


# WRITERS MAKE WORLDS



The Postcolonial Writers Make Worlds project explores the exciting diversity and range of British writing today.

Our reading groups, talks, lectures and other events looked at work by a range of writers: from poets Bernardine Evaristo and Daljit Nagra through non-fiction writers like Reni Eddo-Lodge to novelists Kamila Shamsie and Nadifa Mohamed.

Together we found that British writing is not something produced only by white English authors, but has a diverse range of backgrounds and many different histories.

This poster display shares some of our findings.

See more at [writersmakeworlds.com](http://writersmakeworlds.com)

# WHAT DRAWS US TO ASIAN AND BLACK BRITISH POETRY?



The poets featured in the Postcolonial Writers Make Worlds project included Linton Kwesi Johnson, Bernardine Evaristo, and Daljit Nagra.



Our discussions about this poetry asked what features of their work attracted contemporary readers. Were readers drawn in by the humour of a poet like Nagra in quirky work like 'Singh Song' or Evaristo's nimble verse-novel *The Emperor's Babe*, or was it the dub rhythm of LKJ, which comes through so strongly in poems like 'Inglan is a Bitch'?

Alternatively, was it controversial questions concerning racism, class prejudice and police harassment, such as LKJ and Nagra raise, or the histories of empire and slavery that Evaristo dramatizes? Perhaps it was all of these things.

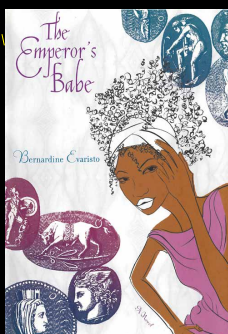


# NEW APPROACHES TO THE PAST:

## POSTCOLONIAL BRITISH FICTION

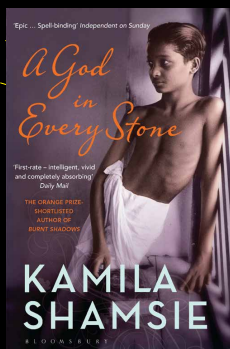
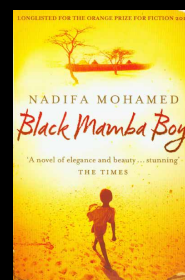
Black British and British Asian fiction is often historical. It uncovers new ways of thinking about British history from outside the mainstream.

In *The Emperor's Babe* Bernardine Evaristo explores the possible lives of black Britons in Roman times. Nadifa Mohamed's *Black Mamba Boy* follows some of the refugee trails that have fed into the story of Britain in the twentieth century. Kamila Shamsie's *A God in Every Stone* turns to the involvement of South Asian soldiers in the First World War, excavating the complicated histories of that conflict and of women's suffrage in surprising and moving ways.



Bernardine Evaristo's comic verse-epic *The Emperor's Babe* pays heed to Britain's long history of cultural mixing and colonization on home ground. Its un-rhyming couplets tell the feisty tale of Zuleika, a third-century African-British woman in Roman London. The teeming city throws up transformative mixes of people, emotions and cultures. For the spirited Zuleika, these encounters culminate in her passionate if doomed affair with the Emperor Septimius Severus, himself of North African descent.

British-Somali writer Nadifa Mohamed's *Black Mamba Boy* is a memoir-cum-travelogue. The book plots a story of migration from Somaliland to the west and grapples with the difficult legacies of colonialism, war and globalization. We follow the hero Jama on a circuitous journey across the Horn of Africa, the Middle East, Wales and southern England, as he forges a sense of belonging and community in both Africa and Europe.



Kamila Shamsie's audacious and affecting *A God in Every Stone* ranges across continents and histories, from the fifth-century reign of Persian King Darius, through to the suffrage movement in pre-1914 England, from the Indian camps of the western front in Flanders to the struggle for Indian Independence in the valleys and bazaars of Peshawar. The novel is a story of archaeologists that itself uncovers the complicated residues and contingencies of global history in Asia.





A growing number of Black British and British Asian writers use creative non-fiction, memoir and other forms of life writing to ask questions about black 'invisibility' in contemporary British society and to project their voices and perspectives in bold and uncompromising ways.



