

# WRITERS MOSAIC

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## **Writers who have inspired me**

Muhammad Khan

Whenever I put down a book and sigh with contentment, I say a little prayer for the author. However, there are a handful of authors who not only excited my inner fanboy but influenced the writer I became.

Like generations of children before and after me, *Not Now, Bernard* by David McKee thrilled me and disturbed me in equal measure. Unusual for picture books, it presented a bleak view of childhood. It spoke to lonely children everywhere who resort to imaginary playmates for lack of flesh and blood ones. Is it metaphorical, is it literal? Who knows, and it is in the very debatable nature of this question that the book's enduring appeal lies. Lesson learned: do not explain everything. Trust your readership to fill in the blanks.

My next inspiration was Jill Murphy, author of the superlative *Worst Witch* series. Murphy knows how to create a world with just enough mystery, wonder and horror to delight a child. I was an awkward kid who was frequently reprimanded by my teachers no matter how altruistic my intentions were. As an adult, I sadly recognise this for what it was: racism. But at the time, Mildred's misadventures gave me hope that someday I could do something so amazing that even the sourest teacher would crack a smile.

Minfong Ho's *Rice Without Rain* and *The Clay Marble* made me feel seen. She writes with a cultural identity that is present, proud and utterly authentic. Her oeuvre centres on simple people who balance duty and survival with dreams and ambitions. Though her plucky protagonists' journeys are always the focus, one cannot help learning about the broken promises of communism, the human face of poverty, or the horror of Pol Pot's dictatorship along the way.

Suzanne Collins' *Hunger Games* series was hugely influential. Until I'd read her books, my preferred mode of writing was third person. In Katniss Everdeen, Collins provided the world with a flawed, unforgiving and downright obstinate character with a heart of gold. Traditionally such an antihero is male, so even from this point of view the book grabbed my attention, but it is in its thrilling narrative and inventive world-building that the reader finds sustenance.

I was late to the Middle Earth party. At the age of 19, I bought the bumper illustrated edition of J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* and was completely blown away by this genre-defining tome. For starters the prose was so elegant, it made me weep. The rich descriptions of Middle Earth paired with the history of its peoples, land and creatures sucked me in so completely it was less about reading the adventure and more about *living* it.

Patrice Lawrence is a recent favourite. Not only is she an unbelievably talented author but she is also incredibly generous. Writing is a lonely business – the trope of the author tucked away in a garret with only a laptop for company is not a million miles away from the truth. So to have someone as kind as Lawrence show you the ropes and champion your books is

inspiring. She writes captivating novels that are diverse, gritty and a huge hit with my own students.

### **Muhammad Khan**

Muhammad Khan is an engineer, a secondary-school maths teacher, and a YA author! He takes his inspiration from the children he teaches, as well as his own upbringing as a British-born Pakistani. He lives in South London and has an MA in Creative Writing from St Mary's. His debut novel *I Am Thunder* was shortlisted for the YA Book Prize, won the Branford Boase First Novel Award, the 2018 Great Reads Award and a number of regional awards. His second novel, *Kick the Moon* is also published by Macmillan Children's Books. He is a World Book Day selected author.

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

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