

In search of lasting change

Kerry Young

This is how it started. Many moons ago, long before my fiction writing adventures, I was involved in youth work. I was part of a particular aspect of youth work called 'work with girls and young women'. It was considered a movement. The Girls' Work Movement. It was the 1980s. The time of *Spare Rib* and women's liberation. A time when we shouted loud and protested energetically about lack of opportunities for women, and in youth work, the absence of space and activities for girls and young women. So, we launched ourselves on a mission to level the playing field, so to speak. Women youth workers were so inspired that groups and activities specifically for girls and young women were established all over the UK, with practically every local authority youth service and many voluntary youth organisations appointing girls' workers and officers. We wanted to make youth work available to all young people, as it was meant to be, not just for boys and young men as it so often turned out. Young women attended and participated in droves.

In the process, we realised that the issues facing us were two-fold. Lack of confidence on the part of so many young women, and the gender stereotyping that impacted on their sense of self, underpinned by the sexism that, intentional or not, created the structural bias that kept some doors firmly locked and others barely ajar. The backlash from young men and male youth workers also had to be addressed. Furious as they were that girls and young women had dared to occupy the space and attention they had for so long dominated exclusively within a so called 'mixed' service.

So, what happened? In 1987, the national Girls' Work Unit was closed and the seven women working there made redundant. Over the following years, girls' work gradually vanished. Or rather, there was a sort of meta-

morphosis. The form still existed, in places, but the content had changed. It had lost its political analysis and intentions. Instead of a focus on access and opportunities, girls' groups were now making jewellery and organising fashion shows.

Then, by the mid-1990s, generic youth work started to disappear in a government re-think that focused instead on targeted work with young people, youth offending and work with young people at risk of offending. The Prevent programme was established to 'counter terrorist ideology and challenge those who promote it'. Not that I wished for more young women to become involved in crime as a way to access resources, but it did seem a shame that all of the attention was back on boys. Again.

The point of my trip down memory lane is the realisation that, despite the passion and wealth of provision, by the end of the 1990s it was as if nothing had happened. Girls' work had vanished. There was barely a trace left behind. The 'mainstream' had shifted and work with girls and young women was not included. No more was there any prominence given to talk of sexism or the ways in which other cross-cutting issues in society impacted on women and girls – racism, class, homophobia, disability.

All of which brings me to this point. Not by way of complaint or criticism, but in the process of reflection. I am aware of the vast array of initiatives that have been taking place for (so called) BAME writers. Specific prizes, scholarships, internships, mentoring schemes, development programmes, festivals, published anthologies, online journals (like this one), writing courses, a literary agency, formal commitments to publish the work of black writers and writers of colour (and also working-class writers, low-income, disabled and LGBTQ+ writers). All in an attempt to 'create diversity'.

That the fruit of this effort includes some critical and commercial success for some writers, is all for the good. But here is the question, which even as I write it may still be in the process of being formed.

What will be the enduring impact of these initiatives as regards black

writers and writers of colour? Not just writers, but those in the broad spectrum of the publishing industry, be they agents, editors, publishers, publicists, marketers, reviewers, booksellers, literary festival organisers and so on. In other words, what is likely to be the longer-term relationship of such 'special funding' and 'targeted' efforts to what we might call 'the mainstream'? Especially when that 'mainstream' shifts its attention to other concerns and imperatives? Will black writers and writers of colour be a part of that shifting 'mainstream' or not? To what extent? Or will the experience echo that of the Girls' Work Movement 30 years ago? The six writers I invited to contribute to this issue all have views on this.

That Margaret Busby published *New Daughters of Africa* (Myriad Editions, 2019) some 27 years after the original *Daughters of Africa* (1992) is an indication of how she continues to view the need to 'remedy the exclusion of women of African descent from the literary canon'. Yet, while encouraged by the number of initiatives aimed at black writers and writers of colour that have 'recently appeared and continue to gain traction', she is still of the opinion that 'a myriad of obstacles and gatekeepers still exist, waiting to be navigated and overcome'. The issues she raises include: who (which writers), what (which stories) and why particular writers or stories are accepted, nurtured and promoted in the mainstream; how perceptions about readership and audience impact on what is taken on; and the issue of 'colour-coded reviewing'. Her conclusion is that the UK book trade 'still has a long way to go in terms of being inclusive of gender, class, ethnicity and all the diverse shapes and orientations in which talent is packaged'.

In her contribution, Sunny Singh, one of the three founders of the Jhalak Prize for Book of the Year by a Writer of Colour, cites Toni Morrison when she says, 'We are building a... "heroic writers' movement: assertive, militant, pugnacious"'. She continues: 'Beyond the long- and shortlists and annual winners, the Jhalak Prize is disruption, defiance, challenge, subver-

sion. It is an initiative to decolonise our literatures, imaginations, cultures, and even ourselves.' Decolonisation is, therefore, conceptualised by Sunny Singh as challenging attitudes in both the public and private spheres of life, in terms of both the 'intricate, cellular ways we are continually damaged by simply existing in a white supremacy' and, as a consequence, the ways in which 'we imagine ourselves (and each other)'.

'How,' Singh asks, 'do we dream, desire, imagine our lives when we can't find people like us even in those intensely private moments of reading words on a page?' In citing Toni Morrison's comparison of whiteness to a goldfish bowl in which the glass remains invisible while permitting 'the ordered life it contains to exist in the larger world', Singh questions the extent to which the bowl 'ensures a tokenistic representation where people of colour become a kind of exotic fish.' She asks, 'are we as writers working in this superstructure unwittingly, even unwillingly, reinforcing the structure and acceptance of the glass fish bowl that contains only what is considered to be the beautiful fish?'

