

A WRITING CHANCE

Press release: for release 5 June 2024

A Writing Chance: 16 writers selected for Michael Sheen-backed programme

Sixteen writers have been selected for A Writing Chance 2024–25, the pioneering programme for change co-founded in 2021 by Michael Sheen, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, New Writing North and Northumbria University.

A Writing Chance supports writers from working-class and under-represented backgrounds and recognises that entry to the highly competitive writing industries continues to favour those from more privileged backgrounds.

By uniting partners across sectors, the programme is building a movement to challenge the status quo and allow all writers to fairly benefit from opportunities to progress that reflect their talent.

A Writing Chance 2024–25 is produced by New Writing North in partnership with Faber & Faber, the *Daily Mirror* and Substack, with funding from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, Mab Gwalia – Michael Sheen’s charitable fund – and Arts Council England, and with support from audio sponsor Audible. The programme is supported by research from Northumbria University and Bath Spa University, funded by AHRC.

The 16 chosen participant writers will each receive a £2,000 bursary supported by a grant from the Charlotte Aitken Trust.

The 16 writers began their year-long programme last week with a five-day residential writing retreat at Arvon’s writing house, The Hurst in Shropshire. Each writer has been paired with an industry mentor and one of four pastoral mentors – experienced writers Clare Shaw, Richard Benson, Lynsey Rogers and Katy Massey – whom they will meet regularly over the next 12 months.

They will also become part of a writers’ network; learn how the industry works at industry-insight sessions with Audible, Faber & Faber, the *Daily Mirror* and Substack; make contacts; and progress their work towards publication.

The writers are:



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A Writing Chance: *Daily Mirror* programme

- **Zainab Amer**, from Manchester (mentored by Brian Reade, *Daily Mirror* columnist and author)
- **Emma Astra**, from Leicester (mentored by Siobhan McNally, *Daily Mirror* columnist, writer and journalist)
- **Shivani Daxini**, from Leicester (mentored by Kevin Maguire, *Daily Mirror* associate editor)
- **Sunita Thind**, from Derby (mentored by Ros Wynne-Jones, *Daily Mirror* columnist)

A Writing Chance: Faber & Faber programme

- **Jade Cuttle**, from Womersley, North Yorkshire (mentored by Laura Hassan, associate publisher at Faber & Faber)
- **Karrish Devan**, from London (mentored by Jane Feather, editor at large, poetry at Faber & Faber)
- **Debora Maité**, from Glasgow (mentored by Hannah Knowles, publishing director at Faber & Faber)
- **Mie Murasa**, from Sheffield (mentored by Fiona Crosby, senior commissioning editor at Faber & Faber)
- **Nosa Novia**, from Torquay (mentored by Mo Hafeez, Commissioning Editor at Faber & Faber)
- **Janice Okoh**, from London (mentored by Sara Helen Binney, crime editor at Faber & Faber)
- **Micaela Ralph**, from London (mentored by Angus Cargill, publishing director at Faber & Faber)
- **Bonita Wileman**, from Cardiff (mentored by Aisling Brennan, fiction editor at Faber & Faber)

A Writing Chance: Substack programme

- **Damian Kerlin**, from Cardiff (mentored by Farrah Storr, head of writer partnerships UK and Europe at Substack)
- **Hattie Morrison**, from West Wales (mentored by Emma Rowley, UK partnerships associate at Substack)
- **Matt Taylor**, from Buxton (mentored by Jonn Elledge, author, *New Statesman* columnist and Substack writer)

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- **Sophie Wren**, from the North East (mentored by Claire Venus, Substack writer and creative engagement consultant).

Michael Sheen said: “A Writing Chance exists not only to enable talented writers to access opportunities that have for too long relied on connections, networks and a financial cushion, but also to find the voices and stories that have been missing from our national conversation. When we share those stories, we all benefit. The 16 writers selected for the programme all have something to say that we, as a society, need to hear. I can’t wait to read the work they produce.”

