

**PUBLISHING AND
LITERARY NETWORKS
IN THE SOUTH WEST**



PUBLISHING AND LITERARY NETWORKS IN THE SOUTH WEST

2023–2024 MA Publishing
University of Exeter



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'This publication should be read by every literary professional, prospective university student, and book lover in the country. It's remarkable to see the wealth of the South West's literary industry and talent taking shape here and how much potential there is for more.'

Anna Cohn Orchard, Executive Director of Exeter City of Literature

'*Publishing and Literary Networks in the South West* demonstrates loudly and clearly that the book industry in the South West is thriving and filled with energy and creativity.'

Darran McLaughlin, Manager of Bookhaus, Bristol

'What hard, diligent work these students have put into mapping the literary landscape of the South West! It's fascinating to read about what's happening across the South West, from the sustainable strategies undertaken by small presses to the queer literature hubs and rich literary histories that are being uncovered by archivists - and that's only the start. My curiosity has been ignited and I'm thankful to them for widening my understanding.'

Heather Marks, Creative Producer, Words of Colour

'A stimulating and lively celebration and exploration of books, book people and readers in our lovely region!'

Barry Cunningham, Publisher and Managing Director of Chicken House

'In a region where publishing and literary groups are often assumed to be isolated and sporadic, it is wonderful to see a thread drawn between these local networks, successfully building up a bigger and brighter picture of a literary South West.'

Eleanor Gaffney, SYP South West Chair 2023

'*Publishing and Literary Networks in the South West* illuminates the region's diverse literary ecosystem, whilst also reflecting the calibre and professionalism of the 2023 - 2024 MA Publishing cohort at the University of Exeter.'

Suresh Ariaratnam, Founder of Sprung Sultan Literary Agency

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INTRODUCTION

Kate Wallis and D-M Withers

The South West of England is emerging as a ‘bookish hub’, declared a recent article in *The Bookseller* (2022). The opening of Hachette’s regional office in Bristol in July 2021 is seen as a key moment in this evolution. For the first time, it brought one of the Big Five ‘London publishers’ to the South West with the ambition to build stronger links with literary communities and book trade businesses outside the capital. It was a move replicated in other cities across the UK, with Hachette opening offices in Sheffield, Newcastle, Manchester and Edinburgh, with the intention of breaking down barriers and increasing the social diversity of an industry that has remained, until recent interventions, stubbornly white and middle class.

There have long been established literary networks and publishing industries in the South West. Devon alone is home to two literary legends that redefined publishing cultures in the twentieth century. Agatha Christie, born in Ashfield, Torquay in 1890, became the biggest-selling novelist of all time (her business archive, Agatha Christie Ltd, is held in Special Collections at the University of Exeter and offers fascinating insight into how this happened). Penguin Books was famously conceived at Exeter St Davids train station when Bristol-native Allen Lane (who was returning, incidentally, from a meeting with Christie) had the great revelation to publish literary classics for the mass market for the modest price of a cigarette packet. This iconic moment was celebrated in 2023 when a Penguin Books vending machine was installed at the station, an initiative led by Exeter City of Literature, and which you can read more about within this publication (see pp. 25–7).

Publishing and Literary Networks in the South West presents a collection of essays, interviews and reviews that work to collectively celebrate publishing and literary connections in the South West. As the pieces themselves make visible, these stories are inevitably shaped by the region’s distinct physical geography. The South West stretches out across Cornwall, Devon, Somerset, Dorset, Gloucestershire and Wiltshire, the largest of the UK’s nine regions. Home to the significant urban hubs of Bristol, Plymouth, and adjoining Bournemouth and Poole, it also boasts the longest coastline of any UK region, and a large proportion of its population live in smaller rural settlements. Reading this extended regional geography as a collective literary space therefore opens productive connections, but also tensions. A 2023 South West-based literary event that perhaps speaks to some of these connections and tensions was the appearance of Natasha Carthew and Catrina Davis in conversation with Raynor Winn at the Cheltenham Literature

Festival. In a discussion entitled ‘Rural Idyll: Myth and Reality’, staged at one of the UK’s oldest, largest and most affluent literary festivals, these writers addressed the disjunctures between the beauty of the Cornish landscape as a nurturing space for creativity, and the lived experiences of rural poverty and lack of opportunities for writers located within it. Notably, Carthew, whose memoir *Undercurrent* was shortlisted for the 2023 Nero Book Awards, is a writer invested in strengthening South West-based literary initiatives and networks. In 2021, she published her collection *Born Between Crosses* – interconnected stories that engage with the challenges facing rural working-class women in Cornwall – with Penzance-based Hypatia Trust (interviewed for this publication pp. 94–101). In the same year she launched a new Bristol-based literary festival – The Class Festival – focused on celebrating working-class writing.

As part of a 2023 ‘South-West Focus’ in *The Bookseller*, Caroline Sanderson highlighted the region as one that ‘abounds in working authors and illustrators, and brilliant indie publishers’. The pieces gathered here can therefore only ever offer a partial snapshot of the dynamics and breadth of literary networks and publishing initiatives across the South West. What they can do, though, is draw attention to key areas of regional strength. In particular, they highlight the vibrancy of work happening that builds connections between nature and writing, invests in the creativity of young people and fosters independent bookshops as thriving literary and community hubs.

Davina Quinlivan’s evocative essay identifies the legacy of Dorset-based environmental education charity Common Ground, founded in the early 1980s, as a ‘living system’ connecting and sheltering an expanding network of environmental writers in the South West (and beyond). As Quinlivan highlights, it is particularly apt that Adrian and Gracie Cooper, founders of award-winning Dorset-based independent publisher Little Toller, have now taken the helm of Common Ground. Both organizations have placed a crucial emphasis on the power of writing, art and publishing to enable individuals and communities to connect in creative and transformative ways with their local environments. Oli Kleinschmidt argues here for Little Toller’s significance as a small press not only in leading the way in nature writing publishing – a flourishing genre within the industry in recent years – but also in terms of urgent wider questions relating to publishing and environmental sustainability.

Publishing and Literary Networks in the South West opens with Catie Gilhooly's powerful piece on children's writing and publishing, drawing attention to innovative work in the region that is creating spaces for children and young people's participation and representation in literature. Organizations including Kernow Education Arts Partnership, Paper Nations and, as explored by Jasmine Aldridge (pp. 118-125), The Bank of Dreams and Nightmares in Dorset, have all partnered with schools to develop workshop models that push the boundaries of imagination and widen access to creative writing. And yet across the pieces shared here we also see spaces for children's creativity and literary expression being prioritized by libraries, bookshops and literary festivals (including Wells Festival of Literature and Africa Writes – Exeter featured on pp. 29-35 and 102-7). Alongside this, South West-based publishers Jessica Kingsley Publishers, Mabecron, Chicken House (interviewed here see pp. 126-133) and Book Island have been working to ensure as many children and young people as possible can see themselves in children's literature and be inspired by the stories they read to make social and environmental change.

One of the biggest boons to the South West's publishing and literary scenes has been the emergence in recent years of a vibrant independent bookshop sector. Independent bookshops have long flourished in the region, but there can be no doubt that smaller, curated and community-focused bookshops have witnessed a renaissance lately. Independent bookshops feature prominently in the stories we tell about publishing and literary networks in the South West. They are spaces of 'intention' as Charlie Richards, co-owner of Exeter's Bookbag, explains. Such intentions will of course differ according to the motivations of their owners, but all the shops visited in these pages share one thing in common: they are spaces which create community. Whether that be the political reading groups hosted at Bristol's Bookhaus; the readers who gravitate toward the Persephone Bookshop in Bath, with its genteel subversiveness; or those who simply feel at home in Bookbag, with its careful curation of books by underrepresented authors. The independent bookshop sector is thriving, not only as a space of consumption, but as a vital platform for the activation of local literary cultures.

'We hope that by sharing the series of pieces that make up this publication, connections and interventions can be sparked for readers that contribute to and continue this work.'

By creating a publication that celebrates and coheres a narrative around publishing and literary networks in the South West, we want to be part of strengthening the work that is happening in this space. Our intention is to do this by raising the visibility of and generating conversations about the region's publishing ecosystems. We hope that by sharing the series of pieces that make

up this publication, connections and interventions can be sparked for readers that contribute to and continue this work. This publication adds to initiatives and conversations started by Literature Works, the Society of Young Publishers South West branch (see pp. 159-167), Exeter City of Literature, The Lit Platform, and Sad Press and Handheld Press's Bath and Bristol Small Publishers' Gathering (2018) that all work to promote publishing and literary industries in the South West. In particular, in our interview published here, Anna Cohn Orchard (Director of Exeter City of Literature) emphasizes the importance of 'job creation and talent development'. We hope that in giving shape to the region's publishing and literary space, this publication can play a part in building these opportunities for the future.

Publishing and Literary Networks in the South West has been forged by the skill, dedication, hard work and talent of students on the University of Exeter's MA Publishing programme. Our 2023-24 cohort have overseen the entire process of creating this publication, from conception to realization, including typesetting the interiors and designing the front cover which features an original illustration by UWE Bristol student Woon Bing. They have conscientiously pitched and written articles, and then collaboratively and carefully edited each other's work. Their contributions report on the vibrant literary events happening across the South West, from Conversations with Baldwin curated by Words of Colour to Bristol's Lyra Poetry Festival and Queer Out Loud in Plymouth. The region's linguistic diversity is celebrated too, through a detailed survey of Cornish-language publishing, past and present. There are articles on the mission-based academic publisher Bristol University Press and queer reprint publisher Lurid Editions. Conversations with library professionals based in Exeter, Bristol and Cornwall speak to libraries not only as the 'beating hearts' of communities, but as spaces of sanctuary, retreat, discovery and entertainment. There are also interviews with South West-based artists and industry figures, such as illustrator Betty Bettsworth and literary agent Suresh Ariaratnam.

When we founded the MA in Publishing at the University of Exeter in 2021, one of our goals was to create a supportive, research-based space that could inspire meaningful change within the publishing industry in relation to issues of access, representation, social and environmental justice, and global power structures. We also wanted to connect our teaching and research to the vibrant literary networks and publishing industries present in the South West. Our work in these areas is ongoing, and we hope with this publication and its subsequent iterations, in dialogue with work with our students and South West-based industry partners, we can make space for continuing these conversations.

TURNING PAGES, BUILDING MINDS

Children's Publishing and Writing in the South West

Catie Gilhooly in collaboration with Haritha Prashanth

The books we interact with in our earliest years are often the foundation for who we become as members of society. Children's publishing is expanding much more than it might seem, and with the huge influence of these books on shaping both children and the future, they are some of the most challenging and complicated ones to produce. If one looks at the variety of content and design changes the industry has implemented, one would be surprised by its diversity and the speed with which things have changed. The South West is at the forefront of these changes. It has become a booming hub for children's literature and publishing due to the festivals, educational programmes, local publishers, authors and more who have brought children in the region closer to books and literacy through community efforts. The medium of stories and storytelling is rapidly changing to adapt to wider societal changes in representation and technology, but children's literature communities in the South West have been taking it in their stride. In this article, we will be looking at some such initiatives and stories which represent the fast-paced changes we are seeing in the children's publishing industry, and how exactly the South West is forging a path for future readers.