WHY I'M  
NO LONGER  
TALKING  
TO WHITE  
PEOPLE  
ABOUT  
RACE

*'This emotional disconnect is the conclusion of living a life oblivious to the fact that their skin colour is the norm and all others deviate from it.'*

—Reni Eddo-Lodge



Journalist Afua Hirsch in her widely cited memoir *Brit(ish)* (2018) considers from a mixed-race perspective the quandaries of national and community belonging in Britain today.



A prominent and vibrant polemicist is Reni Eddo-Lodge, with her bestselling book *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People about Race* (2017). In the book Eddo-Lodge explores the effects of structural racism and the 'emotional disconnect' that happens when liberal individuals refuse to recognise their often inadvertent participation in forms of racial exclusion.

*'Brit(ish) wants us to confront Britain's past and use it to create a wider understanding about race, racism, white supremacy and otherness. At the same time, it also wants to document British history from a side that doesn't glorify the British empire, but instead, centres on the stories of its BAME population.'*

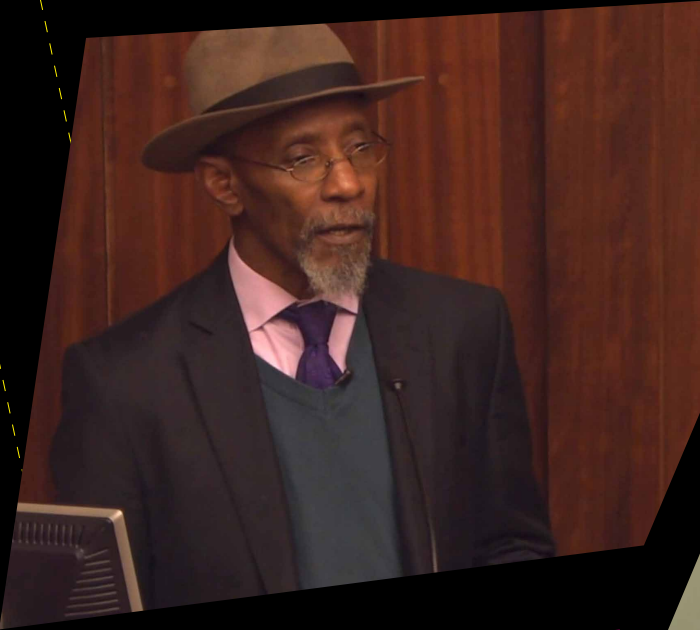
—Nikesh Shukla, *The Guardian*

# DOCUMENTARY AND NON-FICTION WRITING

The performance of a poem or a play powerfully demonstrates how dynamic reading can be. The poet or actor makes the writing come alive in similar ways to how the imagination gives vivid shape and energy to words when we read.



The work of playwrights like Kwame Kwei-Armah or the poetic performance of writers such as M. NourbeSe Philip voice an unmistakable social imperative and catalyse cultural and historical debates. Yet these dramas also work through character and situation to move audiences to respond to those debates.



Our workshops asked audiences how the performances they watched affected their experience of these issues and questions.

*Did the message ever get in the way of their immersion?*

*How is the experience of reading a play different from seeing it performed?*



# PERFORMANCE

# QUESTIONS OF READING

The Postcolonial Writers Make Worlds workshops consider reading to be involved, engaged, and active. Our discussions in 2017–18 explored reading as a dynamic and thought-changing activity. In discussion with the writers themselves, we looked at the ways in which their work is animated, mobilized and made alive through reading.

...for war was a monumental task, huge demands both on Poppa himself, public purse. Money was service had in

One of the most interesting things that all the book groups involved in our project discovered was that different or unfamiliar experiences were not a barrier to readers identifying with characters.

For many readers, finding points of familiarity along gender, age, geographical or other lines was important for their ability to enjoy stories from different communities. Often readers were also struck by finding experiences that were similar to their own in very different contexts.

White British readers developed a new perspective on immigrants in Britain today by reading about immigrant experiences in the past. They found that the more they read, the more deeply they entered characters' points of view, or the more fond they grew of the characters. They saw Britain from 'the other side'. Sometimes these new perspectives were uncomfortable, because they made readers see the still-enduring divides and inequalities in British society more clearly.