Claire Malcolm, chief executive of New Writing North, said: “I’m proud that this programme has brought together a wide range of partners and supporters to make all of this possible. We received more than 1,000 applications to be part of A Writing Chance 2024–25 and are thrilled to be working with the 16 selected writers, whose work is truly exciting and has much to add to our wider discourse. Later this year, we will launch new elements to the programme that will see us working in new ways across the industries to further champion new work and to open out a broader dialogue about class and writing.”

A Writing Chance 2024–25 follows the success of the 2021–22 programme, which supported 11 new writers, including Tom Newlands, whose novel *Only Here, Only Now* was published by Phoenix in April 2024; Mayo Agard-Olubo, who went on to win the Mo Siewcharran Prize 2023 for his unpublished children’s book, *Kid Rex vs the Dastardly Dust Bunnies*; and Maya Jordan, whose book *The Emergency Chicken & Other Stories* will be published by September Publishing in 2026.

The 2021–22 programme was underpinned by academic research led by Professor Katy Shaw at Northumbria University, which became the subject of discussion at writing conferences, TED Talks, the London Book Fair and the House of Commons.

The research found that London-centric industries, low-paid internships and starting salaries, the casualisation of work and a reliance on informal networks and personal contacts all made launching and sustaining a writing career disproportionately difficult for people from working-class and lower-income backgrounds.

In addition, people from these backgrounds often face intersecting challenges due to historic under-representation in publishing and the media, including but not limited to ethnicity, disability, sexuality, gender identity, age and religious beliefs.

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High barriers to access and poor representation across these industries not only affect individual writers' careers and opportunities, but have a more insidious effect in shutting out these voices and experiences from wider mainstream attention and public discourse.

Professor Katy Shaw, co-founder and researcher in residence on A Writing Chance and director of university cultural partnerships at Northumbria University, said: "This programme has changed the industry for writers and publishers and brought barriers relating to social class into the popular spotlight. The solution suggestions and policy proposals generated by our research on the programme to date prove the potential of cross-sectoral collaboration and the power of cocreation to tackle the biggest opportunity and challenge of our times – how to achieve inclusive innovation. Thanks to funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) we have now been able to extend the range and reach of the research undertaken on this vital new intervention. We look forward to working with a new cohort of creatives and industry partners to gear A Writing Chance up to the next level."

Professor Shaw's research continues in 2024–25 and will be complemented by new research led by StoryArcs, an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) programme run by The Story Society at Bath Spa University under the directorship of Professor Bambo Soyinka.

*Read more about the programme at awritingchance.co.uk
Sign up for updates on the A Writing Chance network [here](#).*

ENDS

Notes to Editors

For all media enquiries, please contact Laura Fraine, New Writing North
laurafraine@newwritingnorth.com

Photos of the writers are available [here](#). See below for all author bios.

Read Professor Katy Shaw's Evaluation Report on A Writing Chance 2021–22 [here](#)

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A Writing Chance 2024-25 writer bios

A Writing Chance: Daily Mirror programme

Zainab Amer, from Manchester (mentored by Brian Reade, Daily Mirror columnist and author)

Zainab is a British-Egyptian writer originally from London and now residing in Manchester for the past seven years. She brings over a decade of experience in the NGO sector, where social justice and lived experiences remain core tenets of her work. With a deep passion for storytelling, she integrates her diverse identity shaped by British society and her vibrant Egyptian background. She hopes to use her array of experiences and learnings to elevate voices that often go unheard.

Emma Astra, from Leicester (mentored by Siobhan McNally, *Daily Mirror* columnist, writer and journalist)

Emma Astra is from 'Lesta' as her working-class accent pronounces Leicester in the UK. Emma Astra has multiple disabilities from an intergenerational family who have struggled to survive. But those struggles have made her thrive. Emma is interested in real-life stories and issues, from the funny to the sad, believing in the principles of 'Shared Struggles' and 'Sharing is Caring.' When she's not going on daily rants, Emma can be found watching too much TV and TikTok and is a great supporter of British soap operas, journalism/news and documentaries.