STORIES OF THE SOUTH WEST

Children's literature has a home in the South West, specifically at Bath Spa University, which holds a one-of-a-kind MA in Children's Publishing. This programme is the first in the UK and has begun within the last few years to explore the industry inside and out, from editorial to production. Bath Spa University also offers an MA in Writing for Young People, which paved the way for the Children's Publishing programme. One notable South West alumna of this MA is Emma Carroll. Carroll was an English teacher in Devon prior to becoming a historical fiction author for middle-grade readers ('Home'). For her 2020 novel *The Somerset Tsunami*, she based her story on a real-life freak flash flood in Somerset in 1607 (Faber & Faber). Utilizing local history to educate and entertain both South West and broader young readers creates an interest in and identity for the area.

Mabecron Book Publishing is another publisher who takes pride in creating and distributing stories about the South West, by South West authors. When the publishing house's founder, Ron Johns, was operating his bookshops in Devon and Cornwall, he realized that there was a gap in the market for children's books which discussed local traditions and folktales. Thus, he created what he wanted to sell. This includes titles like a reprinting of a 1986 book of Cornish folk tales, now with colourful illustrations, and various series of stories of 'Cornish Cats', 'Mousehole Mice', and 'Soggy the Bear' ('Publications'). Taking a page out of Emma Carroll's book with a focus on South West history, they also published *The Story of the Good Ship Truelove*, an illustrated story based on discovered images from 1906 of a Penzance man who single-handedly built a boat in his back garden ('The Story of the Good Ship Truelove'). All of these books have a common thread of identity surrounding the counties of Devon and Cornwall, and young readers tie the stories they read and hear to the places they see. Within the South West, a local pride for the past, present and future is clearly shown through its local authors and publishers.

'Utilizing local history in order to educate and entertain both South West and broader young readers creates an interest in and identity for the area.'

ANALYSING CURRENT TRENDS IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Trends in children's literature have seen huge changes. There has been a significant shift in content, especially towards representation of diverse characters in terms of race, ethnicity, socio-economic class, and LGBTQIA+ people and families. Within the last decade, the children's publishing industry realized that many of their bestselling titles lacked representation. The Centre for Literacy in Primary Education conducts annual reporting on children's literature, which showed 'an increase in the number of children's books published featuring a minority ethnic character from 4% in 2017 to 20% in 2021' (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education). At the same time, many of these minority characters were not main characters; that percentage had risen annually but still only comprised 9% as of 2021 (Centre for Literacy in Primary Education). It is extremely important for all children to see themselves in the books they read, and similarly important for those who are not from minority ethnic backgrounds to see others represented through the literature they read at a young age.

Dr Nazneen Ahmed Pathak, a British-Bangladeshi academic at the University of Exeter, is working to bridge that gap. She published her debut middle-grade novel *City of Stolen Magic* in 2023. Dr Pathak is a historian in addition to being a lecturer in creative writing, and thus is focused on writing about 'untold stories' (Noble). In a conversation with Fiona Noble for *The Bookseller*, she said 'the Archive, with a capital A, is something that is arranged by white, middle-class men. There are so

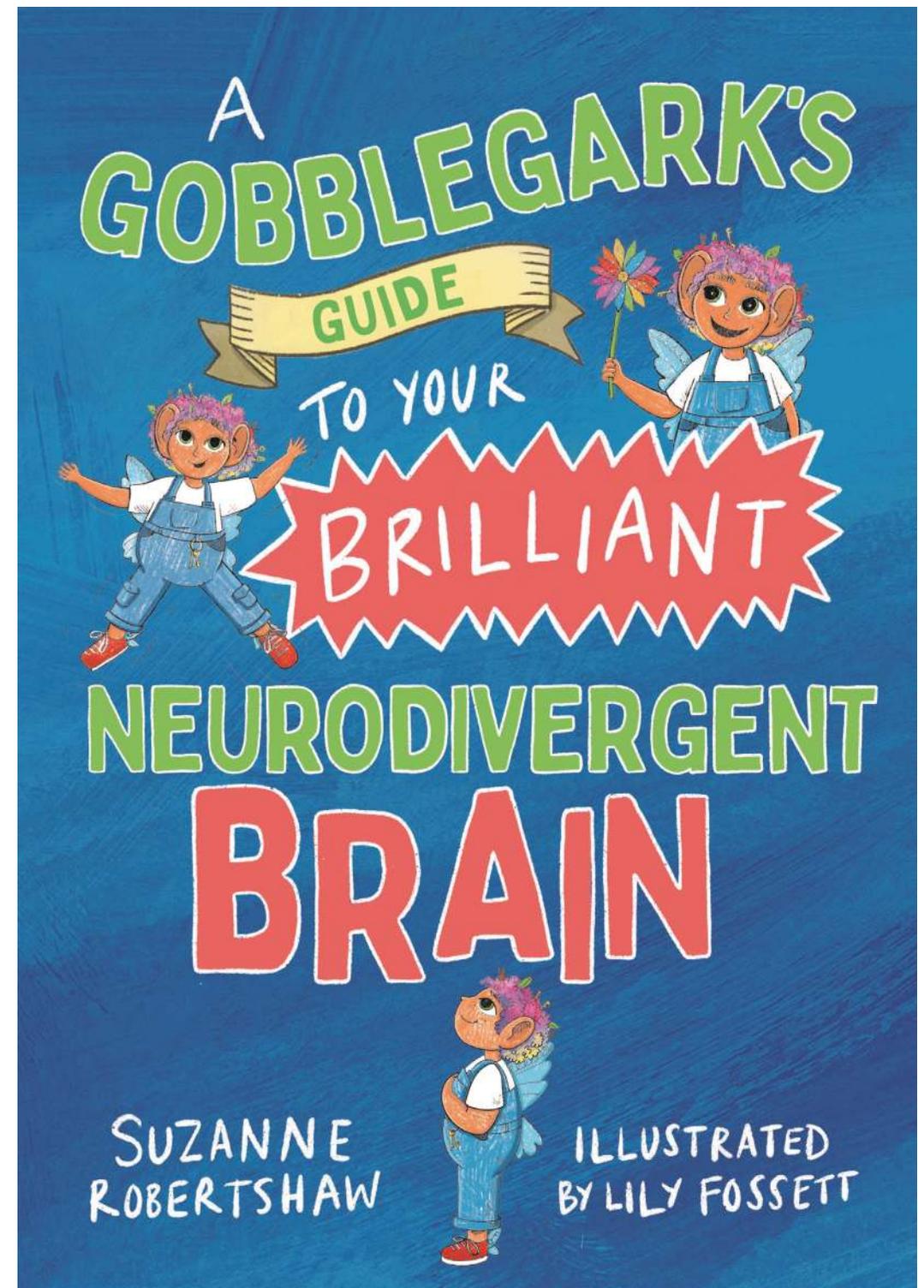
many stories, particularly about communities of colour, that we simply do not have.' Her novel, about a young girl in 1855 rural Bengal whose mother is taken by the 'Company' (meant to represent the East India Company) to London, focuses on sharing those untold stories and has been recognized widely within the industry for doing so.

'There are so many stories, particularly about communities of colour, that we simply do not have.'

- Dr Nazneen Ahmed Pathak

From a Big Five publishing standpoint, the Jessica Kingsley (JKP) imprint of Hachette UK, with an office in Bristol, has been driven by a mission to diversify books since their founding in 1987. The publishing house originally began by creating books on autism, social work and arts therapies ('About Us'). They work towards that original mission now, as they are widely known for their books that are written for and by people who have autism, ADHD, and are part of other neurodivergent communities. They also offer titles targeted towards children and teenagers with ADHD and parents with autistic children. They even provide books for educators to learn how to create more inclusive classrooms and teaching methods for neurodiverse students. One such example is *A Gobblegark's Guide to Your Brilliant Neurodivergent Brain* by Suzanne Robertshaw, illustrated by Bath-based Lily Fossett. This book combines the use of a fictional magical character and incentive-based challenges to encourage children to learn more about how they think and learn differently from others, and to understand their unique strengths ('A Gobblegark's Guide to Your Brilliant Neurodivergent Brain'). In the rural South West, where these resources and representation could be harder to come by, this is yet another opportunity for books to offer a means of support for children and the adults in their lives.

In addition to diversity based on autism and neurodiversity, the JKP imprint has recently expanded their collections to include diversity of gender and sexual orientation. Their book *Rainbow Village* by Emmi Smid celebrates diversity through illustrated woodland creatures, a very modern message with a 'classic' feel. Additionally, they have published works to educate children about the use of pronouns, an *ABC of Gender Identity*, and a set of books titled *He's My Mom!* and *She's My Dad!* to help children learn about transgender people through the representation of trans parents and unique family structures ('Children's Books: Gender Diversity'). Their collections span a wide variety of age categories, and many come with supplementary materials so that parents, carers and educators can feel supported in reading and having conversations surrounding the books' content. Again, having works like this from writers and publishers based inside the South West provides a chance for other authors, illustrators and readers to see themselves represented in diverse works.



Cover art for *A Gobblegark's Guide to Your Brilliant Neurodivergent Brain* by Suzanne Robertshaw, illustrated by Lily Fossett. Published by JKP.

Another trend in children's publishing content is introducing social justice issues using creative approaches. Just as books can situate readers within their own communities and help them form a sense of personal identity, books also have a responsibility to introduce a reader to the rest of the world. A local South West-based children's publishing house, Book Island, publishes translated versions of children's picture books from around the world into English. One of their picture books, *This Is a Dictatorship*, was originally written in Spanish forty years ago following the Franco dictatorship. Its goal was to explain what the term is, and its consequences to a new generation of readers ('This is a Dictatorship'). According to Book Island, the book's Spanish publishers believed that 'children are interested in everything adults are interested in. You must explain things to them, even if it requires great effort' (Book Island). Mikel Casal's bright, modern illustrations not only bring the story to life, but help readers visually understand the concept of a dictatorship. Books such as these, which introduce complex 'adult' topics to children in a digestible form, are important to their education and knowledge of the world's past and present.

'Children are interested in everything adults are interested in. You must explain things to them, even if it requires great effort.'
- Book Island

AN ADAPTING INDUSTRY

The different types of media that children engage with are constantly and quickly changing. To keep up with these changes and to keep their content accessible to as many people as possible, children's publishers have learned to adapt. Many industry professionals have realized that visually engaging images are a way to hold a child's attention over technology. Kathy G. Short, publishing professional and professor at the University of Arizona in the US, stated, 'Books with strong visual images hold special appeal and meaning because children are constantly immersed in a visual culture in which images are central to their experiences and interactions' (Short 289). In addition to using visually engaging imagery, publishers are also learning to engage with children through creating books on topics that they are already interested in, even if those are topics that 'compete' with the attention of children's literature.

