

Why I teach

Irfan Master

When I started to write, over 30 years ago now, I was constantly on the lookout for mentors, teachers, librarians who could help me on my journey, but it was difficult. As a Pakistani/Indian boy from a tight knit community in Leicester, we spoke Urdu most of the time at home and both my parents worked in factories and had barely finished college. There were a few books at home, but not a library, and everybody was too busy working trying to survive to be able to read for pleasure. Still, my parents had high hopes for me. My mother, in particular, gifted me with her mother tongue, Urdu, and the poetry of Iqbal and Faiz Ahmed Faiz, but I had no scaffolding. As the first-born of a very young family, I was quiet, shy even, and inhibited by what I thought was the wrong kind of background. Nobody, where I came from, became a writer. Nobody even considered it. And that's what I thought I was: nobody. I was distinctly average as a student, struggled to establish myself in social circles, didn't go to an Oxbridge university and didn't speak the way one should if one

was to establish a literary career. Growing up in Margaret Thatcher's Britain, you were given short shrift if you tried to be anything other than that which you were designated to be, working class, Pakistani, black or brown or simply, other.

I searched for others like me. In books and in the world, and found us absent in both. Yet reading offered me the escape I needed; allowed me to withdraw into myself. And writing, when it came, allowed me self-expression, however private and contained it was. I was able to make connections in my writing between things that interested me. I could sense my writing speaking for me. The act of creating was more than just a hobby or the angry rants of a teenager, there seemed to be something more. There were choices being made about what I was creating. I was using my own life, personal stories, anecdotes, photographs, the news. I was drawn to the light writing provided, even if the light hurt my eyes and singed my wings.

Despite this, I still found mentors along the way, at school, at college and at university and later in publishing. Not one of the mentors were from a similar background to me, yet each one believed in me more than I believed in myself. Often it came in a few words of encouragement, a letter, a phone call, a hand on the shoulder. All worked to undo the

conditioning that had constructed my brittle psyche. They could see the turmoil in me. Like Sisyphus, I would labour to carry the boulder to the top of the hill but I was relieved when the boulder rolled back down. I was afraid of becoming what I had always been.

So when I published my first book, I realised that it was imperative for me to offer the same guidance that I had been lucky enough to find. I immediately volunteered to be a mentor and started teaching and workshopping where I could. It wasn't enough to be a writer in the world. I wanted to offer the same hand that my mentors had held out for me. But more than that, I wanted the me who had started out so long ago to see the me who was now taking up space in an environment that had felt so far out of reach. That version of me, I now see in every cohort I teach. Quiet, inhibited, uncertain about their ability, and I hold out my hand and pull them up. I want students to look up and see someone who was also uncertain, didn't always speak 'proper', didn't have the academic credentials, came from a household where English was a second language, and always struggled to belong.

I know too well the challenges that cultural barriers impose on students. How much derision and doubt they may have to deal with from their own families when they announce that they are studying creative writing. How

difficult they find it to parse some of the texts that are so culturally removed from their own lives - yet the expectation has always been that these texts are important and so must be studied. I can sense their inhibitions, their inability to share their own learning and understanding of the world. And the saddest outcome for a student who might come from a similar background to me (because they often have no emotional scaffolding and no mentors) is when their own writing is often not about their understanding of the world but mimics what they think the publishing world wants to read. This is often a narrative that completely strips their own lived experience and personal histories from the story.

I was delivering a workshop in a girls' school in East London a few years ago. Most of the girls were Muslim and wore hijab. The girls in the workshop were the brightest in the school. I set them a task to create a central character for their story. After a few minutes I asked what they had come up with. I went around the room. They answered, 'Sarah, Lizzie, Lyra, Christina ...' I had to stop them. The girls in the class were called Alia, Farhana, Nusrat and Fatima. I asked them why they hadn't used a name for their characters they identified with. One from their own culture, like the names of their mothers, or sisters or brothers? They looked at me like they couldn't believe what I had said. 'Who wants to read a story like that, sir! You don't see those books on the shelves or in bookshops!' It broke my heart. Not only could they not see

themselves in the books they read at school or in the library, but they couldn't even see themselves in their own stories. They had made themselves invisible. We had a long discussion about it, and I made them change the characters' names. Some of them struggled to do it. The notion of not being the hero of your own story was so deeply conditioned that they struggled to break it. After we finished the workshops, a few of them came up to me, interested writers, and asked me if I really believed they had something to say, a story to tell. I sat them down and told them that not only did they have stories, that the world needed them to write these stories.

