people.

The resulting commissions range from Richard T Kelly on the controversial political strategist, Durham-born Dominic Cummings, to Melissa Tutesigensi recalling her time as a statistical minority: a state-educated, black, immigrant student at Durham University.

Lauren Davies shines a light on the North East's little-known surf culture, while Lisette Auton looks for the ‘missing 25%’ – the region's disabled population – who are missing from its cultural spaces.

Lyndsey Ayre offers both a snapshot of Newcastle city centre and a meditation on what it means to experience it as a young woman in 2020, while Andrew Hankinson looks back to recent history and the creation of the Metrocentre as an emblem of the region's transition from heavy industry to services.

Carmen Marcus, from Saltburn, will write micro-fictions focus on the region's complex relationship with the sea, while Juliana Mensah imagines a near-future in which the England has left the EU and Scotland has left the UK; in the contested border between Northumberland and Scotland a young woman and her friends look to create a country. What will its founding principles be? In a work of non-fiction Mim Skinner also considers a more principled future, in which non-cash-reliant models offer a broader recognition of value and support communities facing adversity.

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Elsewhere there are stories of myth, wilderness and history from David Almond and Bronwen Riley, and reportage on the history and future of innovation, industry and travel in the region by Richard Benson and Alex Niven.

Alongside 13 professional writers, two young people, Bethan Curley, from Newcastle, and India Hunter, from Teesside, have been offered a package of support which includes working with mentors alongside writing their commissioned pieces. Both writers aim to capture the essence of the working-class communities in which they live, which are so often overlooked or misunderstood by outsiders.

The work will be presented in a variety of forms from autumn 2020, including as essays, films, podcast episodes, and as part of a special digitally-focused Durham Book Festival, before being collected in an anthology to be published in 2021.

New Narratives for the North East is created by New Writing North for the North East Culture Partnership and is supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund, the North East Local Enterprise Partnership, Durham Book Festival, and Arts Council England.

Claire Malcolm, Chief Executive of New Writing North said: “We’re delighted to be able to commission such an exciting and necessary strand of work, especially at a time when many writers are losing other opportunities. It’s been a long-held wish of mine to work with writers to tell the real, diverse and multi-layered stories of the North East. For those of us who live here, there is often a disconnect between the stories we hear about our region and life as we experience it. We’ve wanted to reset that narrative for some time.

We also want to look ahead and imagine what the region could and will be in the future, how it will rise to the challenges of the fast-moving future. Writers are brilliantly placed to imagine these stories into being.”

Matthew Jarratt, Partnership Manager at North East Culture Partnership, said: “We’re incredibly pleased to see this project come to fruition. It was borne out of our Case for Culture consultations, in which we explored ‘distinctiveness’ as a theme.

We know the North East is a distinctive, vibrant and innovative region - we have a rich cultural heritage; a long history of radicalism, collective action and experimentation; our people are resilient and industrious, we have a proud heritage of self-improvement through creativity, and a strong and deeply felt sense of community.

In speaking to thousands across the region we learned that many of the old stories or representations of the North East didn’t resonate any longer. To see New Writing North take this learning and develop New Narratives for the North East is fantastic.

We hope that the writing and stories created from this New Narratives for the North East project will be able to present the North East in a brand-new light, as well as feed into some of the tourism messaging for the region.”

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Alan Welby, Innovation Director at the North East Local Enterprise Partnership, said:
“There are so many stories to be told about the North East and we’re very excited to see what new angles the writers bring forward. We’re particularly pleased to be working with Richard Benson on a narrative around innovation in the region, how is it woven into our DNA and how it has the potential to take us forward to a bright and prosperous future.”

For information about all the writers and their projects, visit
<https://newwritingnorth.com/new-narratives-for-the-north-east/>

Notes to Editor

For all media enquiries including interviews and images contact Laura Fraine, Senior Marketing and Communications Manager at New Writing North
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Commissioned writers and their work

David Almond (@davidjalmond)

David is the author of *Skellig*, *The Dam*, *Joe Quinn's Poltergeist* and many other novels, stories, picture books, songs, opera librettos, radio programmes and plays. His work, all set in the North East, is translated into over 40 languages. His major awards include The Carnegie Medal and the Hans Christian Andersen Award.

“The North is a wild place. For centuries it lay at the furthest edge of civilisation. Now, all of us need to be rewilded if our damaged earth is to survive. My piece, poetic and experimental, written in northern rhythms, will try to conjure and to share the distinctive nature of the North, its beauty and ugliness, to embody its place in the wider culture and history of the world, to show that the North is very ancient and is forever new”.