Dynamo Limited is one such company involved in children's publishing through creating visuals ('Home'). They are a company of illustrators and designers in Exeter who work in children's literature, products, toys and games that are meant to capture the interest of children. Rather than trying to create content that takes children away from the games and activities they love participating in, they encourage them to read by meeting them halfway. One line of products Dynamo

worked on is a line of licensed product books with Welbeck, centred around video gaming. These include titles like *Roblox Master Gamer's Guide* and a *Fortnite Battle Royale Ultimate Winner's Guide* ('Home'). It is important for publishers to encourage children's passions, wherever they may lie, as that passion could potentially turn into a liking for game design, engineering or virtual storytelling later in life.

Another publisher that chooses to tap into the creative minds of children is Bath-based Curious Universe. While they create books that harness this artistic energy, they also provide art and colouring kits, puzzles, toys, and games. By creating these products, they are not only cultivating children's creativity through words and pages, but also encouraging them to use those skills to engage with other areas that may interest them in terms of arts and crafts. These books and resources utilize 'louder' designs than other children's publishing companies, but it is a choice made with the intention of inspiring children and competing with the endless colours and visual engagement of virtual media. These hands-on modes of engaging children with literature are important to understanding the future of technology and how the arts and storytelling will grow and change for future generations. Both of these companies show that these are not trends for the literature industry to be afraid of; rather, it is providing them with new tools to explore and keep children engaged.

CREATIVE SPACES IN THE SOUTH WEST

In addition to many South West-based children's publishers and groups creating products for kids to engage with, there are also many organizations that create physical spaces for children to spark their imagination through drawing, writing and more. The Bath Children's Literature Festival, the largest and most successful children's literature festival in the country, is essential not only for children's publishers, but for children to explore. The festival hosts workshops and activities for children and young people to engage with books in new ways, with exploration of storytelling that includes interactive performances, dance, art installations and even LEGO bricks ('What's On - Children's Literature'). This festival and its successes have helped establish Bath and the wider South West region as a hub for children's literature.

It is also important for children to be reached across the wider region, often in the comfort of their own schools. This is the case for the Kernow Education Arts Partnership (or KEAP), who work with schools, communities and cultural organizations throughout Cornwall. They create programming that '[focuses] on building experiences, confidence, skills, and enjoyment in story and voice' (Kernow Education Arts Partnership). Their performing group, The Story Republic, is a travelling troupe that brings books and writing to communities, developing 'skills in voice, interaction, and working with varied audiences and spaces' by bringing new writers' works to life. It is more challenging for local artists and writers to spread their work in rural areas like Cornwall, compared to artistic and cultural hubs such as



The Story Republic performing as part of Hall for Cornwall's heritage project 'Revealing City Hall'. Photo by Sean Hurlock.

London or Bristol. KEAP brings the work of local writers to new audiences, but also teaches the people they visit about creating and performing their own works. One primary school teacher's review of the group recalled: 'Immediately when we got back to school, their attitude towards writing was different. We didn't have children who were slumped over the page, we had children who were excited' (Kernow Education Arts Partnership). We can see that groups like KEAP do great work to inspire and boost creativity and are important for young children to foster their imaginative side, nurturing the writers, creators, and innovators of tomorrow.

Many of the South West's vibrant independent bookshops also help to develop these creative spaces for children by holding a multitude of events throughout the year. Some of these events expand beyond reading or signing and encourage the attendees to explore more artistic outlets in addition to reading. The Small City Bookshop in Bristol hosted such an event to celebrate the book *Amara and the Bats* by Emma Reynolds. Building out of Reynolds's research into bat conservation and featuring her own illustrations, the book addresses a huge environmental issue, peaceful protest, and community action. At a workshop in October 2023, the author hosted a story time and 'draw-along,' where she taught participants how to draw the bats that they saw in the book and encouraged them to engage with visual and written content in all-new ways.

THE FUTURE OF SOUTH WEST STORYTELLING

The world of children's publishing is constantly changing, in many positive ways. The sector is addressing the issues that the wider industry has been criticized for by changing content and mediums to provide greater representation and become more accessible for a variety of readers. For an area as culturally rich as the South West, it is especially important to tell stories through diverse mediums. This is recognized by the various means of education and entertainment across South West communities that are encouraging children to not only learn about the world around them, but also to engage and create within the communities they inhabit. Children are the future storytellers, authors, publishers and educators, and it is necessary for the current industry to evolve with their desires, interests and needs. There is hope that as these trends become part of everyday stories within children's literature, the world we pass down to today's children will forge the path for a brighter tomorrow.

‘THAT’S WHAT BOOKS ARE MEANT TO BE: FUN AND JOYFUL!’

Q&A with Anna Cohn Orchard, Executive Director of Exeter City of Literature

Sophie Blauth

Nestled in a coffee-lover’s dream at Crankhouse near Exeter Quay, I met Anna Cohn Orchard, the Executive Director of Exeter City of Literature. Kind enough to fit me into her busy schedule, we sat in the window, soaking up the rays on a delightful July day to hear about her role and the work of Exeter City of Literature in the city.

Exeter was awarded UNESCO City of Literature designation in 2019. Anna moved back to Exeter from New York in 2018 and became the inaugural director of the charity in 2021. I was interested in learning more about what drew her back to Exeter, and how she has approached building literary communities and networks in Exeter and Devon around the UNESCO status.

Sophie Blauth: What do you think makes Exeter and the South West distinctive in terms of publishing and literary organizations interacting with the community?

Anna Cohn Orchard: Exeter has so much potential. Comparing Exeter to places like Norwich, which is also a City of Literature, or to Manchester, which has a lot more industry around publishing and the creative industries in general, shows us the direction we can go in and continue to grow. Knowing that publishing needs to exist beyond London, the cities in the

North have kind of coalesced the sector around that. Down here, we are lucky enough to have Hachette in Bristol now, and through the University of Exeter and other organizations we have connections, but it is up to the South West what gap they want to fill. Maybe it is not independent publishing, because the North does that really well. Maybe it is some kind of independent bookstore organization or centre for storytelling; other things that the South West can offer with all of its talent and passion for reading.

Sophie Blauth: Exeter has such a rich history and vibrant literary scene. How do you begin to characterize that through your work?

Anna Cohn Orchard: Through the UNESCO City of Literature umbrella, we are trying to bring all of that knowledge together so that we can inform the public of what is going on in Exeter through our events calendar on our website, newsletters and social media. And we’ve definitely seen that working. We can point to so many events going on in any given week, because what is happening in the city is vibrant and exciting.

I do think the history has a lot to do with it. Although interestingly, I think there is a bit of a disconnect between the history and the present in terms of literary output. You’ve got places like Manchester, which has always had a radical approach to writing and culture that is both in its history and in its present. Same probably with Edinburgh which has always been very constant. The history of Devon and Exeter was actually what we would think of now as a thriving metropolis. It was very intellectual. It was very outward looking because it was so connected through the ports to other countries. It was a place of so many ideas and people coming in, particularly with the paper traders here.

Now, it is obviously this really beautiful part of the South West, although it may not be as international in outlook as it once was. It is interesting to go from that history – where you had a lot of literate people, which wasn’t that common in medieval times, and radical thought coming in from

France and being discussed in Exeter – and then for it to move to a genteel place that people like Jane Austen, Thomas Hardy and Charles Dickens would come to for some writing time. It became one big writers’ retreat, which, of course, is inspiring in its own way. A lot of people here now want to go back to that kind of outward-looking aspect of what Exeter can be: bringing the world to Exeter through the UNESCO network and through the activities we want to do. At the same time, we must remain supporters of that emphasis on the natural world and stay rooted in the families of Devon that have been here for generations.

Sophie Blauth: After I found out about Exeter City of Literature as a student, I was stunned by the amount of programmes and events it has to offer on the website and social media. How would you describe the relationship between Exeter and the City of Literature organization?

Anna Cohn Orchard: It is about trying to get Exeter City of Literature out there. We got the designation in 2019, but then there was a pandemic. By the time I came on board as Executive Director in 2021, we just had to get going, set up the organization as a charity, and apply for funding. This year, we are finally getting our new Literary Map of

Exeter and Devon out there and we launched the Penguin Books vending machine: our profile is rising. But we certainly want to do more and more.

There are two parts to being a City of Literature. First, every UNESCO city works together, and you act as the umbrella organization for your sector in your region. You bring all these great partners together to make the sector stronger and advocate for it. But the second part is what you do for your own city. You create programming that is unique to your place. Nottingham has focused on youth. In Manchester, they focus on translation. In Exeter, we focus on job creation and talent development because we have so many creatives, but we don't yet have the industry and infrastructure to support them.

Sophie Blauth: Are there any partnerships that you are looking forward to developing further, especially those with the other Cities of Literature like Nottingham, Norwich or Manchester?

Anna Cohn Orchard: Yes! All the Cities of Literature work really closely together. We are a network of fifty-three Cities of Literature, and we meet once a year in one of the cities to work on collaborations and share best practice. The Cities of Literature are part of the larger global UNESCO Creative Cities Network, and we're also part of the sub-network UK Creative Cities, which includes Dundee, a City of Design, and Glasgow, a City of Music. We also have a smaller network of just the English Cities of Literature: so that is Exeter,

Manchester, Nottingham and Norwich. Working with those cities through different areas, such as tourism, research or community engagement, is part of our Arts Council work this year. This work is in its very early stages and has been led by Norwich; there is a lot of potential within all of our cities.

Sophie Blauth: Are there any specific collaborative projects with these UNESCO cities you are excited about at the moment?

Anna Cohn Orchard: We collaborate with all the UNESCO Cities of Literature on Slamovision, which is a spoken word poetry competition. Each year, the winning city for the year before hosts Slamovision, and any City of Literature can enter. Last year Nottingham won so they will be hosting this year. We chose our poet through a competition called City Slam, bringing together Spork! and Taking the Mic to run this county-wide event. The winner of City Slam, Jonah Corren, was voted by members of the public at the event and we'll now send him to Nottingham to represent Exeter in front of an international audience in December 2023.

Sophie Blauth: After reading your biography and hearing you'd lived in Sydney and New York, I was thinking about how interesting it must have been to come back to Exeter, a lovely but very small city, after being in some of the most influential and large cities in the world. What was that experience like?



Musa Okwonga (right) in conversation with D-M Withers, as part of the Rough Trade Books presents series, June 2023.

Anna Cohn Orchard: I lived in New York for seven or eight years in my early twenties. It was great that I did it, but New York is a very intense place, and especially as I was working in publishing and non-profits, you are not making a ton of money. It got to the point where I thought, I've done New York, and I've loved it, but I want to see what it might be like to try something else.

I'd been out in America for fifteen years, so I hadn't actually lived in England as an adult. Part of me was wanting to come back and see what that could be like. My mum had stayed

in Exeter, so I always visited her once a year.

I didn't plan on living in Exeter because I didn't think I would find a job in my area, but this job came up, so I ended up staying. Now, my hope is that down the line, we can create more jobs for graduates and we can attract more young professionals to Exeter. There are so many literary activities going on. For people that don't want a big city, or they've maybe done the big city for a couple of years and would prefer something smaller, Exeter has a lot to offer.



A traveller at Exeter St Davids train station perusing the titles available in the Penguin Books vending machine. Photo by Jim Wileman.

