



Press release: for release Thursday 20 April 2023

## We can change who gets to write: here's how

The publishing and media industries, supported by public funders and the third sector, can and should do more to support writers from working class and underrepresented backgrounds.

The [A Writing Chance report](#), written by Professor Katy Shaw of Northumbria University and published by New Writing North, will be launched today (Thursday 20 April) at London Book Fair. The report addresses the challenge of access and opportunity in industries that set the tone of our national conversation through books and media, and which remain stubbornly over-representative of a narrow, privileged cross-section of society.

Professor Shaw was an embedded researcher on the first year of A Writing Chance, a talent development programme co-funded by the actor Michael Sheen and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and produced by New Writing North with support from the *New Statesman*, *Daily Mirror*, Northumbria University and literature organisations nationally. The programme aimed to identify effective ways to support new writers from working class and underrepresented backgrounds into journalism and writing careers.

Today, Shaw publishes her findings on the programme, analysing data of more than 700 new writers who applied to be part of A Writing Chance and the experiences of the eleven successful applicants who were selected to take part. The report identifies common barriers to success for these writers and recommends a range of measures that can be adopted across the writing industries to overcome such barriers.

### Background to the A Writing Chance report

A Writing Chance launched in February 2021 as a new kind of talent development programme, delivered by a cross-sector group of partners and open to aspiring writers from working class and underrepresented backgrounds. The programme aimed to offer a positive intervention and to enable new writers to break into the creative industries.

It was open to writers across the UK and received 744 entries, of which 30 shortlisted entrants were paid to write a second piece of work. Eleven writers were selected to take part in the full programme, receiving a bursary of £2000 to support their participation.

Over 9 months, each writer worked closely with an industry-based mentor; had the opportunity to write for the *New Statesman* and the *Daily Mirror*; had their work broadcast on *BBC Sounds*; developed longer work for submission to other outlets,

Supported by

**JRF**  
JOSEPH  
ROWNTREE  
FOUNDATION

**DAILY**  
**Mirror** **NewStatesman**

**NEW WRITING**  
**NORTH**

 **Northumbria**  
University  
NEWCASTLE

# A WRITING CHANCE

including literary agents, prizes and publishers; and attended a series of webinars, masterclasses and networking events.

The outcomes of the project were remarkable, including three participants signing with a literary agent; one participant achieving a two-book deal following a three-way auction; three participants winning or shortlisted for awards; four participants receiving paid commissions from national publications; and three participants receiving further funding to develop writing projects.

## Five key barriers to entering writing and journalism careers, identified by 744 applicants to A Writing Chance:

- **Knowledge and permission to access the industry**  
“I don’t know where you get in, or how you get in, or once you get in what’s on the other side of the in. If there is a door to go through, I don’t know where the door is, or how to get to it, and if I do find it, I haven’t got a key.” A Writing Chance entrant
- **Lack of networks**  
“I feel like journalism is an exclusive club that I don’t meet the criteria for – I don’t know the right people or have the best connections, I haven’t been to the ‘right’ school. Even the people who write for the more left-leaning publications seem to be Oxbridge educated – a lot of them anyway.” A Writing Chance entrant
- **Geographical access**  
“Being from a lower-income background means that it’s difficult to take risks. Attending expensive courses or going on work experience is out of my reach. I’m from a town that’s hours away from any city with opportunities [...it’s] five hours away from London. The writing jobs I’ve seen seem precarious, and being from a lower-income background means that taking a three-month contract in London just to find nothing to follow it up would put me in a financial hole.” A Writing Chance entrant
- **Money, taking risks, and the precarity of writing**  
“My mentor from the New Statesman has explained not only ‘how it works’ but also about the dynamics, contracts and salaries. This is not a sustainable career for emerging working-class people, especially those with families, dependents, or caring responsibilities.” Becka White, A Writing Chance participant
- **Lack of confidence**  
“I’ve thought long and hard about my lack of confidence and the fact imposter

# A WRITING CHANCE

syndrome clings to me like a bloody limpet to a rock. Trying to take a positive from it, I think it might be that imposter syndrome plays a significant part in what it is that motivates me. The constant desire to be better.” Stephen Tuffin, A Writing Chance participant

- Other barriers identified by writers included home and family life, age, health and disability, intersectionality and the impact of the pandemic.

