

# NEW WRITING NORTH

5 May 2025

## **The Bee Launches in Response to Class Crisis in UK Writing Industries**

Actor and philanthropist Michael Sheen has supported the founding of a new literary magazine and platform for working-class writers, The Bee.

The magazine, launching on May Day, Monday May 5, is edited by Richard Benson, the former editor of iconic 80s and 90s magazine *The Face*, and supported by the British publishing house Faber, home to Sally Rooney, Simon Armitage, and Kazuo Ishiguro.

The Bee has been created to fight the increasing marginalisation of working-class writers, and of working-class people in publishing. In 2014, 43 per cent of people in publishing came from middle-class backgrounds, with 12 per cent being of working-class origin. Since 2019, the former figure has risen to sixty per cent, and as recent news stories about access to the arts have shown, the barriers for the less well-off are increasing.

Benson said: “Justice and fairness demands that people from the less well-off sections of society have the chance to tell their stories, and to get them heard. But it’s also about common sense. Much of the important writing being done today, and so many of the best-loved stories come from ordinary working people. So often, it’s stories from the working classes that express what’s really happening in the world.”

The Bee’s channels include a website, literary magazine, podcast, and a large-scale outreach programme to seek out, and support the professional development of, new writers from working class backgrounds. It will publish fiction and non-fiction.

The initiative was born out of New Writing North’s A Writing Chance, a UK-wide programme for working-class writers co-founded with the actor and philanthropist Michael Sheen, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, and Northumbria University. A Writing Chance alumni have already gone on to become published authors, including Tom Newlands whose novel *Only Here, Only Now* was published in 2024 to critical acclaim.

Claire Malcolm, CEO of New Writing North, the writing development charity producing The Bee, said: “Our research shows that despite incredible success stories from these initiatives the class crisis continues to grow. There’s never been so much debate about class in the creative industries, but nothing has changed, and things are getting worse and inequality more entrenched, hence the need to make our own reality.

“Talent is classless. Opportunity, however, is class-bound. The Bee is an urgent response to that.”

Richard Benson grew up on a small farm in Yorkshire and began his writing career as a reporter for the *Beverley Guardian*. After editing *The Face* magazine in the 1990s, he went on to be

shortlisted for the Guardian first-book award for his bestselling 2005 memoir, *The Farm*. In 2016 his memoir *The Valley*, about a Yorkshire mining family, won the James Tait Black prize for biography, and the Portico prize.

He said: “Class has always been hard to define precisely, and it can mean different things to different people. But what is clear is that in 2025, your background can still affect your life chances and career prospects.

“It’s not just about your income or job, it’s also about family, upbringing, education, opportunity and lived experience. As society changes, we need a grown-up, nuanced debate about class, which will be an important subject for us.

“Readers want this. In our survey of working-class readers, 63 per cent said it was important to them to see people of their background represented in books – and not just represented but represented accurately. There is a market for this, but to meet that demand we need more people from working-class backgrounds working in publishing and making key decisions.”

Claire Malcolm pointed out that just 10% of authors and writers are from working-class backgrounds, whilst 47% are from the most privileged social starting points\* and 44% of newspaper columnists attended independent school (only 7% of the population attend independent schools). \*\*

She added: “Working-class means a multitude of things depending on who you are and who you ask, but what we do know is that in 2025 your background can still affect your life chances and career prospects. We see very few working-class voice and stories visible in mainstream publishing. Representation matters. Real change often happens from outside of the mainstream, and we hope to build a new community of writers and readers around *The Bee* to support real change, and to highlight the talent that is out there.”

ENDS

## Notes to Editors

\*Office for National Statistics’ Labour Force Survey, 2014

\*\*Sutton Trust, *Elitist Britain*, 2019

## About A Writing Chance

In 2018, New Writing North launched *Common People*, which included a professional development programme for emerging working-class writers.

A Writing Chance, co-founded in 2021, opens access to the writing industries for new and aspiring writers from working-class and lower-income backgrounds and for those who face barriers due to intersecting challenges, including but not limited to ethnicity, disability, sexuality, gender identity, age, and religious beliefs. It has given 28 aspiring writers from working-class backgrounds unique access to the writing industries via mentoring and publication opportunities.

A Writing Chance was produced by New Writing North and was co-founded with the actor and philanthropist Michael Sheen, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, and Northumbria University. It was supported by Faber, the Daily Mirror, Substack, Mab Gwalia, Audible, Arts Council England, the Esme Fairbairn Foundation and Charlotte Aitken Trust.

<https://newwritingnorth.com/a-writing-chance/>

### **About New Writing North**

Writing talent is everywhere. But opportunities are not. That is 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. New Writing North's flagship programmes include the Northern Writers' Awards; the Gordon Burn Prize and Durham Book Festival and Young Writers' City, an award-winning programme for young people. New Writing North is currently developing a new centre for writing and publishing in Newcastle upon Tyne. Find out more at [www.newwritingnorth.com](http://www.newwritingnorth.com)

### **About The Bee**

The Bee website and literary magazine will feature writing on contemporary life and culture by working-class writers from the UK and further afield.

The Bee's podcast The Working Class Library will explore the history of working-class writing and seek to create an alternative canon of classics. Each month, a guest writer will discuss and decide whether a book deserves a place on the virtual shelves of The Working Class Library. Guest writers on the podcast include David Nicholls, Louise Doughty, and David Peace.

Richard Benson: [Richard Benson - Little Toller Books](#)