Shivani Daxini, from Leicester (mentored by Kevin Maguire, *Daily Mirror* associate editor)

Shivani is an anthropologist studying for her PhD. After a year of field work in India as part of this, she has started writing a series of fictionalised short stories inspired by her research as a way to create empathy and understanding amongst people. She has always enjoyed using writing as a way of encouraging 'unlearning' as well as learning- in terms of the ideas we hold about the world and each other.

Sunita Thind, from Derby (mentored by Ros Wynne-Jones, *Daily Mirror* columnist)

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Sunita is a biracial, disabled, ovarian cancer survivor, writer, model with two poetry books published, NCJT-qualified freelance writer, journalist, singer, make-up artist and memoirist.

A Writing Chance: Faber & Faber programme

Jade Cuttle, from Womersley, North Yorkshire (mentored by Laura Hassan, associate publisher at Faber & Faber)

Jade Cuttle is a nature writer from Yorkshire and a BBC New Generation Thinker 2024. She's writing a book called *Silthood*, a term she coined to explore ancient connections between soil and self. This narrative non-fiction with elements of memoir traces her journey through metal detecting, mudlarking and medieval re-enacting. Her novel-in-progress *Soiled Hearts: A Fenland Saga* reimagines the forgotten Viking raids that ravaged through Africa 859 CE inspired by her work as a professional historical reenactor: one of Britain's first female warriors of colour. Her poetry is broadcast on the BBC and has won a Northern Writers Award.

Karrish Devan, from London (mentored by Jane Feather, editor at large, poetry at Faber & Faber)

Karrish lives in East London and his writing explores the hidden histories of queer people of colour. He works as a psychotherapist, providing support to refugees and asylum seekers. His stories have been shortlisted for the #MerkyBooks prize, Creative Future Writing award and garnered full scholarships onto the Faber & Faber Writing course and HarperCollins Author Academy. He is currently completing a novel of literary fiction set in contemporary England.

Debora Maité, from Glasgow (mentored by Hannah Knowles, publishing director at Faber & Faber)

Debora is a writer and filmmaker based in Scotland. Passionate about character-driven storytelling that elevates underrepresented perspectives, Debora crafts surreal scenarios to explore fundamental anxieties and vulnerabilities. She is an alumna of several writer development schemes such as Less Is More Residential, the Merky Books Award (Penguin Random House) and the Bloomsbury Mentorship Programme. Her film work has received support from the BFI Network and Screen Scotland and featured in international BIFA and BAFTA-qualifying festivals.

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Mie Murasa, from Sheffield (mentored by Fiona Crosby, senior commissioning editor at Faber & Faber)

Mie Murasa is a British-Japanese student and writer, originally from South Yorkshire. Mie's work is constantly inspired by the rich cultural scene and humour of the North, as well as her obsession with Taisho and Meiji Era Japanese Literature. As an admirer of storytelling in all its forms, Mie enjoys writing prose fiction, creative non-fiction and screenplays.

Interested in intersectional identities, their current work in progress hopes to speak to the Asian experience in the UK and open up dialogue around being biracial.

Nosa Novia, from Torquay (mentored by Mo Hafeez, commissioning editor at Faber & Faber)

Nosa Novia was born in Lagos, Nigeria and moved to the UK at the age of nine. She is a graduate of the University of Warwick and holds a BA(Hons) in Film and Literature and a MA, with distinction in both degrees. She is currently working on two novels, a historical fiction set in the Benin Kingdom and a dystopian, sci-fi novel set in West Africa. She is the founder of The Reclaim Collective CIC, a social enterprise dedicated to equipping poets from marginalised backgrounds. She spends her days off writing and pretending she knows how to bake.