## Five key recommendations from Professor Katy Shaw’s A Writing Chance report:

- **Metrics**

*While social class remains excluded from the list of protected characteristics in the 2010 Equalities Act, the lack of class diversity in the creative industries remains a pervasive issue. We recommend that organisations adopt a metric to identify the class background of employees and potential employees in workforce and recruitment data.*

- **Mentoring**

*Professional networks need to be more easily available to those who don’t come from privileged backgrounds. Mentoring can play a part in helping to address this. Publishers and media groups should make mentoring opportunities available to a targeted number of people from working-class backgrounds each year.*

- **Network**

*Working-class writers would benefit from an identifiable network which would support them with information, highlight opportunities, and build confidence. The network should be supported by a comprehensive website for information, advice, job adverts, commissions, development opportunities and free digital events.*

- **Opportunity**

*A publication track record is key to getting a foot in the door and gaining the confidence of future commissioners. A structured system of guaranteed publication opportunities should be available for working-class writers, for example through future schemes such A Writing Chance, or individual organisations.*

- **Collaboration**

*Many individual organisations have time-limited schemes to address the lack of diversity in their organisations, not all of which result in jobs or publication.*

Supported by

**JRF**  
JOSEPH  
ROUNTREE  
FOUNDATION

**DAILY**  
**Mirror** **NewStatesman**

**NEW WRITING**  
**NORTH**

 **Northumbria**  
University  
NEWCASTLE

# A WRITING CHANCE

*The cross-sectoral approach of A Writing Chance has the potential to address systemic change and we recommend that this approach is further explored. A Challenge Fund created by a major funder could match fund projects, thus leveraging in a range of resources, expertise, and publication and production opportunities.*

- Read the recommendations in full [here](#)

**Professor Katy Shaw, Director of AHRC Creative Communities and Professor of Contemporary Writing at Northumbria University, said:** “Writing and publishing are the core supply line to the UK creative industries. From the page and the stage to the silver and small screen, writing defines us and what we can be. But we can't capture our national story if we only listen to some of the voices. Everyone benefits - culturally, socially and economically - when our writing and publishing industries are defined by a commitment to inclusivity, access and representation.

“This programme evaluation demonstrates the impact, reach and culture change that can be achieved through targeted interventions co-created and delivered in partnership by cross-sector groups to addressed as shared challenge. I look forward to building on the learning in this report as we gear up for phase two with the shared ambition of making writing a career and an industry that is by all and for all going forwards.”

**Michael Sheen said:** “This groundbreaking report is a witness to what has been achieved through the A Writing Chance project so far and points the way to what can and must happen in the future. It is imperative for the cultural health of our whole society that no community be shut out of our national conversation. For this to remain the reality, (and, as described by the experiences of those represented in this report, it most certainly is), diminishes us all. We must fight tooth and nail to create and defend pathways for those who are denied the opportunity to tell their stories and have their voices heard.

“I have watched as my own pathway has disappeared behind me and it is this sad truth, and the knowledge that when it did exist there were so many who didn't even have access to that, that makes me feel the urgency to push for change. The great strides that happened in the middle of last century to bring the voices of those who had for too long been unrepresented onto the British cultural stage cannot be taken for granted. We can ill afford to allow ourselves to slide back into that one-sided, myopic view of who we are as a nation. This report, and the implementation of its recommendations, are a critical step towards ensuring that we do not.”

