

DURHAM BOOK FESTIVAL

Press release 

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Durham Book Festival returns to live events with an international programme and a warm welcome

The annual literary festival returns this October with an exciting blend of live and digital events, including headline guests Lemn Sissay, Richard Osman, Pat Barker, Val McDermid, Leïla Slimani, Fiona Hill, Ed Balls and the announcement of the Gordon Burn Prize

The programme has been announced for Durham Book Festival 2021, marking a return to live events for the North East's largest literary festival, which was fully digital in 2020. Tickets are now available at durhambookfestival.com.

Between 9 and 17 October 2021, writers, artists and thinkers from across the world will take part in more than 60 events, either in person at the Gala Theatre or online.

Durham Book Festival is commissioned by Durham County Council and produced by New Writing North, with funding from major partner Durham University and Arts Council England and support from BBC Radio Newcastle.

The festival was founded in 1990 and is one of country's oldest literary festivals. This year, it is one of the first nationally to announce a return to live events. Audiences will find the festival's usual convivial atmosphere, which brings people together through new ideas and conversation, alongside a range of safety measures to keep everyone comfortable.

A weekend of live events at the Gala Theatre will be complemented by a complete digital programme. Audiences will be able to engage with the festival in a range of ways, from watching author talks and films, listening to podcasts and walking tours, and reading essays.

Durham Book Festival aims to be fully accessible to every audience member. There will be Stagertext captioning of events in the theatre and all digital content will be either captioned (video) or transcribed (audio).

DIGITAL WEEKEND

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The 2021 festival kicks off with a digital weekend on 9-10 October. Access to individual events costs just £5 per household, while a festival pass to access more than 20 events is only £20. No need to travel – watch and join in the online chat from wherever in the world you are! Events will be available to watch back until 31 October 2021.

Highlights of the Digital Weekend include:

Richard Osman, who returns to Durham Book Festival following his 2020 appearance to talk about the sequel to his record-breaking debut *The Thursday Murder Club*. In this special event, Richard will introduce us to his new book *The Man Who Died Twice* as well as reflecting on some of the books that have meant the most to him throughout his life.

Durham's own Booker Prize-winning author **Pat Barker**, who joins the festival to talk about her new novel *The Women of Troy*. Recorded in the historic Bishop Cosin's Library in Durham, Pat will be talking about her acclaimed career and her latest take on classical history.

Francis Spufford and **Sarah Winman** will introduce their new, widely acclaimed novels, both set against the background of the Second World War. **Nickolas Butler** and **Willy Vlautin** also offer exciting new fiction, their novels *Godspeed* and *The Night Always Comes*, which both reflect on American society with empathy and grit.

Writers **Anita Sethi** and **Musa Okwonga** will discuss their memoirs, both powerful reflections on identity and society. In *I Belong Here*, Anita's journey through the natural landscapes of the North is one of reclamation following a racial hate crime, while Musa Okwonga looks back on his experience as a young Black man at Eton in *One of Them*, an exploration of race and class in modern Britain.

Disability activist and author, **Lisette Auton** will chair a fascinating discussion between writer **Joanne Limburg**, whose new book is *Letters To My Weird Sisters: On Autism and Feminism*, and poet **Jen Hadfield** whose powerful collection *The Stone Age* explores how she views the world through a neurodivergent lens.

Dr. Fiona Hill grew up in a working-class mining community in Bishop Auckland before moving to the United States, working as deputy assistant to the President of the United States and as a senior director on the National Security Council. Her testimony during Trump's impeachment hearings made international news. *There is Nothing for You Here: Finding Opportunity in the 21st Century* draws on her personal

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experiences and explains the long historical trends behind our polarised society. She'll be in conversation with journalist **Anne McElvoy**, who also grew up in County Durham.

This year's Festival Laureate, supported by Durham University, is **Fiona Benson**. Fiona will read from her work, including a new sequence of poems inspired by the history of witchcraft in Durham, which was written as part of her laureateship and is inspired by her archival research in Palace Green Library.