Sophie Blauth: Being classed as a UNESCO City of Literature is very much a privilege. Do you think this makes the publications and literary events held within Exeter more exceptional as a consequence?

Anna Cohn Orchard: That is a very interesting question. Every place in the world has something to add, has something of value, without needing a designation. But I think the designation strengthens the network around publications and events, benefitting the writers and literary organizations. It allows us to put Exeter and our partners on the map – literally and figuratively – and gives us the opportunity to link our literary heritage with our ambitious present. The UNESCO designation shows the power of centring culture within a city’s economic and social development, and it allows us to advocate for that even more strongly. And as David Ryding, Director of Melbourne City of Literature, says, the City of Literature Network ‘exists to make the world smaller and each other better’.

Sophie Blauth: Earlier this year you unveiled the beautiful Penguin Books vending machine at Exeter St Davids station. How did this collaboration come about?

Anna Cohn Orchard: It was an idea that I had when I first got the job in 2021. Having lived in Exeter, I already knew about the connection with Allen Lane and Exeter, but I think a lot of people didn’t know about it: that Agatha Christie lived in Devon and

Allen Lane was coming to see her, and famously commented there was nothing to read at the station, which inspired Penguin Books.

There had been conversations about wanting to commemorate the Penguin connection through some kind of public art. I thought of a vending machine and putting this in a place where people need books. I’d seen book vending machines in the States with airlines and literary organizations. I wrote up a proposal and contacted Penguin, saying that I wanted to do the vending machine at the station to honour this connection. And they really enjoyed it! They were like great – find us a vending machine company, let’s do it! Luckily, I found a company in the South West that had refurbished vending machines to have books in them for schools.

We are going to start having different books in the machine. At the moment, it offers a broad range of titles, but we are going to start doing unique themes. For example, we are hoping to have books by authors from other UNESCO cities around the world that have been published by Penguin in English, we will have books for LGBTQIA+ History Month and Black History Month; we want to make sure that the books are relevant to everyone.

Sophie Blauth: Do you think that making the ties between Exeter and Penguin visible has bonded book lovers to Exeter? It has been such a big hit on social media, especially TikTok; did you think it was going to be this successful?

Anna Cohn Orchard: We've seen people that made special journeys to Exeter St Davids just to see the vending machine. I think often they are coming through, but they want to still have extra time to see the machine. We've seen that on social media, which has been fantastic. The Exeter and Penguin connection has really been embraced by people, and we've had such a great relationship with Penguin; they've been so supportive and so into this funny idea.

I didn't know it would be successful worldwide, but I knew it was going to be so visual and appealing to the social media audience, because it is such an amazing thing. It is also just such a convenient space for books to exist in.

The sales have been fantastic! The level of excitement with people like Richard Osman and Elif Shafak – that was really special to see beyond just the public and the visitors.

There were also some funny TikTok videos, and some that really got into the mystery and history behind the machine and Exeter's literary past. This is why I love this vending machine; it gets people excited about books and reading. That is what books are meant to be: fun and joyful!

Sophie Blauth: In addition to the unveiling of the Penguin Books vending machine, you've also hosted Roxane Gay and The Book Market



Roxane Gay (left) and Sharifa Hashem sit in conversation at an event hosted by the Exeter City of Literature and the University of Exeter in 2023. Photo by Jim Wileman.

this year. What has been your favourite moment of 2023 so far?

Anna Cohn Orchard: I think The Book Market. The first year we hosted it at Powderham Castle, where it was really popular, and it has just kind of snowballed each year since. Last year it was at Positive Light Projects on Sidwell Street. Then this year, we wanted to make it even bigger and more central, so we did it on Exeter Cathedral Green. Like our other events it is free – apart from the books! There are new and used books, and all the bookshops that have been coming for three years absolutely love it. Even though we were competing against rain, and the Wimbledon finals, this was the busiest year yet. In addition to the booksellers, we had things like free face painting and bookbinding and wheelchair letterpress. It was a real partnership between all the vendors and the Cathedral supporting us. The book community comes out to support us. But there are also just people in Exeter who get to come across something really fun happening. And it does showcase the amazing book businesses in Devon.

Sophie Blauth: Are there any big plans for the City of Literature's future?

Anna Cohn Orchard: We are still going on with our bibliotherapy work; the next course launches in September 2023. We are expanding that so people getting trained as therapists or counsellors will also be trained in bibliotherapy. The idea is that, eventually, people can be fully trained in bibliotherapy and can deliver services to communities

around Devon. So that is a big project for us. We're also launching City Reads, a city-wide project that will find the public's favourite books in Exeter. It will be running throughout 2024 in celebration of our fifth anniversary as a UNESCO City of Literature.

My long-term goal is to eventually be able to open up a space for literature and storytelling events. I think Exeter doesn't have a lot of evening spaces or evening activities focused on culture. Obviously, the Exeter Phoenix is great for things like music and performance. I love what Bookbag and Sacred Grounds have been doing opening up McCoy's Arcade, and more of that would be fantastic. Having space for writers just to come and write, people learning creative skills, seeing some physical presence – we've seen so many empty spaces on the High Street; it would be really amazing to fill it with things that can go from day to night quite seamlessly. That would be a big, long-term goal, and again hiring more local people to make it happen.

Sophie Blauth: I have just one more question. What is your favourite book or literary organization that is based in the South West?

Anna Cohn Orchard: Well, I can't even choose one bookshop, because what really surprised me coming back to Devon was how many independent bookshops there are. And I am just obsessed with that! Bookbag is the only independent bookshop in Exeter, which is mad, but they have swooped in and changed the literary culture in an amazing way. Having the authors they

are bringing in, and the vision they have, how they bring a community together that has a space of its own; it is phenomenal. There are so many amazing bookshops in Devon though.

We've just released a literary map of Devon and I'm trying to think of the authors on it! The book *Forget Me Not* by Sophie Pavelle is probably my favourite because she is somebody that is so passionate about the environment. She is such a good spokesperson for how climate change is happening and what is going on in nature in our world. She approaches things in a very funny, educational and positive way and her voice is so unique. People can find all types of authors and books on our literary map of Devon. For example, I had no idea that Jean Rhys lived just outside of Crediton and is buried there. There are just amazing people here that I think we completely forget about.

You can find the Literary Map of Devon and Exeter and an Events Calendar of literature, storytelling and literary arts events happening in Devon and Exeter at: <https://www.exetercityofliterature.com>

WELLS FESTIVAL OF LITERATURE 2023

Putting Somerset on the Literary Map

Olivia Hargood

Situated deep in the countryside of Somerset sits Wells – one of the smallest cities in England. While this might not be a place one would immediately imagine a literary festival would take place, one would be mistaken. Located in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and bursting with ancient architecture, Wells is the perfect location to host a coming together of words and people. The Wells Festival of Literature 2023 took place from 27 October to 4 November, with thirty-five events spanning that long week. These talks touched on a wide range of genres, such as historical and political non-fiction to poetry and literary fiction. Despite the weather, the atmosphere of the festival this year was amazing! I encourage everyone to try and attend the festival if they can, as this is one event in Somerset that you cannot miss.

HISTORY AND WORK OF THE FESTIVAL

Wells Festival of Literature was set up in 1992 by Maggie Mountford and Judith Thomas as a way to 'promote the love of books and of reading throughout the community' ('Our Festival'). Before Wells, there were no other literary festivals in the South West (bar

Cheltenham and Dartington), something that was surprising considering the rich history of the region and its involvement in many English myths and legends. Literary festivals are key when it comes to engaging people with reading, and they are instrumental in connecting creatives across the region where they are held. The creation of Wells Festival of Literature has expanded literary networks into the most isolated areas of the British countryside and shown the possibilities for building significant literary communities outside of major cities. The festival has gone from strength to strength, even running an online format during the COVID-19 pandemic. Many famous faces have been part of the festival at some point; some examples include Terry Pratchett, Lemn Sissay and Alison Weir.

It is also worth highlighting the charity work that Wells Festival of Literature does, as this plays a huge role in keeping local children engaged with reading and writing. The festival was founded with the aim of promoting reading to both adults and children, and this ethos is still important today. They have a dedicated Education Committee that liaises with local schools and provides support where needed ('Education'). The festival supports the charity

Coram Beanstalk, which is dedicated to training volunteers that help children who are struggling or reluctant to read. A portion of ticket sales is allocated to the cause of promoting reading to children. The festival also puts on author events in schools and donates books to ensure diverse school bookshelves. Additionally, Wells Festival of Literature has a partnership with Frome-based publisher Chicken House, who encourage their authors to give talks to local children – which opens up opportunities for the children to buy subsidized books ('Education'). The festival donated over 1,300 books in 2022 alone, even letting the children go to local bookshops and pick out the books they wanted to read themselves! The festival engages book lovers of all ages, and is doing crucial work to support children in rural areas who may not have access to the same opportunities as those in areas with better infrastructure. It is amazing to see a local organization having such an impact on my area.

EVENTS AT THE FESTIVAL

Despite being a small festival, Wells Festival of Literature puts on a great variety of events that can be sure to interest everybody. The festival is made up of poetry competitions and talks by local and prominent authors. The author talks are held over the full nine days, alongside other events. The festival has a focus on non-fiction authors, and they try to get local authors in to inspire the community. These talks are held predominantly in Cedars Hall, part of Wells Cathedral School. The modern venue has enough seats for the large

audiences the festival attracts. This year, Waterstones, who have a shop on the High Street in Wells, partnered with the festival to set up a pop-up bookshop close to the hall where festival-goers could buy books from the authors who were guest speakers, and this was also where audiences had the opportunity to have their book signed, with long queues for the signings as they were so popular.

The talks in 2023 were on a wide range of topics, from Robin Ince's work on touring the bookshops of Britain, to Kimberley Wilson's book on how processed food is contributing to a mental health crisis. The festival has a range of literature, although it does not have a large amount of fiction, leaving a wide part of the community untapped. As a young adult, I felt like the talks were mainly aimed at an older audience. More talks on fiction, or different genres of fiction, would help to engage a younger crowd and expand the literary community in Somerset. Even so, the programme this year was packed with events. I would love to talk about every single one, but I do not have room, so I will highlight some of the best ones I attended.

Some of the talks I went to this year were really inspiring, and I was left thinking about them long after they had ended. The first was Naoise Mac Sweeney's talk on her new book, *The West: A New History of an Old Idea*. Mac Sweeney is a Professor of Classical Archaeology at the University of Vienna, and her book aims to dispel the myths surrounding Western history ('Naoise Mac Sweeney'). Although I do have a bias being a history graduate,



The crowd in Cedars Hall. Photo by Jo Shepherd.

the crowd for Mac Sweeney was full of those from a range of backgrounds keen to hear her take on Western history. Every author talk ends with a Q&A, which consists of questions from the audience sent via email during the talk. This aspect was engaging, as it gave the audience an opportunity to hear about specific aspects that they found interesting. Some of the topics brought up included a courtesan, a poet in Venice, and why it is important to look at history from a different perspective. The atmosphere was great for a rainy autumn evening, and the applause at the end of the talk was incredible! I even had the opportunity to have my copy of *The West: A New History of an Old Idea* signed after the event, which added an extra personal touch.