**Husna Mortuza, Associate Director for Public Engagement, Joseph Rowntree Foundation said:** “A Writing Chance shows what can happen when publishers, editors, funders and the third sector come together to support writers from working class and underrepresented backgrounds to tell their stories. Stories of frustration,

Supported by

**JRF** JOSEPH  
ROWNTREE  
FOUNDATION

DAILY  
**Mirror** **NewStatesman**

NEW WRITING  
NORTH

 Northumbria  
University  
NEWCASTLE

# A WRITING CHANCE

hope, despair and joy that would rarely be told first-hand in the news, on our TV screens or in our theatres across the UK were brought to light.

“We must build on what we’ve learnt from A Writing Chance; writers who have traditionally been excluded from sharing their work can thrive when supported. Committed organisations from different and varied sectors really can work together to push for more diverse and talented media and creative industries and for stories that we all want and need to see.”

**Claire Malcolm, Chief Executive of New Writing North, said:** “We’re excited to build on what has been achieved and will be launching a new scaled up iteration of the programme later this year. New and existing partners will join together to support a bigger cohort of writers to break into the industry, as we continue to support new writers and advocate and influence for a fairer chance for all writers to flourish.”

**Alison Phillips, Daily Mirror Editor, said:** “It was a pleasure to support this programme and to highlight writers from working class and underrepresented backgrounds. More voices from people with different experiences can only benefit the media and the country as a whole.”

**Anna Leszkiewicz, Associate Editor, Culture and Interviews, at the New Statesman said:** “We were delighted to publish the eleven brilliant writers supported by the first year of the A Writing Chance scheme in the *New Statesman* – many of whom felt shut out by an industry that desperately needs their unique voices, perspectives and talent. Clearly, the barriers to entering the journalism and writing professions are great and deeply entrenched – which is why schemes such as this are essential.”

**ENDS**

**For all media enquiries, contact Laura Fraine at New Writing North**  
[laurafraine@newwritingnorth.com](mailto:laurafraine@newwritingnorth.com) 07840 254153

## **Notes to editors**

The full report is available to download at [awritingchance.co.uk](http://awritingchance.co.uk)

A Writing Chance is co-funded by Michael Sheen and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation with support from the Daily Mirror and New Statesman.

The programme is produced by New Writing North with research from Northumbria University.

**Who gets to write for the media we all read?**

Supported by

**JRF** JOSEPH  
ROWNTREE  
FOUNDATION

**DAILY**  
**Mirror** **NewStatesman**

**NEW WRITING  
NORTH**

 **Northumbria  
University**  
NEWCASTLE

# A WRITING CHANCE

- 47% of authors and writers are from the most privileged social starting points, contrasting with only 10% from working-class backgrounds. (Office for National Statistics' Labour Force Survey, 2014)
- 12.6% of those working in publishing come from working-class social origins, compared with a third of the population. (Cultural Capital: Arts Graduates, Spatial Inequality, and London's Impact on Cultural Labour Markets, 2017)
- Newspaper columnists, who significantly shape the national conversation, are drawn from a particularly small pool, with 44% attending independent school, compared to 7% of the population; and 33% coming through the independent school to Oxbridge 'pipeline' alone, compared to less than 1% of the population. (Sutton Trust, Elitist Britain, 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)
- The Diversity, Inclusion and Belonging report (Publishers Association, 2020) found that the representation of BAME groups has not changed from 13% in 2017. Even within London, where opportunities are concentrated, only 2% of people in publishing industries identified as Black/Black British, compared to 13% of the London population identify as Black/Black British.
- In 2021, a UK Publishing Workforce survey by the Publishers Association found that more than three-quarters (80%) of respondents were living in South East England. This was significantly higher than the proportion of respondents that grew up in those areas (40%). Outside of London, 7% of respondents were living in the East of England and 5% in the South West of England. All other regions and nations put together were home to 8% or fewer of respondents. The centre of gravity for publishing remains London-centric.
- The representation of people with a disability in the UK Publishing Workforce has increased over the years from 2% in 2017 to 8% in 2020, to 13% in 2021. (Publishers Association, 2021)
- Socio-economic background continues to present major barriers to inclusion, with around two-thirds (67%) of the UK Publishing Workforce of respondents being from professional backgrounds. (Publishers Association, 2021)
- 19% of the UK Publishing Workforce were privately educated compared to 7% of the population, and those educated to a degree level (83% compared to