The Jhalak prize, by contrast, 'celebrates writers who examine and challenge the hegemony of everyday racism and are diligent in representations of ourselves and our worlds'. In other words, writers who resist 'the lure of whiteness' and whose work is 'not intended for the white gaze'. This is how, Singh asserts, 'we make this invisible superstructure visible to all of us.' Not just to black writers and writers of colour, but to all writers and all readers.

A third contributor, Mahsuda Snaith, reflects on her gradual realisation that 'if you didn't write about the stereotypes you were unlikely to have your book put on the shelves'. She charts her early submissions to BAME-specific journals and competitions, and later, joining a development

programme specifically for BAME writers where she felt the empowering effect of meeting 'other writers from the diaspora with similar experiences of the industry'.

In 2014, Snaith won the SI Leeds Literary Prize for unpublished fiction by UK Black and Asian women. She recalls two distinct, almost contradictory, thoughts about the prize: she wondered 'if being part of these schemes would categorise me as a 'BAME writer' and not a 'mainstream writer'; while at the same time, 'creating prizes for BAME writers – or working class, disabled, LGBTQ+ and other underrepresented groups – gives a platform to artists who are most in need.'

Despite being offered opportunities to be published by indie presses, Snaith decided to aim for mainstream publication because she felt a 'lack of experience in business negotiation' and a fear that she wouldn't be included in mainstream promotion. Her aim was achieved with a two-book deal with Transworld that led to a vast array of further opportunities including being a judge for the Costa First Novel Award 2019. Snaith says, 'I know being published by a mainstream publisher gained me those opportunities. [...] Now, with my second novel published and having judged a major prize, you might say I was part of the mainstream but – boy! I had to fight tooth and claw to get here.'

In her final reflection, Snaith writes, 'By having BAME-specific competitions, development programmes and diverse judging panels we can create publishing that more accurately represents its readership and generations of writers who will not feel so alone. And surely, that can only be a good thing.' She weaves her personal experience into her understanding of the current political imperatives.

As does Irenosen Okojie when she writes, 'I have always felt like an

outsider. The experience of never quite fitting in has plagued me all my life. But rather than 'shrinking away' from aspects of herself that others did not necessarily understand, Okojie chose to embrace and cultivate her feelings of 'otherness' in her writing – as a kind of defiance that enables her to focus her lens 'both inward and outward', and to write stories that are 'layered and provocative'.

In looking to the future, Katy Massey comments, 'I am a mixed race, working class female of colour. I am, apparently, not widely represented in the world of books, [where] the names on the spines represent a very narrow social stratum. In the light of this, Massey offers some suggestions of how things could be different. 'Hire us' she says. 'Mentor us, invite minority-run organisations in for meetings and listen to them [...] Ask us to fight each other a little less [as] we compete for tiny windows of opportunity in an otherwise closed and shuttered publishing façade [...] Unburden us from having to explain ourselves and represent every one of our kind who doesn't make it into print. Just let us tell our stories.'

And in the meantime, how do we sustain the passion we have as writers? How do we overcome the people and circumstances that, intentionally or not, bar our path with ignorance and discouragement? How do we keep ourselves going?

Malika Booker's contribution comes in the form of advice to her younger self. She says: 'Dream your dreams and believe that they can come true'. Not by magic or some act of divine intervention, but through sheer tenacity and steadfast determination. She urges writers to pluck up courage, build a community and, as she did, start a writing workshop for black and working-class marginalised writers, sharing skills and forming lifelong friendships. In the end her message is to remember that writing is a lifelong

vocation that requires 'faith, persistence, belief and generosity'.

There is already a vast body of outstanding work out there: accomplished, compelling and authentic. It includes the work of those contributing to this issue: Margaret Busby, *New Daughters of Africa*; Sunny Singh, *Hotel Arcadia*; Mahsuda Snaith, *How to Find Home*; Katy Massey, *Are We Home Yet?*; Irenosen Okojie, *Nudibranch*; Malika Booker, *Pepper Seed*.

Let us hope that when the special funding, attention and current enthusiasm come to an end, there will have been enough of a sea change (and not just inside the glass bowl) to ensure that all is not lost and forgotten – unlike the Girls' Work Movement of the 1980s.

Rather, let us hope that the current initiatives for the inclusion of BAME writers have created the foundation for a future based not on structural, conscious or unconscious bias (including prejudice, sense of guilt or duty, to fill a quota or to demonstrate that one is 'woke'), the writer's educational or professional background, familial relationships, social networks, anger, charm or charisma, class, gender, sexuality, identity, ethnic origins, religious beliefs, age, (dis)ability, physical or mental health, or any other personal characteristic including the colour or shade of our skin. That when all is said and done, what is being judged is simply this – the quality and sincerity of our work.

Kerry Young

Kerry Young is the author of three novels published by Bloomsbury: *Pao* (2011), *Gloria* (2013), and *Show Me A Mountain* (2016). She has also published two short stories, 'Home Is Where the Heart Is' in *Hometown Tales: The Midlands* (Orion, 2018), and 'Tomorrow Is Another Day' published in the *Wasafiri* 35th Anniversary Issue (100, Winter 2019).

A recording of this talk can be found at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

© Kerry Young