In 1990, Dr Rudine Sims Bishop published an article ('Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors') about the importance of providing young readers with books that reflect the 'multicultural nature of the world' in which we live. Dr Bishop makes the point that it's crucial for children from marginalized groups to view themselves in the books they read. When books don't serve as mirrors to children, Dr Bishop says, 'They learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in society'. To this, I would add that students who, like me, enter an institution, yet can't see themselves in the lecturers that are there to guide them, can often leave disheartened, misunderstood and not seen. Not seen in the language they bring, not seen in the cultural reference points they have, not seen in the uncertainty of a world that has often dismissed their perspectives.

In that classroom of girls who couldn't see themselves in the books they read, and subsequently since, I have tried to provide mirrors that reflect a variety of images back; to encourage more voices, to nurture writing that otherwise might never be seen. Sometimes this writing is unstructured, in translation, unfinished and rarely seen by anyone. Every term there is a moment when at least one student will look at me and wait. Sometimes, it's via email, sometimes in a tutorial, and by now I know what the moment is. The student needs permission, to continue, to be what they've always been. I know this moment because I've been there myself and know enough to be patient. The permission is not for me to give. Writing takes courage. Writing even one sentence is an act of faith. The only permission a writer needs is from themselves.

In the last ten years, there has been a movement in publishing for better representation within books, including books by writers of colour. There has also been a push for more diversity in recruitment in publishing, particularly in editorial and publisher roles. This movement is progressive, albeit at times slow, yet much needed. I would go further and suggest the movement might call for better representation in teaching, particularly in higher education. There are now more creative writing courses than ever and it is on these courses that greater representation of lecturers is

needed. I have learnt the true value of a more diverse staff and how important that is for critical interpretations of canonical works, and the selection of texts that represent a wider range of historical, social and literary interpretation. We are working against what Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche called, 'The danger of a single story' by offering a wider view of the world; if institutions employ staff that transcend that single story then we are preparing all students for a broader perspective. So, a call to action for academic institutions, publishers, colleges, schools and places of learning everywhere. Promote more lecturers who don't have the best academic qualifications. Employ lecturers to whom academic writing doesn't come naturally. Support more lecturers who don't always have the 'right' academic credentials. Employ more lecturers who come from backgrounds that reflect the society in which we live. Nurture more lecturers who have always struggled to belong. Let the literature we publish serve as the mirrors which reflect us all, and let the schools of learning we attend serve as the doors we can all walk through. Let us always be seen.

Irfan Master

Irfan Master is an award-winning author of novels, shorts stories, poetry and plays. His debut novel, *A Beautiful Lie*, (Bloomsbury, 2011) was shortlisted for the Waterstones Children's Book prize and the Branford Boase award for debut authors and translated into ten languages. His second novel for young adults, *Out of Heart* (Hot Key, 2017), was long listed for the Carnegie Medal. Irfan's short fiction has also been published in numerous anthologies, most recently, *Resist* (Comma press, 2019), *The Good Journal* (2019) and the award-winning *A Change is Gonna Come* (Stripes, 2017). In 2019 he contributed an article highlighting the importance of greater representation in literature for young people that featured in *Breaking New Ground*, a round-up of British writers of colour produced by BookTrust and Speaking Volumes.

Irfan is a passionate advocate for creative projects in the community and has developed programmes and mentored young people in how to gain access to the creative arts. He has worked with English PEN, the British Council and the Arvon Foundation to deliver writing workshops and has worked as writer-in-residence for the writing charity First Story since 2011. Irfan is currently an Associate Lecturer in Creative Writing and English Literature at London Metropolitan University.

Before embarking on a writing career, Irfan gained his MA in Library & Information Science from Loughborough University, working initially as a public and school librarian and then as an advocate for libraries and reading as Project Manager at the National Literacy Trust. Irfan lives with his wife and son in London.

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

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