

# free verse

Publishing opportunities for Black and Asian poets

**Editor:** Danuta Kean (danutakean@mac.com)

**Project Management:** Nick Murza and Emma Hewett  
(Spread the Word)

**Quantitative Research and Data Analysis:** Melanie Larsen,  
Nick Murza

**Contributors:** Katy Massey, Valerie Mason-John, Daljit Nagra,  
Alison Solomon, Kadija George Sesay

**Poetry Editors:** Bernardine Evaristo, Moniza Alvi

**Special thanks to:** Ruth Borthwick, Bernardine Evaristo,  
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Spread the Word

**Advisory panel:** Moniza Alvi, Gina Antchandie, Jenny Attala,  
Ruth Borthwick, Bernardine Evaristo, Kate Griffin, Lucy Hutton,  
Ann Kellaway, Nick McDowell, Jules Mann, Jane Stubbs,  
Emma Turnbull

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# The start of something...

Poetry lays claim to be the voice of a nation's soul.

To achieve that status, it must reflect the multitude of communities that make up that nation.

On the UK performance circuit that is not an issue; Black and Asian poets are well represented. But when it comes to poetry publishing, minority ethnic poets struggle to be read and, as the printed word is what lasts, remembered.

If you doubt that their voices are unread, then consider this: when the initial list for the Next Generation Poets was drawn up there were no Black or Asian faces on it, leading the judges to send out a frantic call for minority ethnic names to be submitted. Their initial omission did not indicate a lack of poetic ability among Black and Asian communities. Quite the contrary, these communities are rich with talent from

John Siddique and Moniza Alvi, to Imtiaz Dharker to Daljit Nagra.

This is a far cry from the 1980s, when poetry publishers were making great strides towards cultural diversity with such names as John Agard, Benjamin Zephaniah, and Grace Nichols. So what has gone wrong in the 21st Century? Finding the answer to that question – and what can be done to reverse the situation – is the inspiration behind *Free Verse*. This report is the culmination of a year of research by Spread the Word to discover the barriers to being published and how poets and publishers can be brought back together.

So will *Free Verse* achieve anything concrete? Yes. Two years ago I edited a report for the Arts Council's *decibel* initiative aimed at promoting cultural diversity in the arts. *In Full Colour* revealed the appalling lack of diversity within publishing houses, and that the handful of Black and Asian people employed in the sector not only felt

marginalised, but were victims of an insidious institutional racism.

*In Full Colour* was not about merely reporting the situation. It was about promoting change, and since its publication book publishers have embraced myriad initiatives from graduate recruitment schemes and diversity training to the creation of DipNet, a networking organisation for Black and Asian publishers. Change has come to that industry.

*Free Verse* aims to promote similar concrete and cultural changes within the poetry world. As this report reveals, poets and publishers have the same resolution for change as UK book publishers and authors did two years ago. That is why I am optimistic about the impact of *Free Verse*, because that willingness is what gets results.

**Danuta Kean**  
Editor, *Free Verse*

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# The results

**Danuta Kean** and **Melanie Larsen** reveal the results of the first survey into opportunities for Black and Asian poets in the UK.

Black and Asian poets in the UK are optimistic. Few may have made it to the page, but they are convinced they will. In the first ever nationwide survey of its kind, 50% of the Black and Asian poets surveyed expected to achieve ambitions ranging from publishing a collection of poetry to achieving a national or international reputation for their work.

Not that the poets involved were unrealistic. They were keenly aware of the barriers to publication. Almost half (43%) regarded opportunities for them as either poor or very poor, compared to 12% who regarded opportunities as good or very good.

Racism was not blamed for this lack of opportunity. Only 7% cited prejudice or racism as a barrier. Though respondents to the survey did not blame overt racism for the under-representation of Black and Asian poets on the page, they did regard poetry publishing as unsupportive of minority ethnic talent.

There was a strong sense among respondents that there needs to be a shift in awareness and that minority ethnic communities should be better represented in poetry publishing than they are at present. Three things were

singled out as critical for more Black and Asian poets to be published: 61% said the market needed to be developed; 60% said poetry by Black and Asian poets should have a higher profile on the National Curriculum; and 56% believed that if publishers employed more Black and Asian staff, more Black and Asian poets would be published.