There will be more poetry in an event produced with the Poetry Book Society, featuring **Kazim Ali**, **Hannah Lowe** and **Nidhi Zak/Aria Eipe**.

This spring, Durham Book Festival invited contributions from the public to create a collective audio poem about climate change and what kind of world we would like to wake up to. The resulting sound piece, 'Dawn Chorus', has been created by poet **Linda France** and sound artist **Christo Wallers**, to be premiered as part of the festival.

Other digital event highlights include the chance to peer **Inside the Archives** at Palace Green Library; **Catherine Cho**, **Georgina Lawton** and **Hadley Freeman** talking about life writing, drawing from their own recent works of non-fiction; and **Tawseef Khan** who will curate a round table discussion with thinkers and writers, inspired by his vital new book *The Muslim Problem*.

LIVE AT GALA THEATRE

The festival returns to its home at Durham's Gala Theatre from Thursday 14 – Sunday 17 October. Audiences are warmly welcomed back to the theatre, while those who prefer to live-stream events from home can also do so.

Theatre events begin on Thursday 14 October with The Announcement of the Gordon Burn Prize 2021, which celebrates the year's boldest works of fiction and non-fiction. Over the evening, each author will introduce and read from their shortlisted book, before the winner is awarded £5000. The Gordon Burn Prize 2021 shortlist is:

Come Join Our Disease, Sam Byers
A Ghost in the Throat, Doireann Ní Ghríofa
A Little Devil in America, Hanif Abdurraqib

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Luckenbooth, Jenni Fagan
Mrs Death Misses Death, Salena Godden
Sea State, Tabitha Lasley

Other highlights of the Gala Theatre programme include:

Denise Mina and **Lucy Jago** (Friday 15 October), whose new novels tell the stories of transgressive women in history and the secrets and scandals of the royal courts. In *Rizzio*, Denise Mina retells the murder of David Rizzio, secretary to Mary, Queen of Scots, as she explores the lengths that men and women will go to in the search for love and power. Based on the true scandal that rocked the court of James I, Lucy Jago's *A Net for Small Fishes* is an exhilarating dive into the pitch-dark waters of the Jacobean court.

Ed Balls, who will be talking about his new book *Appetite*. Part autobiography, part cookbook, *Appetite* takes us from his family kitchen to the inner workings of Westminster in a celebration of love, family, and really good food.

Lemn Sissay (Saturday 16 October) will discuss his memoir, *My Name is Why* with writer Kit de Waal. The event will explore Lemn's powerful story of his quest for identity and belonging, having grown up in the care system, and celebrate the voice of the boy who grew up to become one of our most celebrated poets, the Chancellor of Manchester University and the recipient of an OBE in 2021. *My Name is Why* is the Durham Book Festival Big Read 2021 and 3000 copies of the book will be distributed throughout the county.

Val McDermid (Saturday 16 October), who will introduce her heart-pounding new novel, *1979*, which begins the first new series from the author in almost 20 years. Set in Glasgow and following crime reporter Allie Burns, *1979* draws upon McDermid's own experiences as a journalist, where she witnessed life in the newsroom at first-hand.

Festival favourite author of the widely acclaimed memoir *Hinterland*, **Chris Mullin**, will also return to Durham to explore the rise of English nationalism.

COMMISSIONS, PODCASTS AND PROVOCATIONS

Throughout the festival, provocations will be brought to audiences in the form of short videos, which encourage us to engage, take note and share our ideas.

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Academics from Durham University will each be given 10 minutes to persuade audiences of their big idea. From **Simon L James'** proposition of an approach to nature conservation that is at once less human-centred and more humane, to **Mariann Hardy** on the rhetoric of women's leadership books, these short films are sure to get audiences thinking and talking.

Another series of ten-minute talks by disabled artists at the forefront of thinking and writing has been curated by **Vici Wreford-Sinnott**. **Dolly Sen**, **Cheryl Martin**, **Jamie Hale**, **Steph Robson** and **Sophie Woolley** will each explore **Disability and the Politics of Visibility**, with a different piece released online between Monday 11 and Friday 15 October at 5pm each day.

