

WRITERS MOSAIC

Writers who have inspired me

Nikesh Shukla

Thank you, Stan Lee. It was your exuberance and ear for dialogue that taught me how to be concise, how to make people talk and how to bring it alive.

Thank you, Hanif Kureishi. You gave me permission. You made me feel seen. You made me pick up books. You made me open up a word document, buoyed by permission to say what I wanted to say.

Thank you, Steven Soderbergh. I asked you to sign my copy of a script you had written. I was flailing. Unsure of what I was doing. Utterly frozen with stage fright. I asked your advice. You told me, don't ask for permission. I disregarded everything I thought I knew and started again.

Thank you, Niven Govinden. You saw I needed guidance. You saw that I needed someone in my corner. You saw I needed a cheerleader and a shoulder to cry on and a friend to call everyone who rejected me an 'arsehole', and you pressed books into my hands. You said, 'Read *Sag Harbor* by Colson Whitehead.' I read it. I then knew what my first novel needed to be.

Thank you, Colson Whitehead. Thank you for using fiction to rewrite history. Thank you for choosing to be different every single time. To subvert what we think of as Black novelists, what we think of novelists of colour. You never ever repeat yourself. Genre can be bent to your whim. History is malleable in your hands. Every time I think about possibility, what a novelist can achieve, I think about you.

Thank you, Zadie Smith, for showing me how to write about cities in a meaningful way. The images you conjure once it comes from memory rather than sensory presence carries much more weight. Because we do not look up enough. Because we take our surroundings for granted. Because we do not understand that sometimes you have to leave a place before you can write it. Zadie, you captured the ebb and flow of my ends like no one else.

Thank you, Salena Godden. You provided me a stage to try out new voices. I always kept coming back to my own.

Thank you, Courttia Newland and Nii Ayikwei Parkes and Rajeev Balasubramaniam. You published my first ever short story and when I saw the barcode, which gave the whole endeavour a degree of legitimacy I'd never experienced before, and I saw my name amongst the names of established writers I respected, I knew what the rest of my life would look like.

Thank you, Akhil Sharma, for redefining the parameters and scope of the immigrant novel. Often these books were reduced to 'struggle with dual heritage identity' arcs, like Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake* (2003). But you managed to forge a new path. Your terse style oozed empathy.

Thank you, George Saunders. You made me laugh and laugh and laugh – and think. Because somewhere amongst all those hilarious juxtapositions hidden in a cast of ghouls, were big ideas about who we are now.

But most of all, thank you, mum. You took me to the library every fortnight. You introduced me to seminal books that opened up the world. Because every writer who inspired me started right there, with you.

Nikesh Shukla

Nikesh Shukla is a writer and social commentator. His debut novel, *Coconut Unlimited*, was shortlisted for the Costa First Novel Award 2010.

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

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