Though getting published was high on the agenda, the poets surveyed were realistic about the financial returns they could expect from their writing.

Only a tiny handful had made money from their poetry in the past year. Over the same period, only 5% said poetry was their chief source of income, compared to 23% who made no money from their work and 6% who earned between £1,001 and £2,500. Only 9% earned more than £2,500, while 57% did not answer the question.

Though almost half (45%) wished to make poetry their prime source of income, only 23% actually expected to realise this dream. A further 23% did not see money as a priority.

These are realistic expectations, and may be assumed to mirror the experiences of white poets. Though no statistics are available for white poets, it is unlikely many earn enough to live by poetry alone. Sales of literature and poetry are in freefall and account for less than 1.7% of the total book market, according to Nielsen BookScan, which collates sales data from book retailers.

The survey bore out the assumption that Black and Asian poets are better represented on the stage than they are on the page. The majority of respondents were writing both for performance and the page, with only 31% writing exclusively for the page.

When measured against outlets for their work, the survey found 31% had been paid for performances, 34% had performed their work free and 31% used workshops as an outlet. In contrast only 28% had been published in book form. The arrival of the internet has opened up new publishing opportunities for Black and Asian poets, 28% of respondents had been published on the net. However 26% had no outlet for their work.

That internet publishing is such a significant outlet should raise alarm bells. Though there are many good, legitimate presses using the internet to bypass retailers and find readers, old fashioned vanity presses, offering no editorial guidance or development in return for the fees they charge writers, are exploiting the frustrations faced by writers. As the number of internet-published poets is likely to rise, guidance is needed on the minimum service poets should expect from their internet publishers.

The number of Black and Asian poets published by major publishers was small, only 8% (*see graph, Who publishes minority ethnic poets?*). Of those who had been published, mainstream presses were responsible for publishing

30% of the poets, while 25% were published elsewhere. Excluding the 2% who had self-published only (in total 13% had self-published), 55% of respondents had seen their work in print.

As with all writers, perseverance pays, and of those who were published active submission (14%) or competitions (11%) were cited as the main ways they gained exposure. The poets had a better than expected hit rate. Of those who had been published 39% submitted their work only four times before succeeding, while 8% had tried between five and nine times and 10% more than that.

Networking between minority ethnic poets and mainstream presses was poor, a finding born out in interviews with poets and presses (*see features pages 6 and 9*). Only 6% achieved publication through personal contacts.

This finding contrasted sharply with the surveyed poets; belief that knowing the right people was key to getting into print. Of those published, 41% said their peers were the most important factor in getting published, 37% cited contacts and 28% a mentor.


Again few respondents cited prejudice or racism as reasons that their work had been rejected, though publishers' rejection slips threw little light onto why their poetry was not accepted. Publishers' most common stated reason for rejecting poets' work was that it did not fit their lists (19%), while 8% were told the subject matter was not suitable for their list.