There will also be new commissions by **Jodie Russian-Red**, whose film **Growing Home** is inspired by community gardens in County Durham, and **Louise Powell**, whose **Counter Culture** is a celebration of working-class people, places and voices, featuring Paul Allen, Astra Bloom, Jenny Knight, Katy Massey, Julie Noble, Lynne Voyce and Shaun Wilson.

Unique **guided walks**, written and presented by Ruth Robson, offer new perspectives on Durham's history and culture. Discover Durham City's literary history; delve into its criminal past; or take a self-guided walk on Durham's Heritage Coast, exploring issues of climate change through the written word.

Having trouble drifting off? Durham Book Festival has commissioned **Salena Godden**, **Jenn Ashworth** and **Andrew McMillan** to each write and record an exclusive short story inspired by the theme of sleep for a new podcast series **Sleep Stories**, created with the expertise of researchers at the Northumbria Centre for Sleep Research.

SCHOOLS PROGRAMME

Durham Book Festival for schools will take place online in 2021, offering opportunities for live engagement with authors via Zoom. There are events for students at all stages of the curriculum with authors **Elle McNicoll**, whose latest novel *Show us Who you Are* explores friendship and Neurodivergent characters; picture book maker **Richard O'Neill**; and inspirational activist **Amika George**.

The Little Read project brings picture books to life for the under 8s. 2000 copies of *Look Up!* by **Nathan Byron** and **Dapo Adeola** – a beautiful picture book that

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inspires us to look up at the stars – will be distributed across County Durham, including to every primary school and nursery setting.

A free video of Nathan and Dapo exploring their story will be able to watch on the durhambookfestival.com website throughout October.

Cllr Amanda Hoggood, Leader of Durham County Council, said: “We are very much looking forward to the return of Durham Book Festival and are delighted to welcome some of the world’s best writers to County Durham. Over the past 18 months, books have provided entertainment, escapism and a huge source of comfort for so many people and I know that this page-turning programme of events will continue to bring joy to visitors.

“With events taking place in person and online, we hope to attract avid readers from both County Durham and beyond, and, hopefully inspire new readers and writers too. However, the festival not only promotes a love of reading. It also helps to put County Durham on the map as a cultural destination as we bid to become UK City of Culture 2025. We look forward welcoming new and returning visitors and hope the weekend encourages even more people to visit all year round.”

Claire Malcolm, Chief Executive of New Writing North, said: “It’s great to be back and to be connecting our audiences again, both in person and online. This year’s varied programme offers all the joys of reading for pleasure, as well as the chance to reflect on our changing society. Literature is a powerful tool for opening up the world to us. It allows us to experience life from different perspectives and to reflect on our own realities; to discover new ideas and address old prejudices; to feel comforted, delighted and inspired. And, of course, to travel infinitely without leaving home. After the year that we’ve had, have books ever felt so essential?”

Professor Simon James, Durham University, said: “As a global top 100 university with a world-leading Arts and Humanities Faculty, Durham University believes in the power of literature to inspire, to challenge, and to make change. We are very excited to once again be sponsoring the Durham Book Festival. We look forward to hosting, supporting and contributing to another successful edition of the Durham Book Festival, which is another example of the outstanding culture and creativity that makes Durham a superb candidate to be UK City of Culture 2025.”

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[High res images relating to festival highlights can be found via this link](#)

For all media enquiries, including interview requests and any other images, please contact Laura Fraine laurafraine@newwritingnorth.com 07411 164 837.

NOTES TO EDITORS

Durham Book Festival is a Durham County Council festival produced by New Writing North, which is made possible by support from partners Durham University, Arts Council England and BBC Radio Newcastle.

Tickets for Durham Book Festival 2021 will be available to book online at www.durhambookfestival.com or at the Gala Theatre (tel 03000 266 600) from 7am on Thursday 19 August 2021.

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