# A WRITING CHANCE

26% of the general population) continue to be overrepresented in the workforce in relation to the population. (Publishers Association, 2021)

- The National Union of Journalists states “disabled members in the media industry are overwhelmingly concentrated in the lowest-paying, low-status or freelance jobs. This makes it particularly difficult for them to get time off to attend meetings or to afford the related costs that disability can bring”. (2016)

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

- 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

## **Project partners:**

### **Daily Mirror**

Since 1903 the Mirror has informed millions of readers, combining entertainment with must-read political news. Politically the Mirror sits left of centre, and has backed the Labour Party in every election since 1945.

The Mirror has a long history as a campaigning newspaper - following the sinking of the Titanic it led the charge calling for more lifeboats on ships. More recently, the Mirror has focused on child poverty, climate change, homelessness, and successfully campaigned to change the law on organ donation (Max and Keira’s Law).

The Mirror also launched the Pride of Britain awards 20 years ago, celebrating ordinary people who have achieved extraordinary things. For more info visit [Mirror.co.uk](http://Mirror.co.uk).

### **Joseph Rowntree Foundation**

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation is an independent social change organisation working to solve UK poverty. We work with private, public and voluntary sectors, and people with lived experience of poverty, to find solutions to end the injustice of poverty. For more information visit [jrf.org.uk](http://jrf.org.uk).

Supported by

**JRF**  
JOSEPH  
ROWNTREE  
FOUNDATION

**DAILY**  
**Mirror** **NewStatesman**

**NEW WRITING**  
**NORTH**

 **Northumbria**  
University  
NEWCASTLE

# A WRITING CHANCE

## **New Statesman**

The New Statesman is an award-winning weekly politics and culture magazine. Founded in 1913, the print magazine has subsequently been joined by a thriving website and other digital platforms.

Past contributors to the New Statesman include H G Wells, John Maynard Keynes, Virginia Woolf, Christopher Hitchens and Arundhati Roy – and today writers such as Stephen Bush, John Gray, Megan Nolan, Gary Younge, Rowan Williams and Deborah Levy fulfil its promise of “enlightened thinking in dark times”. The magazine has been guest-edited by Ai Wei Wei, Grayson Perry, Jemima Khan and Neil Gaiman and Amanda Palmer, among others.

In 2021, the NS won two prestigious British Society of Magazine Editors awards: the editor-in-chief Jason Cowley was named, for the fourth time, current affairs and politics editor of the year, and the 5 June 2020 issue, “We Can’t Breathe”, was named consumer cover of the year.

## **New Writing North**

New Writing North is the development agency for creative writing and reading in the North of England, and an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation. The organisation works in partnership with regional and national partners to produce a range of literary and performance activities including flagship projects such as the Northern Writers’ Awards, the Gordon Burn Prize, David Cohen Prize for Literature, Young Writers and Durham Book Festival. New Writing North specialises in developing and investing in writers of all ages and acts as a dynamic broker between writers, producers, publishers and broadcasters across the creative industries. Partners include BBC Radio 3, Channel 4 Drama, Faber & Faber, Sky Studios and higher education partners including Durham University, Northumbria University and University of York. As a producer of new work, New Writing North commissions a wide range of writing from topical essays and publications to award-winning dance theatre productions, short films, live literature and broadcast projects.

[newwritingnorth.com](http://newwritingnorth.com)

## **Northumbria University - Times Higher Education’s University of the Year 2022**

Northumbria University, Newcastle is a research-intensive university that unlocks potential for all, changing lives regionally, nationally and internationally.

Find out more about us at [www.northumbria.ac.uk](http://www.northumbria.ac.uk)