Opportunities

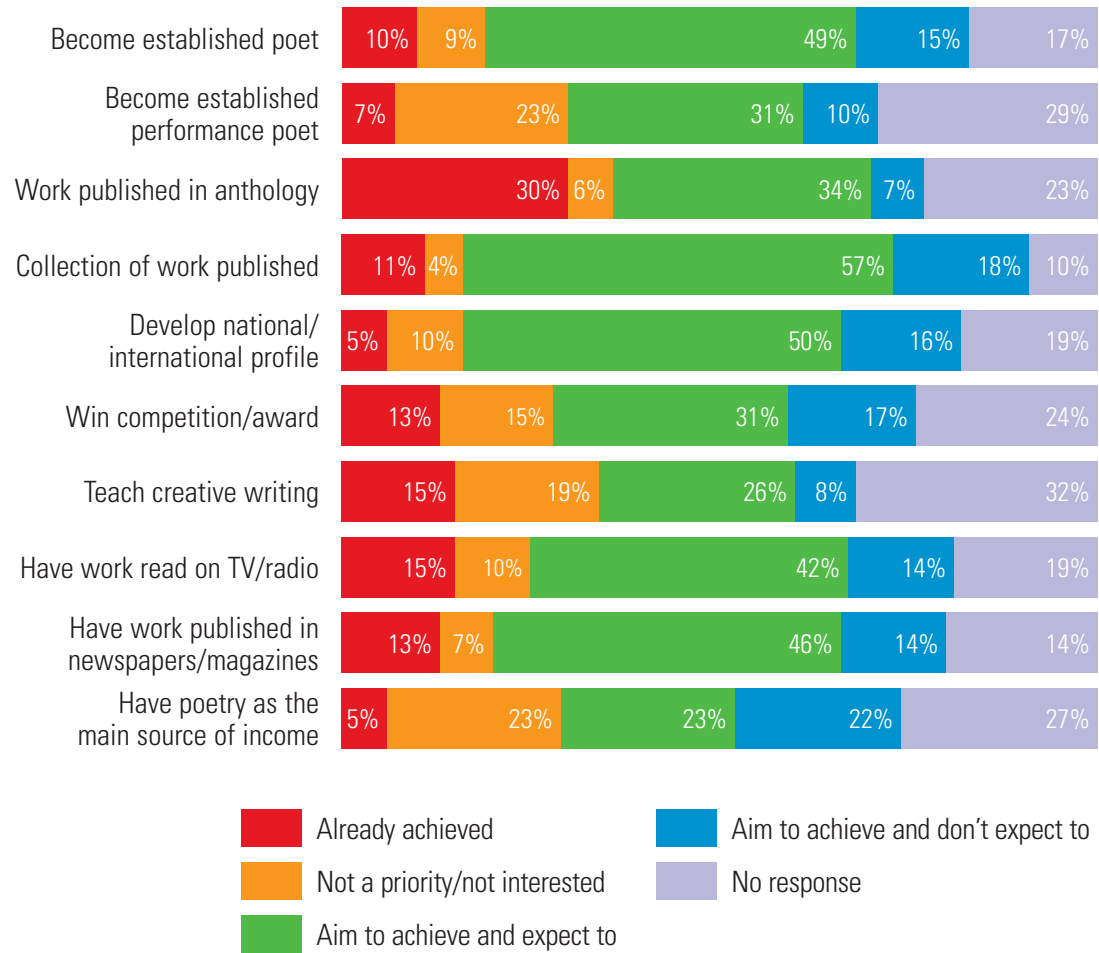
In a tiny handful of cases, 6%, poets were told that their work was “too culturally specific”.

Despite the tough publishing environment, the poets surveyed proved to be determined to fulfil their dreams. Black and Asian poets are not willing to sit back and wait for it to happen. They are actively seeking opportunities, which is why they are optimistic that they will make it eventually.

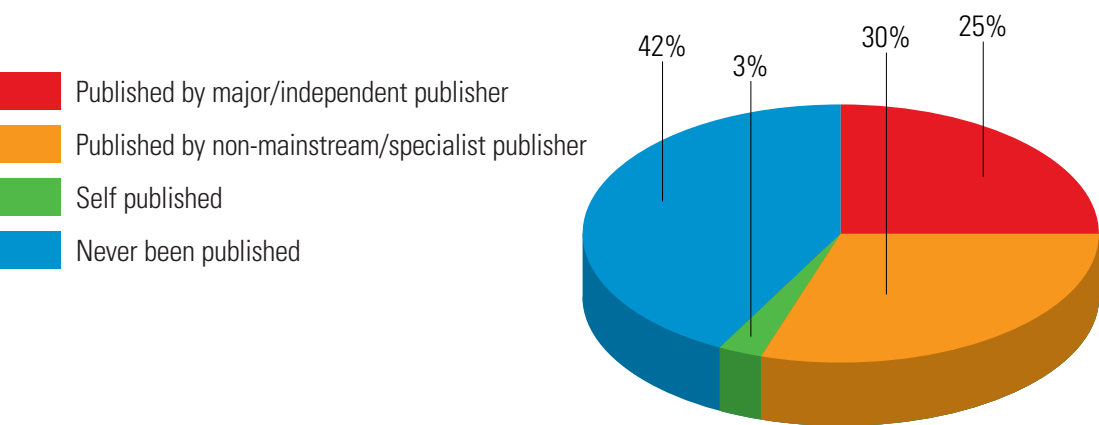
Training is important to the overwhelming majority. 73% have already undertaken some form of training, though a bedrock (27%) of respondents were resistant to outside influences. These poets regarded training as a threat to their developing a distinct voice. While such self-belief is important, poets need to realise that their work cannot develop in a vacuum and such insularity may be the chief reason they are finding it hard to get recognition (see feature page 10).

