

What do you value in the natural world?

Kiran Millwood Hargrave

Value is increased by scarcity, and what I have always cherished most about nature is that it is ungovernable. That does not stop us trying, though.

Maps are a great passion of mine, but I know their limitations, their lies, the sanitised terror of what it cost to draw those neat lines. There have been few truly undiscovered places in the world, but we treat them as if they only came to exist when we put our names to them, have stood with our own two feet on their beaches, planted our flags in the ground and our language in any mouths that were there first. It is a heinous quirk of our western society that freedom of movement is seen as a right for us, and a travesty if the 'others' attempt it.

Even in clear-cut cases, such as the First Peoples of America, and those of Australia, that they have lived there for thousands of years is irrelevant to us when we decide the land is ours. But when anyone tries to make a better life for themselves in one of 'our' countries, it is invasion, even if, as Warsan Shire says, their 'home is the mouth of a shark'. And yet, were we in that position, wouldn't we wish for kindness? Shouldn't we?

In my second novel, *The Island at the End of Everything*, it is Ami's turn to be displaced. Her island home is to be segregated, and people with leprosy kept apart from people without. For Ami, the cost is severe: her mother is ill and she is not. She is taken from her and placed in an orphanage over the sea. For the greater good, families are ripped apart, people turned to patients and left merely to exist until they die out. It is based on the story of the real leper colony of Culion in the Philippines, and is far from unique: the segregation of those different and perceived as a threat has always existed.

A beautiful island home is a prison if you cannot leave.

Freedom of movement is more than a right: to deny it is a hypocrisy that cannot stand. Islands in the Indian Ocean are sinking below rising seas warmed by our consumption. Wars are fought with British guns sold by the millions. And still we dig in our heels and say, this is our land. We were here first. As if that is the truth, and, even if it were, as though it counts for anything in a world where maps are redrawn everyday, regardless of whose lives they cut through. I live on a flood plain in Oxford. One day, in a hundred years perhaps, this house, this city will be underwater, and where will we go? Whose land will we claim, whose mouth will we force our language into? Or will it be our turn, to be turned away?

Kiran Millwood Hargrave

Kiran Millwood Hargrave is a poet, playwright and author of stories for children, teenagers, and adults. Her books include *The Girl of Ink & Stars*, winner of the Waterstones Children's Book Prize 2017; *The Island at the End of Everything*, shortlisted for the Costa Children's Book Award 2017; and *The Way Past Winter*, which won the Blackwell's Children's Book of the Year Award 2018. Her first YA novel, *The Deathless Girls*, a reimagining of the origin stories of the so-called 'brides of Dracula', was published in September 2019. *The Mercies* was published by Picador in February 2020. Kiran's next book, *The Dance Tree*, will be published in May 2022.

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

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