Another talk I'd like to highlight was Tim Marshall's on his new book, *The*

Future of Geography. Marshall is well known for his first book, *Prisoners of Geography*, as well as his long career as a journalist and broadcaster focusing on international diplomacy ('Tim Marshall'). Cedars Hall was packed for Marshall's talk – young and old had turned up to hear him talk about the 'geopolitical space race'. His talk, supported by an interactive presentation, had the audience laughing alongside him, while also encouraging them to think about the future of politics and space: this was something that I had not even considered before.

This year marked the start of a brand-new event for the festival, the Literary Quiz, held at the White Hart. The quiz was hosted by Gary Wigglesworth, an author who tours the country holding literary quizzes based

on his own quiz books. The quiz was great fun and brought together all of the local literary 'experts'. It was such a unique way to engage with the local community and create connections between book lovers.

'Some literary festivals are so big that they lose that personal aspect, but Wells Festival of Literature has this nailed down.'

Literary lunches are also held at the festival, with several authors taking part over different days. These lunches provide a unique experience for those wanting to meet the author and discuss their work, as they provide some audience members the opportunity to meet authors in a more intimate setting before the author's talk. Some literary festivals are so big that they lose that personal aspect, but Wells Festival of Literature has this nailed down. This year's literary lunches hosted authors Gail Simmons, Sander van der Linden and Stephen Moss. The first literary lunch, held on 30 October, featured Gail Simmons talking about *Between the Chalk and Sea*; this book focuses on a lost pilgrimage route between Southampton and Canterbury and what this reveals to us about our history. On 1 November, Sander van der Linden looked at what we can do to protect ourselves from the spread of fake news, introducing his book *Foolproof*. The final literary lunch showcased Stephen Moss, President of the Somerset Wildlife Trust, and his book *Ten Birds That Changed the World*.

From this event series alone, you can see the range of topics covered and play an active part in the festival, and it is great to see local authors talking about their work.

THE POETRY COMPETITIONS

Wells Festival of Literature also hosts several international poetry competitions as part of their ethos to promote the creative arts in their local community, and to promote Somerset to a wider audience. The award ceremonies for the poetry competitions took place in Cedars Hall on 30 October – celebrating the winners of both the Young Poets competition and the Open Poetry competition. The crowds were relatively small compared to other events I attended, but what they lacked in numbers they made up for in enthusiasm. You could tell that both the event staff and the audience had a real interest in poetry and promoting it as an art form to a younger generation. The atmosphere was welcoming for the new poets, and I felt as if I was attending a community poetry event rather than a global competition. There was a real sense of community between the poets and the audience.

The first part of the event was the Young Poets competition; there were entrants from not only all over the UK but even as far as the Philippines. The festival does much to promote the South West literary space around the globe, especially as Somerset is often forgotten. The lack of public infrastructure in the South West has meant that traditionally the publishing industry has not engaged with the region. Although independent presses

are doing amazing work to promote the South West and its creative output, there is still a long way to go to fully integrate this part of England into broader national and international creative conversations. It was great to see such a motivated group of young poets, and the work that they had created was of such a high quality you forgot they were part of the Young Poets category! There was tough competition. Many of the poets touched on personal themes in their live readings, such as identity and their experiences, and I could relate to many of their ideas. Luckily, even though many couldn't make it, they had sent in videos so we could get a feel for how they wanted their poem to be understood.

'The South West has inspirational countryside and is full of bright talent who need proper infrastructure to be in place in order to support them in their careers.'

The Young Poets competition this year was judged by Deanna Rodger. At eighteen-years-old Rodger won the UK Poetry Slam, and has since gone on to be involved in many programmes promoting poetry and the creative arts. She has worked with institutions such as the Old Vic, the National Theatre and the Arvon Foundation ('About'). Rodger lives in Bristol, which adds another meaningful layer to her appointment as judge this year – helping to promote talent from and in the South West. The competition was won by Madeleine Elizabeth Storer with her poem 'Birthstone', which vividly expressed the reality of the working-class experience.

The Open Poetry competition was even livelier. The crowd for this section was bigger, and more poets were included in the shortlist. It was a shame that the young poets were not given these numbers as well, as I thought their poems were just as good as the open competition. This section of the competition was judged by William Sieghart, who founded National Poetry Day and the Forward Prizes for Poetry ('William Sieghart'). The shortlist consisted of poets from a range of ages, who came from all over the globe. It was emotional listening to the stories of the poets through the live readings of their poems, especially the poem 'Picking Blackberries' by Marilyn Timms, where the poet reminisced on the small things

she used to do with her father before he passed away. The overall winner of the Open Poetry competition was John Gallas, who wrote the poem 'Horse Breezes'. The best part of the event was the opportunity for the audience to vote for their favourite poem to receive the 'fan favourite' award. I found this award interesting, as the result was very different to the judge's winning picks. The winner of this category was a beautiful poem called 'Lovers of Valdaro', which described lovers who had died together, and whose bodies had remained together in an embrace for centuries until they were found. Another aspect I really liked was the



Jim Down signing his latest book. Photo by Jo Shepherd.

inclusion of the 'local winner' category. While there were many amazing international entries, it was important that the festival highlighted local talent through these extra awards. The South West has inspirational countryside and is full of bright talent, who need proper infrastructure to be in place in order to support them in their careers. Nicola Keller won the local award with her poem 'The Castles We Built', which used beautiful imagery of the South West countryside as a metaphorical device – something that I was able to picture vividly in my mind having grown up in that very same countryside. By

encouraging local and international talent to send in their writing, these awards, alongside the short story and children's book competitions, all strengthen the festival's ethos of encouraging new talent, while creating platforms for experienced creatives to carry on creating ('Competitions').

FINAL THOUGHTS

Wells Festival of Literature is an unsung gem in the Somerset countryside. Without the tireless work of its volunteers and staff, this particular area of the South West would lack direct access to contemporary literary

culture. The ethos and values of the festival are really important for Somerset's young people: their educational events have proved very popular and are successful at getting children reading again. The talks were engaging and thought-provoking, and covered many topics spanning from non-fiction about China to authors writing on local issues. It was fantastic to attend the festival and talk to some of the volunteers. When talking to them, I got the impression that they really believed in the power of words to bring people together. One volunteer, who had painstakingly read every poem submission and helped compile the shortlists for each competition, mentioned how she really struggled to choose the shortlists as there were too many excellent submissions. The talks I attended were engaging and highlighted a range of topics, especially from local authors. The poetry competitions showcased the creative talent of the local community, as well as attracting entries from across the globe. If it is not already, the Wells Festival of Literature should be on your literary calendar for next year!

All general event information referenced was sourced from the specific event pages on the Wells Festival of Literature website. See 'Full Programme', Wells Festival of Literature. <https://www.wellsfestivalofliterature.org.uk/2023-programme/>

SMALL YET SUSTAINABLE

Eco-Warriors of Pen and Paper

Oliver D. Kleinschmidt

Have you ever considered how the books you read are made? What about the impact the production of books has on the environment? In the present day these exact issues are being addressed by publishers big and small with the singular aim of making publishing more sustainable. I have come to learn that working with an independent publisher is crucial to understanding the publishing industry as their approach incorporates both practical knowledge and essential insights into the most relevant industry trends. Currently, one of the biggest trends in the industry is a growing awareness of environmental sustainability. However, in an industry saturated by conglomerate standards, what exactly can a small publisher do to help?

One such independent publisher is Little Toller Books, a nature publisher located in west Dorset and winner of the 2023 Small Press of the Year Award from the British Book Awards. For my MA in Publishing, I was fortunate enough to conduct a work placement with Little Toller, during which I researched how to improve their environmental impact and gained a better understanding of how sustainability impacts publishing production processes. In turn, I was able to reflect on the ability of small independent publishers to innovate in this area, even though access to research and knowledge is not widely available.

Lately, sustainability has exploded into mainstream social consciousness. Nationwide climate action and influential figures promoting eco-conscious actions have translated into book sales. Greta Thunberg's book *No One is Too Small to Make a Difference* was a runaway bestseller, whilst Extinction Rebellion's handbook *This is Not a Drill* and David Wallace-Wells' *The Uninhabitable Earth* sold strongly enough to become two of the nature category's six top-selling titles of all time (O'Brien). Since 2019, nature writing sales have increased by 15% and, according to *The Bookseller's Buyer's Guides*, it is an especially big seller amongst independent publishers (O'Brien).

Founded in 2008, Little Toller were an established nature publisher long before this recent interest in the genre, and began with the purpose of republishing forgotten nature classics like *Through the Woods* by H.E. Bates and *In the Country* by Kenneth Allsop. Whilst nature writing existed before Little Toller, they helped to consolidate its market presence in the late 2000s by bringing these classic texts to a modern readership. One article from *The Herald* even mentions Little Toller as helping usher in a 'golden age' of nature writing back in 2014 (Jamieson). As well as publishing books that celebrate the natural world, today small publishers like Little Toller want to ensure their production processes and business practices are as environmentally sustainable as the themes behind their publications. To better understand the processes of book production, Little Toller encouraged me to visit their Cornwall-based printer, TJ Books. Upon visiting the site, I witnessed how any positive changes made there would subsequently be passed down the supply chain and influence Little Toller's publishing. In turn, this meant that I could directly assess how to make printing, trimming, bookbinding and packaging more sustainable, as these processes produce the most significant environmental impact. Efforts are already being made to understand the impact of printing processes. For example, the Independent Publishers Guild's (IPG) Book Journeys Project documents areas in need of improvement whilst also suggesting helpful strategies that can encourage actionable change. After all, publishers can only ever be as sustainable as the businesses they rely on across the entire value chain – all the way from the paper mill to the bookstore.