The optimism of Britain’s Black and Asian poets is matched by keen practicality, which is why support for career development was top of the agenda for the poets surveyed. How this support is provided needs to be central to the debate that should follow this report. For the surveyed poets 38% want financial support, 27% want networking opportunities and 28% want to work with a mentor. These are achievable, concrete goals that poets and publishers should regard with equal optimism. 

Ambitions and expectations



Who publishes minority ethnic poets?





# The sound barrier

Black and Asian poets are breaking through on the performance circuit but not on the page. **Danuta Kean** investigates why.

In capital letters usually associated with Angry of Middle England, one publisher scrawled across the Arts Council/Spread the Word survey into publishing opportunities for Black and Asian poets: "This is a racist survey."

By merely asking minority ethnic poets: "How is it for you?" the survey had pushed the retired editor's nuclear button: "If you conducted this survey on

behalf of white British poets you'd be taken to court."

But if, as she forthrightly claims, poetry publishers are "colour blind", why is so little of what they publish by Black or Asian writers?

If presses are "colour blind", to use her phrase, and, as we know from the performance circuit, there is a thriving community of minority ethnic poets out there, why are more not making it to the page?

It is a question minority ethnic poets are asking. "Why do the big poetry publishers have so few Black and Asian poets on their lists?" asks Indian poet Shanta Acharya. Though Acharya is an on-the-page veteran – her collection

*Looking In, Looking Out* was published by Headland last June – she is painfully aware that hers is a rare voice. "When I look at their lists, I only see a handful of minority ethnic poets. They have their token Black or Asian people – one or two names."

## Law of averages

If publishers are, as they claim, choosing according to quality not ethnicity, the law of averages implies a proportion of BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) poets should be picked for publication. But publisher after publisher, both large and small, admits their list is overwhelmingly white.



When the influential Next Generation Poets list was compiled, the shocking realisation that it contained no Black or Asian faces caused the organisers to call presses and ask them to submit work by minority ethnic writers.

It is as though a synapse link is missing. The majority of publishers answering the survey desire more representative lists and believe there are BME poets worthy of publication, but somehow that is not happening (*see Come the revolution, page 9*). Good intentions have gone awry and poets' ambitions and publishers' desires are not producing results. Clearly something is wrong.

Explicit racism is not to blame. No poet reported aggressively racist treatment. But many experienced something more subtle. It manifests itself when poets are asked to represent "the Black Voice" at events, as if one experience represents all Black people, or, as happened to Mimi Khalvati, when rejection slips state the publisher "already has one poet to represent the Asian voice". Khalvati recalls: "It was ridiculous, especially as the [other] person's work was so unlike my own."

The values that anger Khalvati are depressingly prevalent in poetry circles, says up and coming poet Daljit Nagra, who is to be published by Faber this year. "Magazine editors have sometimes described my poems as 'exotic'. I find this offensive. Major publishers have told me that my work is 'not for us'. I don't know what this means. Or they have said my range is 'too narrow'. My suspicion is that they are referring to my Asian content and not my style."

Behind the good intentions, clumsy comments betray far from "colour blind" values.

Could the ogre of institutionalised racism be at work in poetry publishing? Could the frustration voiced by the majority of poets spoken to for this survey be the result of cultural barriers – as invisible to publishers as they are frustrating to poets – that limit access to networks, mentors and role models in education and the critical establishment?

Cardiff-based Leon Charles, 49, a poet and rap artist working in community and schools projects, says the rot of exclusion sets in early for minority ethnic students. "It would have been great to have poetry to read at school that was by Black poets," he says.