Janice Okoh, from London (mentored by Sara Helen Binney, crime editor at Faber & Faber)

Janice Okoh is a multi-award-winning British-Nigerian playwright and radio dramatist. She has an MA in Creative Writing (Scriptwriting) from the University of East Anglia, has worked as a Lecturer at Southampton University and, for seven years, as a banking paralegal in the city.

In 2023, Janice Okoh was awarded a Mary Prince Memorial Award from the Black Writer's Guild for her novel-in-progress *The Girl with the Light Eyes* and was shortlisted for the Bath Novel Prize in the same year. She has also participated in the Thrive (Hachette) Grow Your Story Mentoring Programme and Harper Collins' Author Academy.

Micaela Ralph, from London (mentored by Angus Cargill, publishing director at Faber & Faber)

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Micaela is an aspiring novelist born in Sydney, Australia, who now calls a crumbling creative warehouse in North London home. With a decade of designing graphic props for film and television behind her, she chose to pursue her true passion by earning an MA in Creative Writing, transforming her hobby into a career. Her writing explores themes of identity, grief, love, and revenge intertwining to create vivid queer-focused narratives. Through her work, she invites readers to journey with her through the complexities of the heart, mind and the human experience.

Bonita Wileman, from Cardiff (mentored by Aisling Brennan, fiction editor at Faber & Faber)

Bonita Wileman is a Wales-based fiction writer with roots in both New Zealand and the UK. She studied her MA in Creative Writing at Cardiff University and has since been developing a short story collection of queer women in strange worlds falling apart at the edges. Her literary interests are in the surreal, ghostly, provocative and saline, with an emphasis on the relationship between queerness and fluidity. She is a fan of jazz and handmade trinkets.

A Writing Chance: Substack programme

Damian Kerlin, from Cardiff (mentored by Farrah Storr, head of writer partnerships UK and Europe at Substack)

Damian Kerlin is a culture journalist and broadcaster, with bylines in *Attitude*, *The Telegraph*, and *The Independent*. He also founded Substack, Material Queer, a celebration of queer culture. Damian hosts the Iris Prize podcast, Europe's largest LGBTQ+ Film Festival, and presents Monocle Radio's Daily Briefing and Virgin Radio Pride.

Damian was selected as one of three Acast Amplifiers for his LGBTQ+ docu-series podcast Memories from The Dancefloor which celebrates LGBTQ+ venues and shines a light on the history of these incredible spaces from the staff and patrons themselves. Released to critical acclaim, Season 2 is due out June 2024.

Damian writes the Substack Material Queer.

Hattie Morrison, from West Wales (mentored by Emma Rowley, UK partnerships associate at Substack)

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Hattie Morrison is an award-winning writer and literary host from West Wales. In 2022, she was New Welsh Review's 'Young Welsh Writer of the Year', and between 2022 and 2023 she was 'Representing Wales' for Literature Wales.

Her essays and narrative non-fiction have been published by The Guardian, Pitt Rivers Museum and Sticky Fingers Publishing. She has lead symposiums with Glasgow School of Art, Piet Zwart Institute, and the SVA, as well as hosted author interviews at Photoville in New York, Waterstones in London, Shakespeare & Co in Paris and The Island in Bristol. In early 2024, she completed a residency at Desperate Literature in Madrid.

Hattie writes the Substack [\(not\) Writing with Hattie Morrison](#).

Matt Taylor, from Buxton (mentored by [Jon Elledge](#), author, *New Statesman* columnist and Substack writer)

Matt Taylor is an award-winning writer and music producer with a remarkable journey. Growing up in rowdy and unruly children's homes, Matt found refuge in music and literature. His writing talent was first noticed when he won the Highly Commended Award in the Life Writing Prize 2021. Since then, he has gone to study for a master's in creative writing at the University of Oxford while continuing to produce music. Matt also advocates for those from the care system, writing passionately about his experiences and challenges, to open up the creative industries to those with care-experienced or low-income backgrounds.