Lisette Auton (@lisette_auton)

Lisette is a disabled writer, activist, poet, spoken-word artist, actor, theatre-maker and creative practitioner. She’s an award-winning published poet, a Penguin Random House *WriteNow*, mentee, the recipient of an Early Careers Residency for Literature at Cove Park and is on the TSS Publishing list of Best British & Irish Flash Fiction. All her work seeks to make the invisible visible.

Using reportage, poetry, verbatim speech and found poetry Auton will create a work exploring a new narrative for disabled culture in the North East. “I want to talk about the missing... 25% of people in the North East classify as disabled. We do not take up 25% of the cultural space. Where are the missing? How do we say: ‘you are welcomed and important?’.”

Lyndsey Ayre (@lyndsey_ayre)

Lyndsey won New Writing North’s inaugural Sid Chaplin Award for working-class writers in 2019. She was an Emerging Critic for the *Scottish Review of Books* in 2018 and was shortlisted for the Observer/Burgess award in 2017. She’s interested in challenging perceptions of working-class identity and in writing about the urban experience.

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Ayre has been exploring the city of Newcastle upon Tyne since she was thirteen. In this new essay she will walk the city to explore the changing profile and experience of the city and to investigate how the city has changed and is changing and how this shifting landscape impacts on those that live here.

Richard Benson (@_RichardBenson)

Richard edited *The Face* from 1995-2000 and writes for newspapers and magazines. His memoir *The Farm: The Story of One Family and the English Countryside* was shortlisted for the Guardian's First Book Award and was chosen for Richard & Judy's' Book Club. His second, *The Valley: 100 Years in the Life of a Family*, won the James Tait Black Prize for Biography, and the Portico Prize, and was shortlisted for the Gordon Burn Prize. His new memoir, *The Meadow*, will be published in 2021.

In, Making Work for Ourselves, Benson will create a narrative non-fiction documenting the relationships between work, innovation and self-image in today's North East. Based on the renewable energy sector and the people who work in it, it will consider contemporary identity, social relationships, and attitudes to work, and ask what they might mean for the future of the region.

Bethan Curley (@bethancurley)

Bethan is a Year 10 student currently studying at Excelsior Academy, Newcastle upon Tyne. From a young age she has had a passion for making positive change in the world as well as raising awareness of global issues such as climate change. Earlier this year, Bethan featured in the Young Writers' City project, *Stitched: a Hip-Hopera*, and has showcased her writing at the Inside/Outside event held at the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art.

The North East is a place of discovery where each day you find out something new, and Benwell in the West End of Newcastle is no different. The community spirit, how people know each other and have grown up together, will form the basis of this piece, which aims to reduce the bad publicity, and to tell the true story of the people who walk those streets.

Lauren Davies (@LittleTurtleSOS)

The first of Davies' five novels, *Serve Cool*, was a Times Top 10 debut. She wrote the feature documentary, *Waveriders*, winning the Dublin International Film Festival, and created the story for a BAFTA-nominated innovative game. Lauren's environmental children's book *Little Turtle Turns the Tide*, launched in 2020.

"If God had intended Geordies to surf, some would say, he wouldn't have invented football". In a creative non-fiction piece Davies will explore the little-known surf culture of the East coast, spanning Tynemouth's Longsands to Seaton Sluice and Blyth. She will tell the story of the characters that made it, and give us a surfer's perspective of the coastline, viewing from the sea, the region's industry, history and natural world

Andrew Hankinson (@AndrewHankinson)

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Andrew is a freelance journalist whose work has appeared in the *The Guardian*, *Wired*, and the *New Yorker*. He wrote the award-winning book, *You Could Do Something Amazing With Your Life [You Are Raoul Moat]*. He is currently undertaking a PhD in Creative Writing at Northumbria University.

A creative non-fiction piece about the North East's enthusiasm for shopping and how the Metrocentre filled the transitional period for the region when heavy industry had gone, and the region was looking to new service and retail economies. The Metrocentre was the first UK shopping centre of its kind and heralded the start of new era which itself now appears to be coming to an end.

India Hunter

Growing up in a post-industrial town with a father in the steel industry has given India Hunter, a young writer from Teesside, a unique experience of the issues facing the North East today. She is particularly interested in the way that recent political events have shaped the mindsets of those living in areas that would be considered more 'economically deprived' and her writing aims to eradicate the negative stereotypes. India is a member of the Tees Women Poets.

India works weekends in a Chinese takeaway in Teesside and she will write a poem about a typical night at work and the people she meets there. The piece will attempt to address the lazy stereotype of working-class people. "We are not lazy, we are not charity cases, we are the same as everyone else, we just have to fight a bit harder to get where we want to be."