Though there are more Black and Asian voices are on the curriculum, he observes they tend to be in the English Language rather than Literature section of the syllabus. This effectively separates minority ethnic poets from the literary canon, as if what is interesting about them is their use of language rather than the universality of their message. Charles was not the only one to ask: "Why are white people regarded as the only ones able to make universal observations?"

### **A certain voice**

The damage done to emerging BME poets is subtle, he says. By not seeing their reflection in the poetry read at school, a perception, however misguided, develops that published poetry has "a certain voice" – a white voice with a European accent. "It implies that poetry has to fulfil a certain criteria that is about speaking in the Queen's English, staccato and regimented," Charles adds.

Too often, he believes, poetry editors do not understand Black poets and dismiss their work as rap with little artistic merit and nothing profound to say. ➤

## **CHOMAN HARDI**

### **THE PENELOPES OF MY HOMELAND**

(for the 50,000 widows of Anfal)

Years and years of silent labour  
the Penelopes of my homeland  
wove their own and their children's shrouds  
without a sign of Odysseus returning.

Years and years of widowhood they lived  
without realising, without ever thinking  
that their dream was dead the day it was dreamt,  
that their colourful future was all in the past,  
that they had lived their destinies  
and their was nothing else to live through.

Years and years of avoiding despair, not giving up,  
holding on to hopes raised by palm-readers,  
holding on to the wishful dreams of the nights  
and to the just God  
who does not allow such nightmares to continue.

Years and years of raising more Penelopes and  
more Odysseuses  
the waiting mothers of my homeland grew old and older  
without ever knowing that they were waiting  
without ever knowing that they should stop waiting.

Years and years of youth that was there and  
went unnoticed  
of passionate love that wasn't made  
of no knocking on the door after midnight  
returning from very long journey.

The Penelopes of my homeland died slowly  
carrying their dreams into their graves,  
leaving more Penelopes to take their place.

"We have some awesome poets in the rap world, but they are put in some kind of cultural cul-de-sac, as if all we have to say is about 'gangsta' and 'niggas'."

Hertfordshire-based poet Catherine Boldeau has first hand experience of this stereotyping in education. "Black and Asian writing is not always appreciated by people in higher education," she says. "I started an English degree and on the course studied Black poetry. All my classmates were white and they thought 'dub poetry' was rubbish. I spent nearly an hour explaining its thoughts and sentiments. It was very embarrassing."

It is not only in education that minority ethnic poets feel marginalised. Too often it is first on the list of criteria used by editors to judge BME poets' work, whether their work reflects their ethnicity or not, claims established poet John Siddique of Hebden Bridge. "My ethnicity should be third on the list of relevance in judging my work. It has its place, but not at the top of the list."

More than once Siddique, whose latest collection *The Prize* is published by The Rialto, has fought editors' selections of his poetry. "Even though I have written about the struggle for identity it is only a fortieth of what I write." He recalls: "One editor's choice was very 'ethnic'. I fought tooth and nail to get most of that material excluded because it was not representative of my work."

### Everyone gets work

Poets spoken to for the survey feel caught on the horns of a dilemma: put up with being marginalised, their ethnicity used – in performance and on the page – to define their work, or refuse to play the game and risk being left off the slate at gigs or in anthologies

because they do not want their ethnicity to define their work.

As Asian poet Sundra, observes: "During Black History Month, everyone gets work."

She articulates the conflict BME poets feel: "It is positive because you are earning money as a poet and if you are writing about your ethnic background, people want to hear about it. But it is also negative, because I don't just write about my background, I also write about working in an office, but that is not what is wanted."

Minority ethnic poets want a platform for their work, but they want their work to be judged on its own merit, not because it represents "the Black or Asian experience", whatever that means. In part, says Lawrence, it is a symptom of the way poetry is funded.

Funding bodies' criteria for awards usually include stipulations about ethnicity and gender. While the system ensures that organisers and editors acknowledge the Black and Asian voice, it can backfire. "People want to tick boxes," observes Lawrence. "I am a female Asian poet and that is two boxes ticked." Organisers need to think outside these boxes.

