

Does the writer have a responsibility?

Umi Sinha

I've been following the Hay-on-Wye Literary Festival – held online this year because of the coronavirus lockdown – and I notice that many writers are voicing something I've been thinking for some time, that the oldest and most familiar stories don't serve us anymore, and that maybe it's time for us to change our story, or to create a new one.

In the storytelling world – I am also an oral storyteller – there are two schools of thought. The traditionalists maintain that storytellers are essentially performers, not creators, and should only tell stories that have been handed down from generation to generation because they contain all the wisdom that humanity will ever need. Others, including me, feel that it's appropriate to create new stories that reflect our own times, just as people did in the past, because if the traditionalists are right and we cannot make new stories, where are the stories, for instance, that represent mixed-race people, like me, who do not belong to a particular tradition? Are we not to be represented? Retold?

And where are the stories that represent modern women? In most traditional stories a woman is an object to be given away with half a kingdom and no voice in the matter. Or, if the folk tale has a 'heroine', she is meek and gentle, like Cinderella, or Patient Griselda, whose husband takes her children and pretends to have them put to death, then casts her out, naked and alone, to test her obedience; all of which she submits to patiently in order to win his love. Or, like Scheherazade in *A Thousand and One Nights*, she has to be wily and cunning to placate and seduce a violent man. Are these the role models we want for our daughters today?

Some traditional storytellers get round this problem by using gender reversal: the hero becomes a heroine, but then, instead of celebrating the different ways that women approach challenges, they make women behave like men. Compare, in real life, the way the Prime Minister of New Zealand and the Chancellor of Germany have approached the Covid-19 pandemic with the approaches taken by the President of the USA, or our own UK Prime Minister, with their posturing and militaristic language about 'fighting', 'beating' and 'winning'.

Bertolt Brecht said, 'Unhappy is the land that is in need of heroes', and yet most stories in our dominant Western culture are built on the Hero's Journey, as identified by Joseph Campbell in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. This heroisation has also become a model for our way of life, with its emphasis on personal achievement, competition, constant growth and development. And yet fairy tales inform us again and again that the characters who return with the treasure are often the least heroic and most undervalued – the orphan girl or cast-off stepdaughter, the 'fool' or naïve youngest son – who interrupt their personal quest for fortune to respond to the needs of those around them. And it is those whom they have helped who repay that help when needed, enabling them to return home safely and share the treasure that they have gained, to nurture and enrich their communities. That is the true point of the journey – the return home and the sharing of knowledge and wisdom gained.

But in real life our species is so focused on our own heroic advances that we forget that the real enablers are our helpers – until we need them. It is the ordinary people whom we take for granted – nurses, bus and delivery drivers, cleaners, shopkeepers, postal workers and neighbours – whom we depend on most when the chips are down.

Viktor Frankl, the psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor wrote in *Yes to Life*, his book of lectures in response to that experience, that 'the question

can no longer be “What can I expect from life?” but can now only be “What does life expect of me?”” Maybe we need to see that the heroes we need are those who ask, ‘How can I help?’ rather than ‘What’s in it for me?’

And perhaps it is the responsibility of writers to ask that question of ourselves and others, too.

Umi Sinha

Umi Sinha is the author of the novel *Belonging*. Born in India, she spent her first ten years at the naval engineering base in the Western Ghats where her father was stationed. She moved to Britain with her mother and siblings at the age of fifteen. Her British-born mother was a writer and an artist. Her father was one of the first Indians to be accepted as an officer into the Royal Indian Navy and served on the Arctic Convoys in the Second World War.

Umi Sinha’s short stories have been published in magazines and anthologies. She has worked as a Lecturer in Creative Writing on the MA at Brighton University and currently teaches on the Creative Writing Programme at New Writing South. She also runs her own courses and workshops at her Writing Clinic. In 2006, Sinha and a group of other storytellers founded The Guesthouse Storytellers, an oral storytelling club based in Newhaven, East Sussex.

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A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at

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