

## Writing *The Kids*: Some thoughts about memory, truth and ethics

Hannah Lowe



The colour photograph above was taken by my friend Eve, at the Anti-Nazi League Carnival Against the Nazis in 1994, and shows myself and fellow literature students from Barking College standing below the college banner. Eve and Madeline (pictured in the centre in a tartan scarf), had organised a bus from the college down to Brockwell Park in Brixton and we'd spent the afternoon watching bands

perform, listening to speakers call for the urgent need for anti-racist action. This was a year after the murder of Stephen Lawrence, and the infamous demonstration clash between the police and anti-racist protestors who wanted the BNP bookshop in Plumstead closed down. On a personal note, this was the age my own politics became galvanised and where my passion for literature began.

The photograph is already an act of mediation, catching only a second in time of that afternoon. The book's cover photograph is a further, much later mediation, cropped and made black and white by my designer friend Vicki. I wrote to those pictured to ask for their permission to be featured, and most granted it. One former student did not want her image used, and out of respect for her preference, she is also obscured from the source image. There is one other person I still haven't been able to track down, and I am just praying she'll be happy to see herself pictured on the book cover, if she ever comes across it.



These images provide a way for talking about truth, ethics and the politics of representation in literature, and particularly in my new poetry collection, *The Kids*. The book is a sequence of sonnets – love poems – to my teachers, my teenage friends, my young son, and the young people I taught for a decade as a teacher in an inner-city sixth form in London. These ‘kids’, as I have termed them, predominantly working-class, from a wide range of ethnic and religious backgrounds, were instrumental in my becoming a writer. But more importantly, they were key in helping me understand my own complex ancestry, as the white-looking daughter of an Afro-Chinese father and white English mother.

What does my writing about these young people mean with regard to ethics? Who can say what, and about whom? And what about those, like the women who didn’t want to appear on the book cover, who might not want to be pictured? These concerns were at the forefront of my mind during writing. I wondered if I should be writing about my students at all. But what does it mean if writers limit themselves to only writing about those from their own position or background, and never about the lives of others? These questions are not new. Any research into this heavily policed and politicised quandary will reveal a range of viewpoints, often predicated on binarism, from those that believe only members of marginalised communities should write their stories, to those who insist that the very act of writing involves the necessity of depicting others. In relation to my own body of work, written over years, the pertinent question has become not whether writers should, but *how*. And *how* involves various literary and ethical choices and processes.

*The Kids* originally began as a loose, fragmented memoir, before I attempted to write it as a sequence of interlinked sonnets – an extended corona – that in the end proved too difficult to pull off. Finally, I settled on the single sonnet form. This decision was in part aesthetic, part pragmatic, but also about the different expectations related to genre. Writers of memoir enter into what Philippe Lejeune conceptualises as ‘the autographical pact’ – a contract with the reader that what is written will be true, to the best of the writer’s memory of events. The concept of ‘truth’ in memoir is also a publishing strategy – many books, from autobiographies of pop stars to narratives of trauma, marketed as ‘survival literature’, are sold by the enticement of *this really happened*. Memoirists sometimes try to slip from this pact, by inserting epigraphs declaring a text’s fictional components. Others, controversially, have written and published memoirs which turned out to have little basis in fact. Fiction writers, on the other hand, are under no such obligations, though many novelists and short story writers will happily tell you how a story or character is based on real events or people.

Poetry – some poetry, not all – can occupy an in-between place, sitting between truth and fiction. Readers might be invested in the idea of the poem being ‘true’, but they can’t expect it. With this in mind, the poems in *The Kids* often relay classroom encounters that are based on things that happened, sometimes once, sometimes many times, but use mainly fictionalised students as the focalising point within the sonnet. ‘Monique’ in ‘Queen Bee’ for example – a feisty sixteen-

year-old who refuses to unplug her phone when the 'I', the teacher, asks her to do so. But there is no real Monique. She is a conflation of various students I encountered over the years. The details of the encounter are more influenced by trying to write in rhyme and iambic pentameter than trying to record the documentary truth. This brings to mind a favourite quote by the poet George Szirtes, who claims that 'the constraints of form are the chief producers of the imagination'. I've often found this to be true in my writing practice. Following a strict poetic form has repeatedly pushed my ideas and use of language into the territory of invention. And yet something like the tug o' war the teacher and 'Monique' have in the poem did once happen, nearly twenty years ago.