In the meantime, BME poets either play along or miss out on the rare opportunities to be heard, as Mimi Khalvati acknowledges: "It is difficult because you don't want to deny the centrality of your race and culture, but at the same time you don't want to be typecast. I'm not going to say no because I think I am there in an ethnic capacity."

The poetry world will know it has broken through the race barrier when BME poets feel their work is considered

according to their individual voice and quality and not as an expression of collective racial identity.

No matter how well intentioned, the presumption that minority ethnic poets see life entirely through the prism of ethnicity is racial stereotyping, as Newcastle-based poet and journalist Katy Massey points out. "I don't wake up every morning and think, 'What am I going to do as a Black woman today?'" she says wryly.

### Stereotyping

Though poets expressed concern that even on the performance circuit there are issues of stereotyping, there was a strong feeling that it is open to minority ethnic poets in a way publishing is not.

But the importance of the performance circuit to BME poets presents problems, as Leeds-based Rommi Smith, a published poet who came up through the performance scene, points out: "I think more could be focused on the expectation that minority ethnic poets are performance poets. This is often used in a dismissive way. I've had the head of a poetry MA course refer to me as 'one of those performance poets', then proceed to demean the craft as lesser to that of those who are solely published."

Mark Mace Smith of Preston believes BME poets must take the long view and use what is on offer to gain a platform from which they can challenge the system. "To get to a position where I can say what I feel to an audience that will listen, I need to go through this ghettoisation so that I can say what I want later on," he comments.

The performance circuit offers access to networks, mentors, advice and general support. All were cited as vital if BME poets are to break through the barriers

that keep them off the page. This was especially important to poets outside London, where resources like Apples & Snakes ([www.applesandsnakes.org](http://www.applesandsnakes.org)) are scarce.

"When I lived in East London there were an awful lot of resources for anyone wanting to do more creative writing," Yasmin Butt says. Since moving to Hayes in Middlesex she has found it more difficult to access networks, in part because there are few events where she can meet other poets.

It can be lonely outside the metropolitan hub. Writers like Butt, at the start of their career, ask the same question: "How do I find others who can help me?"

Presuming everyone knows about resources like the *Writers' and Artists' Yearbook* is misguided. Networks are self-perpetuating: if you are part of one you will be pointed towards more resources; if not, you feel lost, which is why online support networks for writers, such as the excellent Commonword ([www.commonword.org.uk](http://www.commonword.org.uk)), need to be marketed to raise awareness outside immediate circles.

A good introduction to networking is adult education. But one issue raised by poets in the survey was that work commitments mean they can only attend evening courses, which tend to fill up quickly. "All the ones I find are in the middle of the day," Rachel Ajoio complains. "I work, but if there were courses nearby in the evening I would go." It compounds a feeling of exclusion among poets.

### Guiding hand

While new poets may struggle to access networks, poets of all levels want mentors, as much to guide them



through the publishing jungle as anything else.

"Derby is a small city, you don't meet many people who are making money from writing poetry," says Alison Solomon, who has attended a number of poetry courses, but wants help finding out about the business of getting published, as well as developing her writing.

"I would like a mentor who could help me with the practicalities of how to do that: how much to charge, where to get funding and so on. I would be happy talking to someone by email or phone, just somebody who would be able to

say, 'That's crap!' or 'Yeah, that is right'" she explains.

A short-term result from this survey would be to establish networking and mentoring services, which would enable Black and Asian poets to access mainstream presses and poets of colour who have successfully managed the transition to the page. Judging by responses to the poetry survey, such a poets' "dating service" would produce immediate results.


Pragmatic solutions offer no quick fix for the attitudinal change needed within poetry publishing if it is to be more diverse. But they will enable more BME poets to get heard and challenge the assumptions that fired the angry editor quoted at the start of this piece.

Mark Mace Smith's pragmatism and determination to break the glass ceiling is typical of the poets questioned for this survey. To use a cliché, minority ethnic poets are a "very can-do" community, whose lack of access to traditional markets has turned them into poetry entrepreneurs accessing new markets for their work.

It is this determination and the recognition that there is a market for their work outside Waterstone's

customers that fires their optimism. It is a resource the presses should tap into.