Richard T Kelly (@RichTKelly)

Richard is the author of the novels *Crusaders*, *The Possessions of Doctor Forrest* and *The Knives*. His fourth novel, *The Black Eden*, is forthcoming from Faber and Faber. His other publications include various non-fiction books and biographies, including *Alan Clarke*, *Sean Penn: His Life and Times* and *Keegan and Dalglish*. He has written for *Prospect* and the *New Statesman* among others and is a contributing editor to *Esquire* and *Critical Quarterly*.

In, A Wicked Issue – The case of Dominic Cummings, and who speaks for the North-East? Kelly will investigate how the Durham born Cummings shaped his unique philosophy and whether he is more on the side of the North East than we might think? More broadly the piece will explore where the 'Geordie voice' features in our national politics.

Carmen Marcus (@Kalamene)

Carmen's debut novel *How Saints Die* is a semi-autobiographical account of her life as a fisherman's daughter. Her poetry has been commissioned by national festivals and BBC radio. She designed The Writer's Plan in 2019 to support working-class writers entering the industry. Marcus is currently working on her second novel, *The Bait Boy*.

In a collection of micro-fictions, Finfolk, Marcus will tell mythic stories about the North, it's people and their relationship with the sea. The sea offers a powerful new narrative to explore as it occupies absences, roars over silences and remembers what was lost.

J. A. Mensah

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Juliana has written for theatre with a focus on human rights narratives and the testimonies of survivors. Her first novel won the inaugural NorthBound Book Award at the Northern Writers' Awards and will be published by Saraband. She lives in Newcastle upon Tyne.

On 31st January 2020, in a world similar to our own, the UK leaves the EU and Scotland leaves the UK. On this day, a forgotten area of land between England and Scotland, which was once fiercely contested, suddenly belongs to no one. Four disillusioned friends move to the area and decide to create their own country: a small and inclusive nation of diverse millennials. But how do you create a country? What traditions from their cultures should they incorporate? How do you write a constitution or establish a government? Should they practice democracy? Should they let old people in? How will they gain international recognition? And what if the neighbours hate them?

Alex Niven (@Alex_Niven)

Alex's writing has appeared in *The Guardian*, *New York Times*, *New Statesman*, *The Independent*, *VICE* and *Pitchfork*. His previous books include *Folk Opposition* (2011), *Definitely Maybe 33 1/3* (2014) and *New Model Island* (2019). He is currently Lecturer in English Literature at Newcastle University.

A creative non-fiction work that will examine the political and human aspects of travel and movement in the North East. The piece will examine the illustrious history of transport in our region from Stephenson's Rocket and T Dan Smith's metro and combine it with a contemporary political analysis and the writer's personal reflections of travelling in, around, away from and back to the North East over the last 35 years.

Bronwen Riley (@BronwenRiley)

Bronwen is a writer with a special interest in the Classical world and Romania. Her books include *Journey to Britannia* and *Transylvania*. Committed to the promotion of culture and research in and of the North, she is a trustee of the Lakeland Arts Trust and the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society.

Telling the love story of Barates and Regina in a work of creative non-fiction written in the continuous present, Riley will explore this disturbing love story between a Syrian and a slave from Southern Britain living on Hadrian's Wall in the classical era. A story about how the fate of the North East became so bound up with that of Caledonia and how our regional story is built on a long history of people of different races, religions and backgrounds.

Mim Skinner (@MimSkinner)

Mim is a writer and social entrepreneur and the founder of REfUSE, an award-winning social enterprise in Chester le Street which collects and redistributes food that would otherwise go to waste. Her book *Jailbirds*, about working in a women's prison, was published in 2019. It was serialised in *The Guardian* and has been optioned by BBC Studios. She has written for *The Sunday Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Huffington Post* and *Elle Magazine*. She featured on the 2019 Elle List of '50 Game Changers' for her campaigning work and writing.

Taking as her starting point the stories of the community of the REfUSE café in Chester le Street, Skinner will look to tell a story of how North East communities come together in

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response to challenges and express unity in the face of adversity. Can such alternative non cash-reliant models which accept multiple forms of payment and that recognise value in a tangible way be part of our future narrative? Can kindness?

Melissa Tutesigensi

Melissa is a journalist, writing and broadcasting across multiple platforms. Her love for storytelling grew during her time at Durham University where she studied Philosophy and Theology. She believes in the nuance of British identity to celebrate narratives that strengthen our cultural memory.

In, A Tale of Two Cities, Tutesigensi charts her time in Durham as a student and explores the dualistic experience of the city and the multi-layered textures of identity that exist there. The city is both a bastion of the elite and a working-class cultural touchstone. It is also a place where people of colour, the migrant population and resident artists testify to a narrative beyond this.