

## **Writing spells danger!**

Richard O'Neill

As I sat signing books in the grand room of a museum after a storytelling event, a young child approached me. 'Will that story you just told be in a book?' she asked. 'Not that one, it wouldn't like it,' I replied, and the child nodded, understanding that some stories, just like children, need space to change and grow without feeling pressured to conform. 'It would be stuck forever and never know what comes next,' she said.

I grew up in a fully nomadic Romani family in the Northeast of England. In our language, that area of the UK was called 'shillow Tem', which translates as 'the Cold Country'. It was, but the warmth of my family was the perfect antidote. From a young age, I was immersed in a world of stories and songs, the lyrical style of communication that my family used in their everyday lives. We had no need for writing and, in fact, we were taught to be extremely wary of it. Writing represented bureaucracy,

official documents, control and an attempt to put an end to our nomadic way of life, a way of life that had a four-hundred-and-fifty-year history.

In the late 1960s, the UK was changing rapidly. There were massive infrastructure projects, business-park and home building programmes and many of our traditional stopping places were being swallowed up. They called it progress, we called it being forced to settle. As a result, I was legally required to attend school – but a year before, I had already become intrigued by books, particularly one about a farm and its animals, which I had spotted in a newsagent's window as my mam and I were walking through a town. It had animals on the front cover, which looked like the animals from the farms we stayed on, and I asked her if I could have it. I was a boy who usually asked for diecast toys, so I think a combination of surprise and delight made her whisk me in to choose it from the carousel. At four years old, I taught myself to read with that book. Reading allowed me to decode the symbols printed on paper, taking me into different worlds, expanding my vocabulary, although, as I grew older, I realised that things written about our culture were not written by us and often contained mistakes that were used against us. When I read aloud for my relatives from books and newspapers, I would edit out what I thought was negative, hurtful, wrong or alarming.

It wasn't until I was nine years old that I discovered the power that writing held in the Gorja (non-Romani) world. My dad was an entrepreneur – a buyer and seller of a whole range of things, mainly vehicles, motorised and horse-drawn. As well as selling at auctions and via word of mouth, he understood the power of advertising and would place regular advertisements in the local town newspaper. This would consist of my dad visiting the office in person and describing the item to the person at the front counter, who would write it down, calculate the cost and take his money – a system that had worked very well. If I was off school, I'd go with him and wait in the van, and he'd often have a good-natured grumble about the cost eating into his profit.

On one particular visit, there was nothing good-natured about his reaction. He'd been informed that the newspaper's policy had changed, and everyone had to write out their own advert. To make it worse, this had been done in front of a queue of people. Embarrassed and annoyed, my dad returned to the van with a blank form, where I set about writing the advertisement for him. The following day, my copywriting skills had produced a larger number of enquiries than usual and the item was sold quickly. From that day on, I wrote all of the advertisements and flyers when we were on the road and calling door-to-door.

Writing may have served a practical purpose at first, but soon it developed into something that allowed me to express my innermost feelings that I would never have shared with anyone else. That's the way it would have stayed, had I not got a request to explain a particular aspect of my culture to an academic who was conducting research in healthcare. Despite my best efforts to explain over the phone, we were unable to bridge the gap between us. It wasn't until I wrote an email, a heartfelt and in-depth description of the situation, that the researcher understood. This experience showed me that the written word could be a tool to tell our stories in a way that others could understand. Writing had the power not just to sell things, but to create a bridge of understanding. I had built that bridge.

I realised my writing could be a tool for telling our stories in a format that people outside of our community could understand – that I could help to change the narratives and challenge the well-worn tropes so often seen, read and heard in film, TV, books and theatre. But how to start, when on TV there were no programmes by Romani writers and we weren't included in any of the other ones?

An opportunity arose quite out of the blue. A writer with Romani heritage who had read a little of my work took a huge chance on me, putting their

reputation on the line, by recommending me for a paid, playwriting project. The resulting drama was performed nationally in theatres and broadcast on BBC Radio 4 and its success cemented my belief that writing was not just a code to be cracked by anyone who could read. It was a tool that could be used to change people's perceptions and open their minds to new ideas and cultures. I could write in a way that challenged stereotypes and encouraged understanding and empathy.

Writing also allowed me to explore and express my own identity as a Romani person. It was a way for me to reflect on and keep connected to my culture and my family's traditions. Through writing, I could capture the true beauty of our culture and share it with others. I could also address the misunderstandings and misconceptions that have plagued our community for centuries.

However, as most writers know, it's never a straight road, even when you're a professionally performed playwright, internationally published children's author and writer of articles for national publications. There were, and still are, those misunderstandings and misconceptions along the way, as well as resistance from those who don't understand or appreciate our culture. So, writing for me is not only a necessary form of self-expression, but also a form of resistance – a way to challenge the

dominant narrative that has been written about us for far too long. It is a way to fight against the forces of oppression and discrimination that have held our community back; a way to educate others; to break down barriers and build bridges of understanding.

Once you enter the mainstream, you are in danger of being misunderstood by your own community as well as others. The questions start to haunt you – how much of your community and culture do you write about, at what point do you draw the line? How much do you edit your writing in case there is the slightest possibility that what you are writing is going to negatively impact members of your community, your family and maybe even yourself? Words like ‘betrayal’ enter your mind... you might think of not writing at all.

Romani people have always had to remain hidden to remain safe, so as a Romani writer you’re in a double bind – wanting to represent your community authentically but, at the same time, not wanting to give away the knowledge and secrets that have kept you safe, leaving yourself open to criticism and your community open to harm. I write about our history, our struggles, our joys, our dreams. I write about the beauty of our language and our culture, the power of our traditions, the importance of our community, the richness and diversity that we bring to the world. And

slowly but surely, I have seen a change. An increasing number of people listen to us, and now see us as more than just exotic curiosities or criminals. And that's what writing has done for me – it has given me a voice, a way to tell our stories and to challenge the dominant narrative, to show the world who we really are. It's also given me the wisdom to decide which stories I commit to the page, the airwaves or screen and which will always stay as oral stories free and unfettered ready to travel through time and space to the next storyteller and their listeners.

We now need to inspire future generations of Romani writers – to show them that their stories matter, that their voices deserve to be heard. How do we do that? By mentoring and creating opportunities for their writing and their voices to be seen and heard and that's exactly why, along with one of my writing partners, Michelle Russell, we created the community publishing company 'Trails of Tales'. As difficult as it may be sometimes, it's part of our culture to help each other, and it's incumbent on me to help other writers as I have been helped. As the old Romani saying goes, 'das dab Ka i roata le nevi vardo' – you have to push the wheel of a new wagon to get it rolling.

## **Richard O'Neill**

Richard O'Neill is a storyteller, author, playwright, animation scriptwriter and workshop leader based in the North of England. He conducts nomadic storytelling training sessions across Europe and co-founded Diverse Book Week to champion inclusivity and amplify diverse voices.

His upbringing in a traditional nomadic Romani family deeply influences his work, inspiring him to leverage the power of storytelling in various formats to promote inclusion and acceptance.

Awards include the 'National Literacy Hero' award for his impact on promoting literacy and diversity in literature, the Beacon Leadership Award for community development and inclusion, and a Royal Literary Society Award.

A recording of this text can be found at [writersmosaic.org.uk](https://writersmosaic.org.uk)

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