Likewise, the students named in the poem 'The Unretained' – Luke, Amal, Marta – all of whom drop out of college for different reasons, are loosely based on real people. Like the doctoring of the cover image, writing is a process of mediation, selection, editing. The choice to make the cover image monochrome was not just aesthetic, but to emphasise the photograph as an image from history – just as the poems in the book are historical. I hoped the details from some of the poems would reveal their setting in the early to mid-2000s – a line from the Fugees 'Ready or Not'; watching the film *Notes from A Scandal* at the cinema; even references that teachers might know to examination anthologies that are no longer on the syllabus.

Inevitably, the opening sequence, set in the sixth form and concerned with the intersections of race, class, religion and gender in these students' lives, might well

evoke a power dynamic – myself in a position of power, as the observer-teacher, writing about the lives of my students, both in and out of the classroom. But many of the poems segue between my experiences as a teacher and my own life outside of teaching, conflating the ‘public’ role with the exploration of self, as a child, a learner, a young woman grieving the death of her father, and later as a mother. The book is dedicated to the memory of John Toolan, an inspiring and irreverent English teacher I encountered at sixteen, who taught a very radical curriculum and introduced me to a range of literature that spoke to my burgeoning anti-racist, left-wing politics.



That sixteen-year-old self is never far from the teacher I became, wanting to galvanise my students, wanting them to understand the political and social power of good literature. This same energy has motivated my life as a writer.

The sequence of poems about the sixth form ends with the aftermath of the July 7 bombings of 2005. A university friend of mine was killed in those bombings, on her way to work. This is true. But the poem about it is an act of imagination, garnered from a scattering of facts. In the following poem, 'Ricochet', I try to communicate the consequences this act of terrorism had on the Muslim students who attended the sixth form. But I couldn't speak for them, only render my memory of the shifts in choices of dress, to hint that a summer of police stop-and-search and awful populist Islamophobia, had made some of them cling more strongly to their religious identities as an act of resistance: 'It was summer still when the kids came back / Muslim boys in Nikes and thobes and skull caps...The papers called those bombers *British Born*.'

In many of the poems, the students are nameless – they are 'the kids' of my imagination, emphasising how much this collection is a work of memory, and how memory is fallible. One contradiction of the word 'memoir' is its etymology in the word 'memory', which is always changing, never fixed. Showing the old photograph of the ANL carnival to friends pictured, acutely emphasised this for me. Some reminded me of events of that day I had long forgotten. Each of us remembered it, and each other, differently. Even this week, a teacher from the college wrote this about the photograph, lending his perspective to the photo:

In the cover photograph...young Hannah is standing behind the young man in the cap...and alongside others of her 'A' Level classmates. None in the photograph came from wealthy or privileged

families and they represent a variety of ethnic backgrounds, but together they evince a spirit of optimism and solidarity in the face of those who seek to oppress or divide us.

As a teacher and writer, I want to emphasise resistance, optimism and solidarity, believing that literature can be a unique platform for these qualities, both in terms of the narratives conveyed, and the act of writing itself. Just as a photograph may represent 'reality' *and* be an act of mediation, so too are literary representations. The political struggles conveyed in both the cover image, and in the poems of *The Kids*, which situate young people as agents of change, are as real and urgent as they have ever been.

### **Hannah Lowe**

Hannah Lowe was born in Essex in 1976 to a white English mother and Afro-Chinese Jamaican father. Broadly, Lowe's work is concerned with migration histories, multicultural London and the complex legacies of the British Empire. Her first poetry collection, *Chick* (Bloodaxe, 2013), blended these political concerns with a deeply personal and elegiac commemoration of her father, and won the Michael Murphy Memorial Award for Best First Collection. Her second collection, *Chan* (Bloodaxe, 2016) is about the life and untimely death of her father's cousin, the jazz saxophonist, Joe Harriott, and in *Ormonde* (Hercules Editions, 2014), she excavates the story of the SS Ormonde, on which her father migrated to Britain. *The Neighbourhood* (Outspoken Press, 2019) explores how



communities respond to the pressures of austerity, gentrification and deportation. Her latest poetry collection is *The Kids* (Bloodaxe, 2021). Lowe's memoir, *Long Time, No See* (Periscope, 2015) was Radio 4's Book of the Week. She has also been Poet in Residence at Keats House, and a writer on the Colonial Countryside Project.

A recording of this talk can be found at [writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)

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