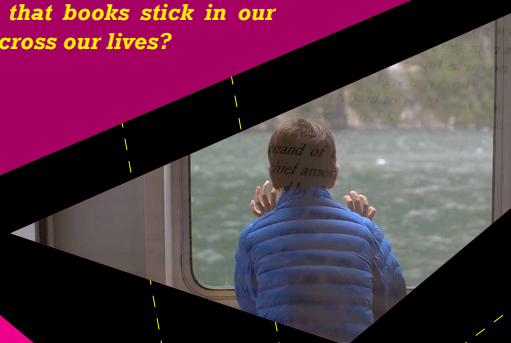
Some of the questions we asked included:

***What is it that calls to us in a book and what draws us in?***

***How do we identify ourselves through how we read?***

***And how is that books stick in our memory across our lives?***

While the majority of our Oxford readers were from white British backgrounds, those who weren't enjoyed reading books that presented alternative perspectives to the ones often found in what is more typically considered 'British' literature. For such readers, seeing their stories represented in books can be profoundly validating.

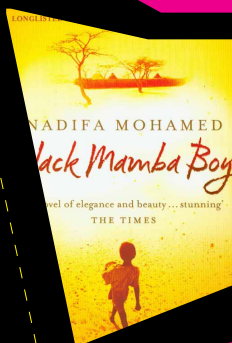




Writing by Black, Asian and other minority ethnic authors has been consistently under-represented in the literature published in the UK. Out of thousands of books published in 2016, fewer than 100 were by British authors of a non-white background (*The Bookseller*).

How are our experiences of reading shaped by book covers and blurbs?

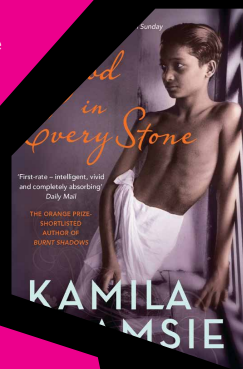
Are your book choices ever affected by the shelf a book is placed on in a bookshop?



**'There is an orthodoxy whereby the presumed reader is totally mono-cultural, White middle England. We know from looking at census data that this is a very out-dated view. I think sometimes a paradigm gets created and everyone starts to subscribe to it.'**

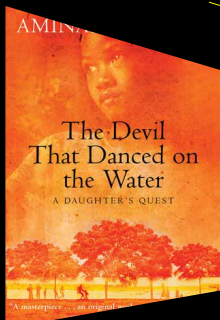
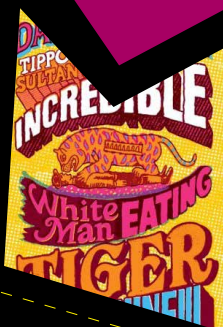
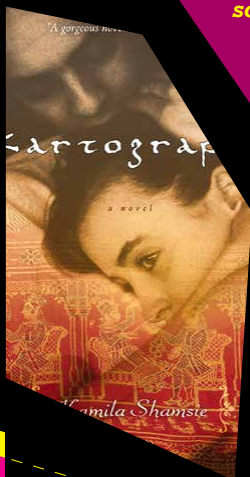
—Aminatta Forna, *Writing the Future* report by Spread the Word, 2015

Many Black and Asian writers whose books have come out with mainstream British publishers describe the pressure they have felt to conform to cultural stereotypes. Their books are often packaged in ways that focus on their ethnicity and depend on clichés.



At the same time, more universal aspects of their writing are overlooked. For example, the covers of novels by Asian British writers usually stick to a limited colour palette of yellows, reds, and oranges, accented by exotic images.

# THE BOOK INDUSTRY



Does this look like a book that includes the author's experiences living in a caravan in Scotland?



# HOW IS BRITISH WRITING TODAY POSTCOLONIAL?

**It explores questions of identity.**

**It interrogates our ideas of home and ourselves in the world.**

**It excavates the many diverse histories that went into the making of modern Britain.**

If we think about it, these perceptions apply whether we are reading Hilary Mantel or Nadifa Mohamed, Ali Smith or Kamila Shamsie.

All these writers give us dynamic new ways of thinking about Britain and British identity. They ask us to revisit our assumptions about how we as readers relate to the wider world and encourage us to develop new forms of national and global awareness. Their writing also speaks directly to the pressing issues of our time, such as race, migration, inequality and war.

Perhaps all contemporary writing in Britain can be thought of as postcolonial.