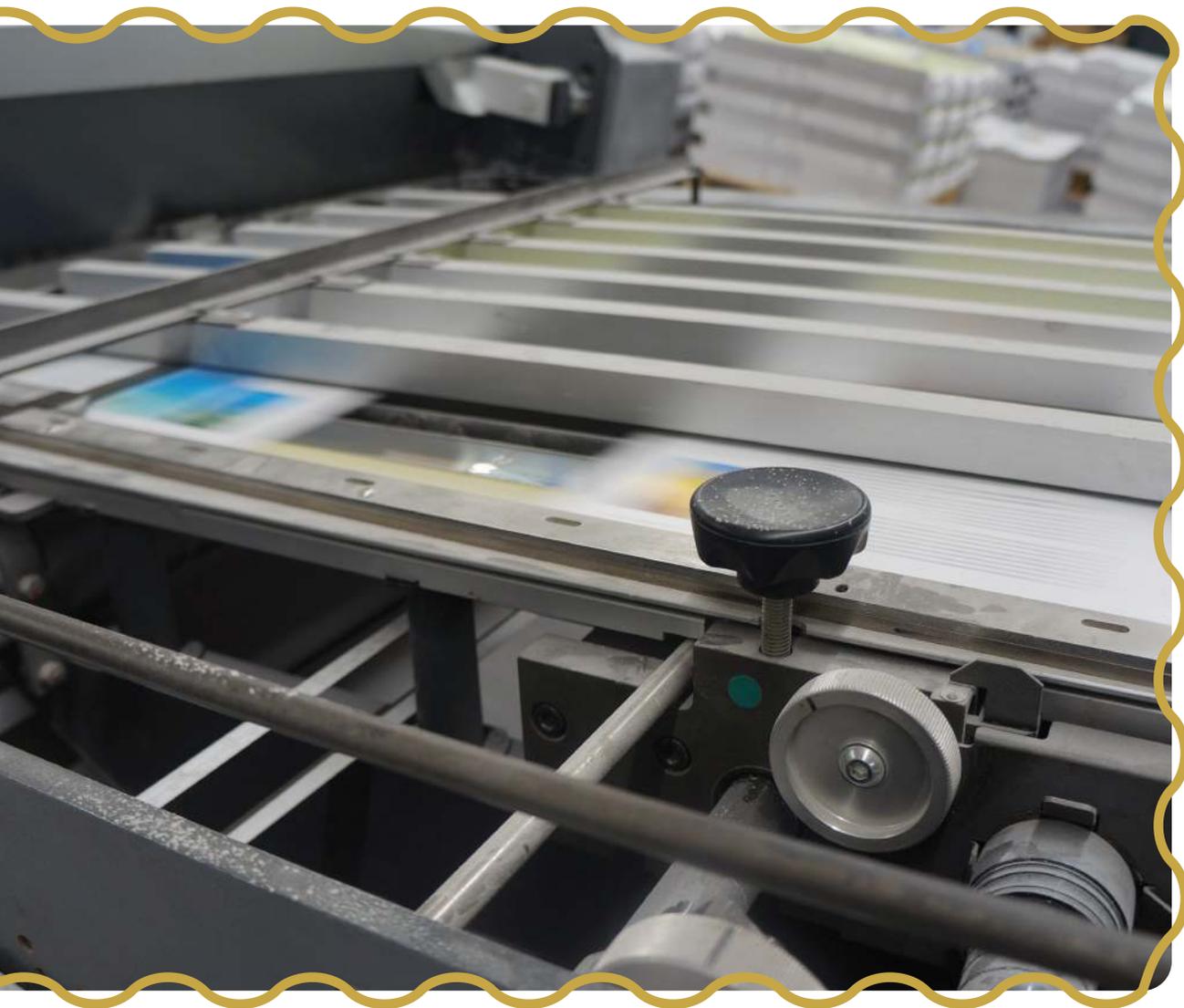
'Publishers can only ever be as sustainable as the businesses they rely on across the entire value chain – all the way from the paper mill to the bookstore.'

As such, it is so important to observe and understand the actions of printers since they are a key link in the publishing supply chain. For Little Toller, a printer like TJ Books is ideally situated as they are located in the South West and both companies are actively seeking ways to introduce more sustainable production methods. This includes sourcing ecologically sustainable and ethical paper, the reduction of plastic waste throughout the production process by packaging books with paper and cardboard, and fixing books with sustainable glue. TJ Books have a good existing strategy to deal with paper waste and use a well-developed recycling system that

captures the majority of offcuts when a book is trimmed to the correct size. Nonetheless, they are still seeking ways to make the process more environmentally friendly by developing an internal recycling and reuse process instead of relying on an external partner.

An urgent concern across the industry is the necessary reduction of CO₂ emissions. These have been broken down into three categories relevant to businesses: Scope 1, Scope 2 and Scope 3. These emissions are the main sources of CO₂ that are expelled throughout business operations and are impacted by every part of a company. Although these emissions influence a publisher's sustainability goals, it must also be understood that they are largely produced in the printing

*Printers in action at Short Run Press, a sustainable printing company in Exeter.
Photo by D-M Withers.*



stage. According to the UK National Grid Group, Scope 1 emissions are defined as emissions from sources that an organization owns or controls directly, Scope 2 are emissions that a company causes indirectly and comes from where the energy it purchases and uses is produced, and finally Scope 3 includes emissions that a publisher is indirectly responsible for throughout its value chain ('Energy Explained'). Whilst Scope 1 and 2 emissions are significant, most publishers identify Scope 3 as being the largest source of carbon emissions. Hachette Livre identified Scope 3 emissions as accounting for up to 97% of the company's total emissions (2020-2021 Environmental Progress Report 1). Because of this imbalance, it has become necessary for publishers to be mindful of how they manage their Scope 3 emissions across their supply chain.

This being said, it cannot be overlooked that smaller publishers do not have access to the same resources as larger organizations like HarperCollins, one of the Big Five publishers who are constructing a new production facility in Scotland with sustainability in mind ('Our Sustainability Journey'). Yet smaller publishers can still make an impact by working with their printers to find alternative uses for waste, such as reusing paper offcuts and trimmings. They can also keep waste recycling processes internal to the printer, thereby reducing Scope 3 emissions since transportation to another disposal site is not needed. The publishers themselves can make a direct difference by using LED lighting throughout all their facilities and offices to reduce Scope 2 emissions, and many publishers are already doing this. For those small publishers who have the budget, they can also install motion sensor technology for lighting to reduce passive energy consumption through lights being left on. Furthermore, Henry Ling Ltd, a Dorchester-based printing company, proves that renewable energy sources are a viable long-term sustainability strategy. The company not only powers their own facility using solar power but also feeds the excess back into the national grid. There are also long-term considerations for the addition of the Boxsizer technology, as used by Hachette. This technology ensures that packaging is custom made to a book's specific dimensions, resulting in less void space needing to be filled by materials such as packing peanuts, bubble wrap and paper.

'Because of this imbalance, it has become necessary for publishers to be mindful of how they manage their Scope 3 emissions across their supply chain.'

Equally, transportation should also be taken into consideration. A good way to begin would be to encourage sustainable transportation methods that reduce CO₂ emissions by utilising sustainable distribution networks. A great example of these networks limiting Scope 1 and 2 emissions is Little Toller's decision to work with UK-based printer TJ Books rather than outsourcing to an international company

for a cheaper production cost. Progressing from this it would be beneficial to start introducing electric vehicles for book transportation and to send multiple orders in the same vehicle, in line with target one and target two of the IPG report for the Book Journeys Project.

Whilst large publishers dominate the UK industry and can make big and bold moves towards sustainability, it is often the efforts made by smaller publishers that encourage innovative strategies to develop. Essentially, the financial security of large publishers means they take fewer risks on new sustainable strategies whereas a small publisher's lack of security forces them to take more risks, ultimately creating new eco-conscious avenues to explore. Presently, publishing in the UK has made gradual efforts to implement more sustainable practices; however, this appears to only exist on an individual business level with no wider UK legislation being introduced that would force publishers to adhere to a unified industry standard for sustainability.

‘Whilst large publishers dominate the UK industry and can make big and bold moves towards sustainability, it is often the efforts made by smaller publishers that encourage innovative strategies to develop.’

When considering the domestic market, the Big Five publishing houses (Penguin Random House, Simon & Schuster, Hachette, Macmillan and HarperCollins) are universally putting effort and expense into the reduction of emissions and clearly communicating a message of sustainability to their readers and shareholders. Almost all of them have created digital webpages or sustainability reports that outline future strategies which have been made freely available for public access, such as the Macmillan Sustainability website. Macmillan are promoting environmentally conscious books as well as creating new imprints which highlight our important connection with nature. This includes curating collections of relevantly themed material such as Macmillan's green titles which are comprised of books specifically curated for adults and for children (Macmillan). Curated collections such as Vintage's Vintage Earth series feature novels that 'reconnect us to the planet we inhabit - and must protect' (Vintage Earth). Penguin, in collaboration with Sir David Attenborough, are creating the imprint Witness Books which intends to focus on environment and will be produced using sustainable printing techniques ('Our Sustainability Policy').

As previously mentioned, the Big Five have the financial resources and reach unmatched by independent publishers, giving them access to time and money that is otherwise unrealistic for small presses. This naturally puts larger publishers at a significant advantage when it comes to researching sustainable action

and gathering their own data analytics. Nonetheless, small publishers are often considered the beating heart of the industry in the UK (Lyon). So, as the giants of the industry publish their strategies, how does this impact these smaller publishers? Due to their size, these publishers have the scope to pursue new policies and strategies which help to drive wider industry change.

Topics that might once have been considered unprofitable, like nature writing, thrive because of the invention of new literary markets instigated by independent publishers. Within Dorset alone there are several small publishers exploring workable sustainable strategies alongside Little Toller. Renard Press, for example, participates in projects such as Ecologi, a company dedicated to sustainability projects and tree replanting. They also work to maintain a slimmer list of books to reduce wastage and send orders out in eco-friendly 'book wrap' ('Sustainability Policy').

Folde, another Dorset-based nature publisher, use Bezero's carbon calculator to help make decisions about improving production processes to reduce their CO₂ emissions (Sustainability). This action is not limited



*Printers in action at Short Run Press, a sustainable printing company in Exeter.
Photo by D-M Withers.*

only to publishers but also the wider supply chain. Henry Ling Ltd include sustainable energy sources such as solar power and offer different staff initiatives such as a cycle-to-work programme (Environment).