Matt writes the Substack [Underclass Hero](#).

Sophie Wren, from the North East (mentored by [Claire Venus](#), Substack writer and creative engagement consultant).

Sophie is a foraging teacher, writer, and apprentice to the greenwood. She is based in England's wild north. Whether wandering the woodland or the realms of deep imagination, Sophie seeks out the magical and peculiar, from mushrooms and healing herbs to speculative worlds. Writing often about the unsung magic of the everyday, Sophie's creative cauldron bubbles with nature writing, fantasy fiction and magical realism. She is currently working on a trilogy of fantasy novels, a collection of short stories, and a Substack about life in the woods.

About our partners

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About Joseph Rowntree Foundation

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation works to speed up and support the transition to a more equitable and just future, free from poverty, in which people and planet can flourish. For more information visit www.jrf.org.uk

About New Writing North

Writing talent is everywhere. But opportunities are not. That's why New Writing North exists. To identify and nurture talent. To inspire a love for creative writing and reading. To create life-changing chances for people across the North. Through our programmes, events and activities, we find and support talented people of all ages and backgrounds to access creative opportunities and to enable them to flourish.

Find out more at www.newwritingnorth.com

Donate: <https://www.justgiving.com/newwritingnorth>

About Audible

Audible, an Amazon company, is a leading creator and provider of premium audio storytelling, offering customers a new way to enhance and enrich their lives every day. Audible.co.uk content includes more than 700,000 audiobooks, podcasts and Audible Originals. Audible has millions of members around the world who subscribe to one of 10 localised services designed for customers in Australia, Canada, France, Germany, India, Italy, Japan, Spain, the UK and the US. Audible members download nearly 4 billion hours of content annually and listen across a wide range of supported devices.

About Northumbria University

University of the Year 2022 (Times Higher Education Awards) – Northumbria is a research-intensive university that unlocks potential for all, changing lives regionally, nationally and internationally. Two thirds of Northumbria's undergraduate students come from the North East region and go into employment in the region when they graduate, demonstrating Northumbria's significant contribution to social mobility and levelling up in the North East of England.

Find out more about us at www.northumbria.ac.uk

About Esmée Fairbairn Foundation

Esmée Fairbairn Foundation aims to improve our natural world, secure a fairer future and strengthen the bonds in communities in the UK. We unlock change by contributing everything we can alongside people and organisations with brilliant ideas who share our goals. The Foundation is one of the largest independent grant-makers in the UK. In 2023, we provided £58.4m in funding towards a wide range of work in support of our

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aims. This includes additional funding to organisations we fund in response to the rising cost of living. We also have a £60 million allocation to social investments for organisations with the aim of creating social impact. www.esmeefairbairn.org.uk

About Substack

Substack is one of the world's largest paid-for subscription networks, enabling creators and writers to be paid directly by the audiences enjoying their work. Substack supports everyone from local independent news outlets to household names in writing, podcasting and video, allowing them to build their audiences through email lists they own, as well as make a living from the work they create.

About the Mirror

Since 1903 the Mirror has brought words and pictures from the most important world events to millions of readers, and now listeners and viewers. We are committed to reporting both light and shade, covering news, sports and entertainment accurately and with empathy and energy.

The Mirror is known for its strong campaigning journalism. More than a century ago we led the campaign for more lifeboats on ships after the deaths of the poorest on board the Titanic. We campaigned against the ivory trade and seal clubbing and helped create the World Wildlife Fund. And more recently we have changed the political agenda by breaking the Covid-era Partygate exclusive.

Politically the Mirror sits left of centre. It has backed the Labour Party in every election since 1945. And our annual Pride of Britain Awards, celebrating the ordinary people of this country who have achieved extraordinary things, reflects the very best of the Mirror and its values.

Our mission is to make sense of a rapidly changing world for our audience To challenge wrongs where we see them. To stand up for the underdog against authority. And to entertain. For more see <https://www.mirror.co.uk/>.

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