



28 September 2021
For immediate release

Book-gifting campaign gets County Durham reading

County Durham will be transformed into a giant book club this October as 5000 free books are gifted to residents as part of Durham Book Festival.

The festival, which is commissioned by Durham County Council and produced by New Writing North with major support from Durham University and Arts Council England, stages both live and online events featuring internationally acclaimed authors.

All festival events, both live and online, are captioned, making Durham Book Festival accessible to a wide audience. Just as important as the events, is the festival's outreach programme, which engages people right across the county to take part in reading activities.

This inclusive approach is also key to the Durham 2025 campaign, which aims to secure the title of UK City of Culture 2025 for the entire county, creating even more opportunities for people to experience the many benefits of engaging in arts and culture.

The Big Read is a long-running campaign at the heart of Durham Book Festival, celebrating the joy of reading and the power of books to help us connect and make sense of the world. This year's Big Read title is Lemn Sissay's memoir, *My Name Is Why*.

At the age of seventeen, after a childhood in a foster family, followed by six years in care homes, Norman Greenwood was given his birth certificate. He learned that his real name was not Norman. It was Lemn Sissay. He was British and Ethiopian and he learned that his mother had been pleading for his safe return to her since his birth.

The Big Read campaign brings Lemn Sissay's powerful story of his quest for identity and belonging to a wider audience; shines a light on his lived experience of the care system and the discrimination he experienced as a Black child growing up in a small post-industrial Northern town; and celebrates the voice of the boy who grew up

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to become one of our most admired poets, the Chancellor of Manchester University and the recipient of an OBE in 2021.

3000 copies of *My Name Is Why* are being gifted by Durham Book Festival. They can now be picked up in libraries throughout County Durham and are also being distributed through community centres, Durham University and the prison service.

Lemn Sissay will be taking part in a special event at Gala Theatre on Saturday 16 October, talking to writer Kit de Waal about his life and career.

Lemn Sissay said: "It is a privilege to share *My Name Is Why* with 3000 readers across County Durham through Durham Book Festival's Big Read. It can be difficult sharing our stories, but the act of reading and writing can help us to connect to one another and to better understand ourselves. Perhaps reading my story will help others to feel less alone and ultimately more hopeful about the future."

The Little Read is a sister-campaign to the Big Read, launched by Durham Book Festival in 2018 to inspire the county's youngest readers. This year, 2000 copies of the picture book *Look Up!* by Nathan Bryon and Dapo Adeola will be gifted to every primary school and nursery in the county.

Look Up! is a heart-warming picture book about space and the wonder of the natural world. Rocket's going to be the greatest astronaut, star-catcher, space-traveller that has ever lived! But... first, she needs to convince her big brother Jamal to stop looking down at his phone and start *looking up* at the stars. This beautifully illustrated story, which won the Waterstones Children's Book Prize 2020, will inspire children to turn off those screens and enjoy the outside world.

As well as the free books, teachers and parents can find a host of free workshops and resources created by Education Durham and Durham University on the Durham Book Festival website, and from 9-31 October watch a live-drawing session with illustrator Dapo Adeola.

Cllr Elizabeth Scott, Durham County Council's Cabinet member for economy and partnerships, said: "The Big and Little Read epitomise what Durham Book Festival is all about – nurturing a passion for reading and writing within people of all ages.

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“This year’s titles are not only entertaining, but they explore important issues including identity, diversity and the joy that can be found when you immerse yourself in the world around you.

“Our vision is for County Durham to be a place where everyone feels included, valued and able to express their creativity. If County Durham’s bid to be UK City of Culture 2025 is successful, we will be able to build on this work and create more exciting opportunities for our communities to engage in arts and culture.”

Claire Malcolm, Chief Executive of New Writing North, said: “This year’s Big and Little Reads are wonderful books and we hope people across the county will pick up a copy, get reading, and join in our activities and events this October.

Durham Book Festival is proud to support the county’s bid for UK City of Culture 2025. Through the Big and Little Read, we aim to ensure our cultural offer reaches every corner of this large and diverse county. We know that projects like this really do make a difference, especially to those who feel isolated or disconnected from their communities. Art has a unique power to enable us to connect and to feel part of something bigger. But we can always do so much more, and UK City of Culture 2025 would make this possible.”

Durham County Council, with support from principal partner Durham University, submitted the initial bid for UK City of Culture on behalf of Culture Durham, a partnership of arts and culture organisations from across the region.

Durham’s bid is for both the county and the city. To find out more and to leave messages of support, visit www.durham2025.co.uk and follow @Durham2025 on Facebook, @Durham_2025 on Twitter and @Durham2025_ on Instagram.

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