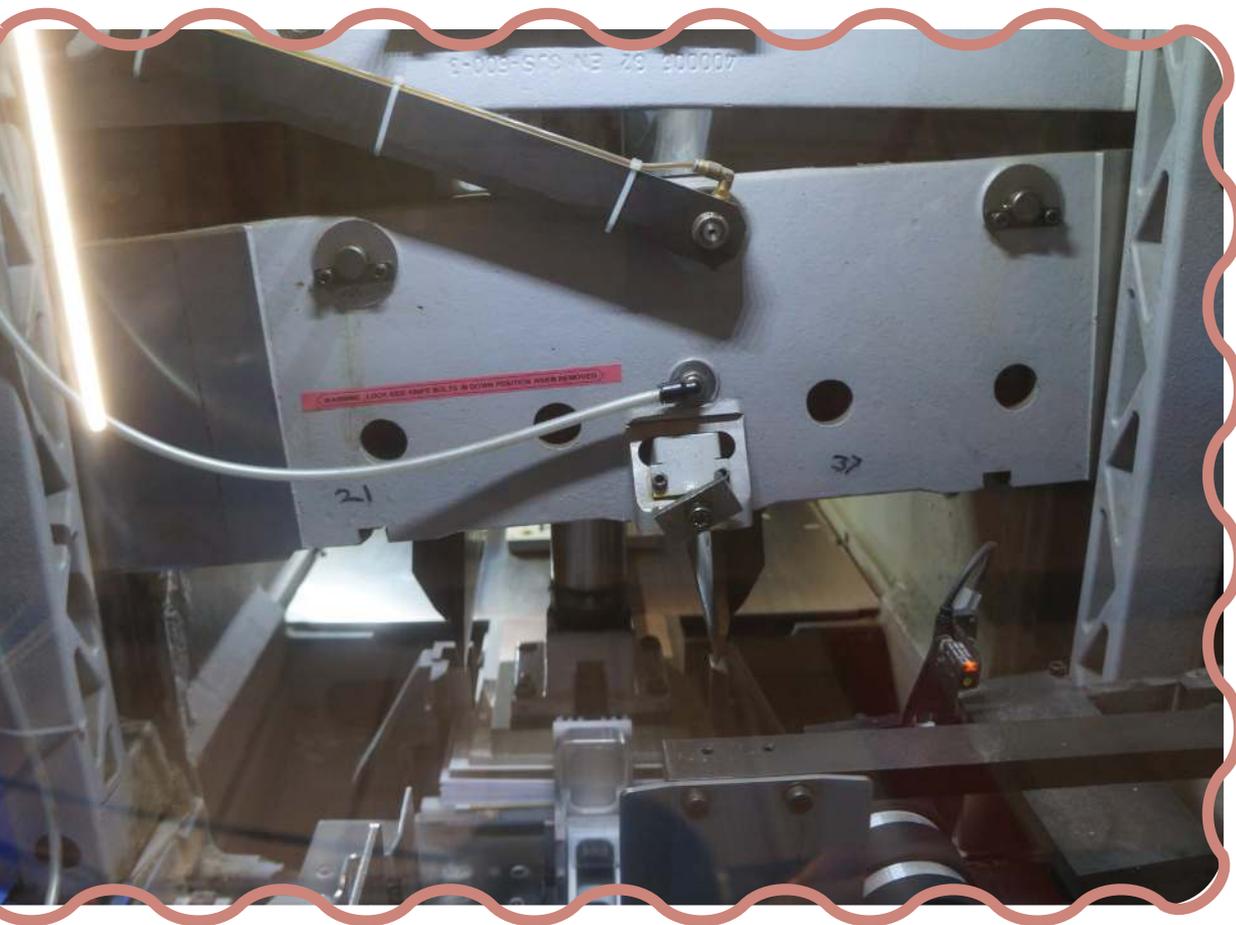
Just as important is ensuring that dialogue throughout the publishing industry is made accessible, such as through websites where organizations coordinate to pool research and collect data that helps contribute to improving the entire industry. This can be seen in the example of the Book Chain collaborative project and the IPG Book Journeys Project. Both initiatives make available important data about the sustainability of the supply chain, such as which paper mills are sustainable or which inks are biodegradable. The intelligent use of databases such as this really helps small publishers by removing the time-consuming and costly process of conducting their own research. Alongside this internal communication in the industry, keeping the public informed about the efforts a publisher is making

can help encourage readers to act. By openly promoting their own steps towards sustainability, small publishers can communicate the integrity of their brand. Like the Big Five, many presses are now publishing their own sustainability reports and webpages (Sustainability). There is also an opportunity here to note emission targets and talk about any sustainability projects publishers are involved in; after all, there is a surprising variety of projects for businesses to participate in that can help towards restoring the environment. By being open about their sustainable actions they have a chance to promote the use of Forest Stewardship Council Certified paper, ISO 14001 Certified resources (an international standard for designing and implementing an environmental management system), sustainable inks and the use of recycled materials. Finally, small publishers can promote their efforts through their own catalogues of environmentally themed books from both existing collections and their backlist.

‘Small presses are well positioned to take advantage of all the positive publicity generated by sustainable action.’

Just as essential is the creation of a work environment that actively reflects an eco-friendly business policy. By encouraging staff and employees to make sustainable decisions at work, such as switching their browser to Ecosia which plants trees the more you use the search engine, and by making it easier and more convenient for people to cycle to work (as championed by Renard Press), an atmosphere of sustainable action is created. Yet across the industry there is still more work to be done and smaller presses can still learn from bigger publishing houses. For instance, Penguin Random House is taking these efforts a step further by producing an environmental information toolkit for members of staff that can help to inform them of how to act more sustainably at home and in the workplace. Building on this, communication within the industry is important for building dialogue between these networks and should therefore clearly aim to support smaller publishers. Since communication, accountability and transparency are key to ensuring change in the industry (Ward), publishers should reach out along the supply chain to papermills and wholesalers and speak to them directly about their climate impact and sustainable methods of operation.

A proposal that could work well is tracking one book through each stage of the production process, from the exact plot of forest it came from through to the reader receiving the book. This would effectively demonstrate provenance and ensure accountability. Such information will be included in books published in Penguin Random House Witness Books imprint, with sustainability information featured in the book’s back-matter, thus demonstrating one way this method could be executed (Ward). Indeed, small presses are well positioned to take advantage of all the positive publicity generated by sustainable action.



*Printers in action at Short Run Press, a sustainable printing company in Exeter.
Photo by D-M Withers.*

Whether through social media posts about involvement in tree planting projects, or creating a dedicated webpage promoting their climate action, it is important to communicate that an effort is being made. Ultimately, the aim for small businesses is the same as for larger companies; it is about taking steps to minimize the harm caused by the industry in the future. Ideally, the industry needs further research, more dedicated graduates educated on sustainability, and more small publishers actively implementing environmentally sustainable strategies. If this can be achieved, then we will see the development of a bright and hopeful future with dozens of small yet sustainable publishers stood proudly at its core.



‘I SEE BEING AN AGENT AS A VEHICLE TO ADDRESS ISSUES OF INEQUITY’

Q&A with Suresh Ariaratnam,
Founder of Sprung Sultan

Bethan Oakley, Olivia Pearce and Bethan Pepler

After discovering the work of Somerset-based literary agency Sprung Sultan, we were delighted to interview its founder, Suresh Ariaratnam, about his focus on representing authors from Black and Asian communities. Some of Sprung Sultan’s clients include Jay Bernard, winner of the Ted Hughes Award in 2017 and writer of the poetry collection *Surge*; Johny Pitts, winner of the 2020 Jhalak Prize for his book *Afropean: Notes from Black Europe*; Linton Kwesi Johnson and Yomi Sode. Alongside this, Ariaratnam provides creative opportunities to emerging writers in the South West. Within publishing, he has a specific interest in income inequity for Black and Asian authors, alongside the more discussed issues of diversity and inclusion. In this interview, we were interested in talking to Ariaratnam about his agency, projects, goals and values regarding Black and Asian writers in publishing and creative spaces.



Suresh Ariaratnam, founder of Sprung Sultan Agency and trustee of Literature Works.

Bethan Oakley: Could you tell us a bit about how you came to set up Sprung Sultan, when you established it, and some of the first writers you ended up working with?

Suresh Ariaratnam: I set up the agency in 2008 because I couldn't get a job in publishing. I had worked as a bookseller for about four years and then I'd freelanced as an editor, journalist and a reviewer; I was doing multiple things

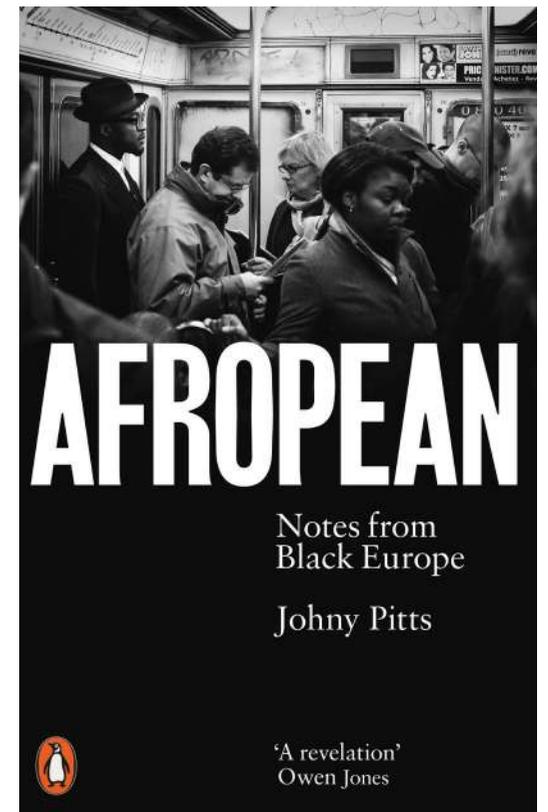
to pay my bills. I had two mentors; one was a publisher, and one was an agent. I was going to work as a scout for another agent, but that fell through. My agent mentor said to me, 'Why don't you set up as an agent because it feels like that is the direction you're heading in, and I will hold a broly over your head whilst you get started,' which was a really generous offer from her. In the spirit of complete ignorance, I thought, I'll do that. I also thought, well, no one is going

to be off the wall enough to come to me because I was untested, but I would go to people whose work I had either an emotional or an intellectual affinity for.

At the start, I would often pursue non-fiction and my focus was on wellbeing because I had a personal interest in this. I began, representing people like Sebastian Pole, the co-founder of Pukka Herbs, and Chris Johnstone, a former GP who took the NHS to court in the 1980s for the working hours of junior doctors. I had very loose criteria about who I would work with and would ask myself three things: did I have an emotional or mental purchase on their work? Did it sound like we could get on? And did I feel I could add value? This meant I then ranged over quite a wide area of either forms or subject matter.

In 2015 or 2016, after I'd been agenting for about eight years, I thought about what this list had begun to look like, and realized that I represented a higher-than-average number of authors who came from Black or Asian communities. It wasn't something that I'd set out to do, it just kind of turned out that way. My opinion is that prior to 2020 and the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent Black Lives Matter movement protests, when the book industry began to look at how it might change, Black and Asian writers were undervalued, as were writers from other marginalized communities. I'm not unique in this approach, but one of the things that I brought to these relationships was not caring about whether an author had been to university, whether they had published in a certain magazine or other things

you tend to look towards for validation. I failed my A levels at school and got asked to leave university. So, it was not a big deal for me if someone didn't have qualifications, although I respect when people do. More interesting to me is the distance you've travelled – or where you want to go creatively and intellectually – rather than what's on your CV. Currently, the agency represents probably thirty-five clients; about 85–90% are from Black and Asian communities.



Cover of Afropean: Notes from Black Europe by Johny Pitts.

Bethan Oakley: Could you go into a bit more detail about the process of finding and signing the writers and artists that you represent? Does this process differ considering you now specifically aim to represent and amplify Black and Asian voices?

Europe in search of what it meant to be both Black and European. In 2013, Sharmilla got in touch and suggested that we would get on and for the two of us to have a conversation about the book Johny wanted to write. So, we met and we talked. My North Star is do I think that this person has or could

‘It was not a big deal for me if someone didn’t have qualifications, although I respect when people do. More interesting to me is the distance you’ve travelled – or where you want to go creatively and intellectually – than what’s on your CV.’

Suresh Ariaratnam: Some of the usual processes are that you would have a website or you would be in the *Writers’ and Artists’ Yearbook*, and you would have guidelines about submissions which would probably ask for the first three chapters of a writer’s work and a proposal. I don’t have a website, and I’m not in the *Writers’ and Artists’ Yearbook*, partly because I wanted to work in a slightly different way. The majority of writers that I represent have either come through recommendation, which is not an uncommon route for other agents, or they have been people whose work I had heard about and I sort of gently persuaded them that it might be an idea for us to work together. For example, I represent Johny Pitts, author of *Afropean: Notes from Black Europe* and the host of *Radio Four’s Open Book*. We were introduced by a colleague, Sharmilla Beezmohun, who co-founded and co-runs a live literature organization called *Speaking Volumes*. Johny had been travelling around

have something important to say? With Johny, he knew partly, but part of that journey of writing would be to discover more fully what it was, and this was something I wanted to support.

