

A WRITING CHANCE

Press release: Embargoed until 9pm, 30 March

A Writing Chance: Michael Sheen makes case for improved pathways for underrepresented writers in Parliament

Actor Michael Sheen appeared at the House of Commons today alongside writers who took part in A Writing Chance, an ambitious new cross-sector collaboration to tackle the pervasive challenge of access and opportunity in the creative industries.

Together with A Writing Chance partners the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, New Writing North, Northumbria University, Daily Mirror and New Statesman, they made the case to MPs and cultural sector leaders that better interventions are required to ensure talented writers from across society can thrive in the UK's writing industries.

A round-table discussion with the All Party Writers Group (APWG), chaired by Lady Jane Bonham Carter, took place in the House of Lords. This was followed by a celebratory reception introduced by Giles Watling MP, hosted by the group's secretariat, Authors' Licensing and Collection Society (ALCS). Michael Sheen, who instigated, led and part-funded A Writing Chance, introduced the writers in an event hosted by poet and broadcaster Andrew McMillan. Each of the 11 new writers read from their work and discussed their journeys into writing.

The House of Commons event marks the culmination of the first year of the A Writing Chance project, which launched in February 2021 and supported writers from underrepresented groups across the UK to develop their work, networks and publication opportunities through mentoring, industry introduction and engagement. As part of the project, writers had the opportunity to write for the Daily Mirror and New Statesman, including appearing in the 25 March issue of New Statesman, 'A Dream of Britain', guest edited by Michael Sheen.

A Writing Chance is underpinned by academic research, led by Professor Katy Shaw of Northumbria University, which looks to understand the barriers that writers face and to investigate the structural changes that would enable fair access to careers in the writing industries.

The final report is due in Summer 2022 and today Professor Shaw presented interim findings, which showed that while demand for better inclusivity and representation within the UK writing industries has continued to grow, barriers to participation prevail and are often not fully understood by those who seek to address them. Shaw

A WRITING CHANCE

finds that access to opportunities remains inequitable and that a fair chance to pursue a career in the writing industries is unavailable to the majority. This is compounded by writers' earnings decreasing and career sustainability proving more difficult.

Professor Katy Shaw, Director of Cultural Partnerships at Northumbria University said: "A Writing Chance proves that cross-sector partnership working can create innovative and vital solutions to the challenges of EDI and access facing our creative industries today. Michael and I conceived of A Writing Chance from our living rooms on Zoom, locked down in March 2020. By bringing together a diverse group of philanthropic, university, charitable, third and private sector partners, the programme evidences how collaboration is key to creating meaningful change, and why full representation is so important both for public faith in, and the economic future of, our media industry in the UK. As researcher in residence for the programme, it has been astonishing to witness its impact and reach."

Michael Sheen, Co-Founder and Funder, A Writing Chance, said: "A conversation that only has the same voices being heard over and over again is a dead conversation. Nothing truly new or vital can ever come from it. There is a mighty energy waiting among the unheard and on the margins and this is where the hope of renewal and the dynamic of possibility should be sought. My hopes for AWC have been more than surpassed by this first group of extraordinary and incredibly diverse writers. They are creating a doorway that I sincerely hope thousands upon thousands of others will now be able to follow them through. The tools are here so let's now do all we can to make sure they get used to build something of real lasting value. Something that will truly benefit us all."

Claire Malcolm, Chief Executive of writing development agency New Writing North, which designed and led the programme said: "There is such power in the partnership that came together to make this project happen. Across the network the professionals involved have been astonished that the writers we selected were struggling to make progress with their work, which they felt was of a very high quality. I think this demonstrates that the barriers for many writers remain real and that they are both structural and psychological. The unique mix of partners collaborating in this venture has been unusual but also made this a high profile and impactful project that has now reached so many people. As we plot the future of the next A Writing Chance, I'm calling on funders, industry and media partners to play their part and help us launch a new generation of writers from across the UK. The talent is out there, the networks to enable it aren't yet."

A WRITING CHANCE

Husna Mortuza, Associate Director at the Joseph Rowntree Foundation said:

“Who gets to tell their story, and how they get to tell it, is incredibly meaningful. This narrative power shapes our sense of self, our confidence, our identity. In showcasing incredibly talented writers from across the UK who are finally getting their voices heard, A Writing Chance demonstrates not just how we can do more to break down barriers, but why we should.

“We are incredibly proud to support an initiative like this, built on a unique partnership working across different sectors. It exemplifies how change is possible when partners are creative, collaborative, and generous with their time, networks, and expertise.”

Notes to Editors

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About A Writing Chance

A Writing Chance launched in February 2021 as a fresh talent development programme open to aspiring writers from working class and wider under-represented backgrounds. The programme aimed to offer a positive intervention and to enable new writers to break into the creative industries.

This UK-wide project is co-funded by Michael Sheen and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and supported by media partners New Statesman and Daily Mirror. The project is delivered by New Writing North and literature organisations nationally, with research from Northumbria University.

The writers who participated in the first year of A Writing Chance are:



A WRITING CHANCE

- Mayo Agard-Olubo, based in London
- Tammie Ash, based in Bradford
- David Clancy, based in Ulverston
- Jacqueline Houston, based in Glasgow
- Maya Jordan, based in Newtown
- Anna Maxwell, based in Lancaster
- Tom Newlands, based in London
- Grace Quantock, based in Pontypool
- Elias Suhail, based in Folkestone
- Stephen Tuffin, based in Swindon
- Becka White, based in London

Who gets to write for the media we all read?

47% of writers are from the most privileged social starting points, contrasting with only 10% from working-class backgrounds (ONS, 2014)

Newspaper columnists, who significantly shape the national conversation, drawn from a particularly small pool, with 44% attending independent schools, compared with 7% of the population and 33% coming through the independent schools Oxbridge 'pipeline' alone, compared with less than the 1% of the population (Sutton Trust, 2019)

Just 0.2% of British journalists are Black, compared to 3% of the population and 0.4% of British journalists are Muslim, compared to nearly 5% of the population (City University, 2016).