

Why I write

Natasha Bowen

I write because I read.

That sounds so simple but that's because it really is. By the time I was six years old, I could read more fluently than my mum, who was dyslexic but had gone most of her life undiagnosed. Sent to a school for the 'sub-normal', my mum was scared at the thought of me ending up in such a place and so, she surrounded me with books from when I was a baby. The first story I remember was *Lenny the Lamb*. I loved that book and made her read it to me over and over every night before I went to sleep. At the age of four, when she skipped over the words she couldn't read, I began to help her sound them out.

From then on, I was hooked.

Immersed in stories from a very young age, these alternate worlds became my entertainment, my teachers, and my solace when things went wrong. I suppose it is only natural that loving books so much made me want to create my own stories.

I used to write little novels, and illustrate them too, adding to a mini library that my mum would look at with me every evening.

I hate to say this, but by the time I reached secondary school, my enthusiasm for writing began to wane. I didn't like the prescriptiveness of the English lessons, nor the books that were on the curriculum. I found most of them boring and never saw myself in any of the stories or plays. My coping mechanism was, of course, reading, and so I would quickly finish the class work and then sneakily devour the latest offering from Stephen King behind my textbook. No teacher ever caught me doing this because they were too busy trying to control the class. When there are constant fights and children walking out, the girl at the back, hunched over reading, does not draw attention. When I was younger, I read to escape from the estate where I lived, from the struggles growing up and from the failing school that I went to. I loved books set in other countries, other worlds, in other periods of time. In them were stories - from which I could learn something.

I was optimistic and chose to study English and Creative Writing at university, which led to a resurgence of my passion for creating my own stories. During the course, when thinking of what I wanted to write, I had those books we read in school at the back of my mind, and I deliberately wrote something completely opposite. I wrote the type of stories that my old English teacher would most likely purse their lips at, and I always included characters that looked like me and the people I grew up with. I wanted to create stories where all children see themselves in books. I also wanted to provide a chance for readers to learn more about cultures other than the usual stereotypes.

In short, I write because I have to. I write to create stories that I didn't get to read when I was younger. I write to tell tales of forgotten history and previously dehumanised cultures. I write hopefully to ensnare and enthrall readers. I write because the stories are there, inside me, pushing their way out until I have no choice but to write them down.

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Natasha Bowen is of Nigerian and Welsh descent and lives in Cambridge, England, where she grew up. Natasha studied English and Creative Writing at Bath Spa University, before moving to East London, where she taught for nearly ten years. Her debut book, *Skin Of The Sea*, was inspired by her passion for mermaids and African history and will be published by Penguin in November 2021.

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

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