Bethan Oakley: We would love to hear how you came to work with the poet Jay Bernard. How are you able to support them to keep innovating within the work they do?

Suresh Ariaratnam: Jay and I again met through Sharmilla at *Speaking Volumes*. At that point, Jay was contracted for *Surge*, which had started as a spoken word piece. The relationship that Jay and I have is characterized by giving time, the same with Johny Pitts and me, and by not rushing to make decisions or not trying to project meaning on to a situation when there is uncertainty. We take a selective approach to choosing projects. That decision is always theirs, although I will give my opinion as to whether something makes sense

strategically. We’ve always taken a long-term view of what they do. Yes, there is a creative stimulus that needs to be met in terms of their work, the commercialization of that work, and they need to earn income from that, but we’ve taken a really patient approach to building their respective careers. Both work across literature, broadcast, and the visual arts, with Johny in photography and Jay in more conceptual work and theatre. Importantly, their work is path independent. The most obvious thing for Jay to have done after writing *Surge* would have been to write another collection of poetry. Similarly, the most obvious thing for Johny to do after writing *Afropean* would have been to write another book, and neither of them have done that. They’ve each done something different. I have said this to them, that I never have any idea what they’re going to do next and actually, that is quite good, I think.

Olivia Pearce: How important is it to create communities and networks between Black writers through events like *Speaking Volumes’ Breaking Ground Black British Writers US tour*, which Jay Bernard and Johny Pitts were both involved in?

Suresh Ariaratnam: It is vital because, at the start of a creative endeavour, you’ve got very little validation from the external world that what you’re doing is going to find an audience. There is a network of support that occurs through relationships with fellow authors under the umbrella of an organization like *Speaking Volumes*, but also in terms of the doors that they, and organizations

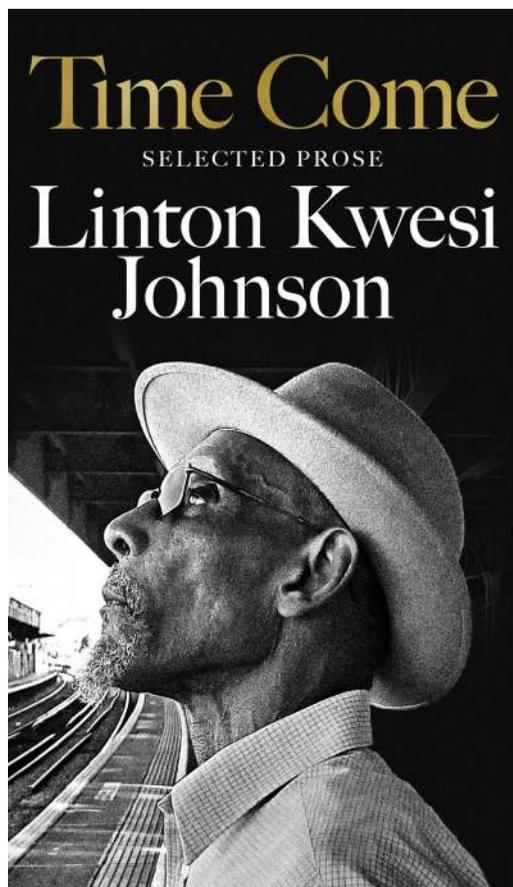
like them, can open. If you were to look back in history, there are other times – the Harlem Renaissance would be an example – where writers and other artists came together and were part of providing a mixture of positive and negative stimulation in order to catalyze creative work.

Bethan Oakley: What has been the most rewarding aspect of setting up your agency Sprung Sultan? Is there a particular event or journey, like you were talking about with Johny, that you’ve been involved in which stands out to you?

Suresh Ariaratnam: Some of the best things have occurred because of adversity. I’m particularly interested in what the conditions are for someone to have a sustainable writing career. If that is someone from a marginalized community, it often comes down to having equitable conditions within which to create work. Some people in our society have advantages and opportunities that other people don’t, and I’m interested in closing the gap between the two. The piece of work that I feel most proud of is yet to happen but will be next year. It is a co-designed module on intellectual property, race and health outcomes in publishing, with a colleague at the University of Pittsburgh, that will be taught in the School of Law there before further dissemination.

Bethan Oakley: Do you think that over time your role as an agent has become increasingly important in trying to combat the issues within the publishing industry?

Suresh Ariaratnam: Yes. It is not something that I set off to do and is something that I've accidentally taken on because that was the territory encountered. I see being an agent as a vehicle to address issues of inequity. Agenting is an enjoyable way to spend time but for me it is definitely a vehicle towards a larger purpose.



Cover of *Time Come* by Linton Kwesi Johnson.

Bethan Pepler: How important to Sprung Sultan is your location in the South West?

Suresh Ariaratnam: The South West is very important for two reasons. One, I grew up here, so it is where I have my roots. Second, is because not all the interesting things happen in London. In fact, many of the most interesting things don't happen there. Historically, publishing has been quite London-centric, and I think that conspires against people who might want to work in publishing, but maybe can't afford to, or don't wish to live there. This also works against writers who aren't visible to editors, but all of that I think is changing. In terms of links to other parts of the South West network, I serve as a trustee for Literature Works, which is the regional writer development agency for the South West of England and I also have a longstanding relationship with Mr B's Emporium in Bath, which is one of the finest bookstores in the world.

Bethan Pepler: You mentioned you are a trustee of Literature Works. Why was this a role that you were open to taking on, and what do you think is particularly significant about the work Literature Works is doing within the region?

Suresh Ariaratnam: What is amazing about Literature Works is that notions of equity, as well as equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), are in the engine room of what they do. It guides much of the decision making. In some organizations that I've been part of, EDI is in the side room, and we occasionally

get it out to look at when the funders come in, but then it gets put back again, which is just rubbish. So, it is nice to be part of an organization where their purpose and their actions are aligned.

'Some people in our society have advantages and opportunities that other people don't, and I'm interested in closing the gap between the two.'

Bethan Pepler: How do you think the literary and publishing space has changed over the time Sprung Sultan has been active? Do you think there are more opportunities and visibility for writers from Black and Asian communities now?

Suresh Ariaratnam: Every so often in publishing, there appears to be a focus on certain themes. So, if we think about diversity and inclusion, there was a focus on that in 2006–2007 as well as later in 2016. Then there was a more concerted focus that was wider than the book industry, following the murder of George Floyd and the subsequent Black Lives Matter movement protests. There seems to be a series of cycles and it feels like each time the tide comes in a little bit further and then it goes out again, but then it'll come in a little more. A positive change is the growing understanding that books by marginalized people don't just sell to people from those communities. Obviously, we never think that books

by men or books by women only sell to men or women. It is nice that we've woken up to the idea that books by someone from the LGBTQIA+ community don't just sell to someone from the LGBTQIA+ community. It is not rocket science, but it has taken a while to get our heads around it as an industry.

Olivia Pearce: What changes or improvements would you like to see in the publishing industry's approach to addressing income inequality and lack of diversity among the more senior leaders specifically?

Suresh Ariaratnam: The industry ought to spend more time talking about equity and addressing inequity, which it doesn't talk about, hardly at all – even if it spends a lot of time talking about diversity and inclusion – or do. I would suggest that diversity and inclusion are the low-hanging fruit. You can make a business case for why you should publish more diversely because it is going to increase your consumer base and benefit your profit and loss statement. You can make an argument for why it is important to hire more inclusively because especially as a younger cohort enters the workforce, you are going to be able to benefit from what their wider view brings, in terms of the books written, published and sold. But creating a more equitable system will mean addressing some of the structural and systemic advantages that publishers have had over marginalized authors and making an adjustment to the balance of profit and loss accordingly. There are senior

leaders who say one thing and do another thing, and a bit more alignment in terms of what people say and what people do would be helpful. My biggest concern is that we may end up with a sort of diluted form of equality, diversity and inclusion and that we will think *this* is the real thing. When in reality, this is only a surface form of it. That won't happen across the board thankfully, but you can see that it is happening in some places. Think about it in terms of gender and equality. It is one thing to say that there should be gender equality in terms of pay but, if you go under the bonnet, what does that mean in terms of the retention of people from different genders? An employer can say 'we will employ more women', but will those women stay in the job? And I think that detail is the important part. In publishing, there is a lot of talk about the number of hires from diverse communities, but there is not enough data in terms of how many people have stayed in the industry five years down the road.

Olivia Pearce: What are your specific goals for Sprung Sultan in the coming years? Is there anything in particular that you hope to achieve?

Suresh Ariaratnam: One specific goal is the transfer of my list to be managed by Salma Begum, a young person who is Bangladeshi British, a first-generation immigrant from a working-class community, and whose talent is likely to be overlooked in publishing because of inattentive blindness. This is a way for her and me to work together to close the equity gap that she faces. And at

the same time, it is a bit of a no brainer, because she is very talented! My second goal will be a body of work that asks what role a publisher plays in creating the socio-economic conditions for wealth inequity for people from Black and Asian communities, drawing on my encounters of inequitable behaviour in the book industry.

Bethan Oakley: What role do you think that readers and consumers can play in advocating and contributing to this change in the industry?

Suresh Ariaratnam: I wonder whether the biggest change consumers can make is thinking about supply chain ethics. It is becoming normal now to think about a piece of clothing and question whether you want to buy a top from a fast fashion outlet that is manufacturing in a developing nation, with people not being paid properly and where there are health and safety issues, just so we can have a garment that costs five pounds. If we apply the same lens to the supply chain in publishing, where a consumer or a retailer asks when they are buying a book, such as by a writer from a Black community, 'What are the conditions under which that book was written?' What I mean specifically is, what is the financial value that the writer is receiving? I would quite like to see someone publish a book with a breakdown on the back, with how much the bookstore makes, how much the publisher makes, how much the distributor makes and how much the author makes, just to give a little bit more transparency, as has on occasion been done in fashion.

Olivia Pearce: Jay Bernard's collection, *Surge*, is taught on the English undergraduate syllabus at the University of Exeter. What do you think is the importance of universities in pushing forward the visibility of Black and Asian writers?

Suresh Ariaratnam: I wonder whether the part that a university can play is in providing some kind of intellectual commentary around a work, a space for it to be discussed, to be a focus of ideas around the work. Universities also validate as well, so having work taught as part of the syllabus, I suppose, confirms the work. However, it is important to remember that only 38% of school leavers go to university. So, yes, universities are important, but what are the other spaces that may be less visible and less organized that also hold importance for writers' work? This is irrespective of ethnicity or other forms of minoritization. The centre of an ecosystem – educational or otherwise – is important, but so are the margins, which of course is someone's centre, somewhere.

For more information regarding Literature Works and Speaking Volumes, discussed in this interview, please see: <https://literatureworks.org.uk/> and <https://speaking-volumes.org.uk/>