BME poets want to be published and are willing to take whatever opportunities they can. This extends to do-it-yourself publishing, if all other routes remain closed. "I am sure that I will self-publish before the big boys come looking," Mace Smith comments.

Voicing the determination of the majority of poets spoken to for this report, he adds defiantly: "We will get there!" When BME poets do, mainstream presses should be with them if they want to find a dynamic new market that could revitalise British poetry publishing in the 21st Century. 



# Come the revolution

Poetry publishers are adamant they want to publish more minority ethnic poets, so what is getting in the way?

**Danuta Kean** investigates.

After years running Kuumba, the successful Bristol poetry venue, Bertel Martin felt frustrated at the poor progression of talented minority ethnic

poets from stage to page. So he decided to do something about it. In April last year he set up City Chameleon, an independent poetry press he hopes will

help right a situation that, he says, has for too long been wrong.

"What we are trying to do is develop work with writers, rather than just get them to send manuscripts in to which we say yes or no," he explains. "The reason we have taken this route is that a lot of Black and Asian writers find getting support and development hard, and because I want to have a publishing company that has a different relationship with its artists and the audience for their work."

By "different" he means a relationship in which poets are mentored and their readership encouraged by actively developing an alternative market place for poetry, which is increasingly squeezed out of traditional bookshops.

These are revolutionary actions in a sector that by its own admission is resistant to change, as Paul Keegan concedes: "Poetry is an inherently conservative genre. It tends to open up relatively slowly and has not diversified as freely as fiction." Keegan is better placed than most to talk about the poetry establishment: as Faber poetry editor he is at the top of the tree.

It is a tree that needs shaking, he freely admits. Because, despite the high profile achieved by minority ethnic poets on the performance circuit and in fiction, very few are making it into print.

As Keegan implies, it is not racism that blocks minority ethnic poets' progress, it is a culture inclined





towards the status quo and resistant to change. This was reflected in the majority of responses of poetry presses to this survey.

### Few solutions

As would be expected of poetry publishers, most want better representation of minority ethnic communities in poetry. But few offered solutions as to how to achieve it, and none regarded their submissions policies as contributing to the problem.

Just the opposite: they choose work on merit and merit alone, said publisher after publisher. If Black and Asian people are poorly represented on their list, it is because either they are not submitting their work or it is not good enough to make the cut.

In one rare case was anything expressed that could be described as prejudice. "Regarding this race business, you certainly can't call me racist," fumed one small publisher, who refuses to be named. Irritated by the mere mention of the subject. Heatedly he adds: "But the ugliest word in the English language is that four letter word beginning with 'r'.

"It doesn't help to even talk about it, because as soon as you talk about race you talk about difference, and people should be judged on their merits. It polarises attitudes to stick labels on people. The best way to promote harmony amongst all sorts of people is to encourage role models."

But the problem for minority ethnic poets, as the survey revealed, is that poetry publishing has too few BME role models.

### Good intentions

If poetry presses are in favour of greater diversity on the page, why are their good intentions producing such paltry results? And why do there appear to be fewer opportunities for Black and Asian poets to get published now than there were 20 years ago?

Publishers questioned for the survey identified a number of factors ranging from the demise of a viable retail base for poetry, which has had a corrosive effect on independent presses, to the flood of submissions received by poetry editors, which leaves them little time to scout out new talent or to develop potential. They also pointed to an overwhelmingly white, male critical establishment, which many regarded as resistant to poetry from other cultural perspectives, and thus perpetuating the myth among minority ethnic poets that getting published is "a white thing".

Two publishers, Peepal Tree Press and Arc Publications do publish work by BME poets. A fundamental problem, says Jeremy Poynting of Peepal Tree, is the lack of interface between the minority ethnic community and the white poetry establishment. "The thing that you notice about good white poets who approach us is that they all have a c.v. of work that has been published in magazines, won competitions and so on. That is generally not the case with good Black and Asian writers," he explains. "It is a two way thing. Perhaps they are not aware of the existence of some of the magazines, competitions and smaller presses or

they think they are pretty white and are not approaching them?"

The gap between minority ethnic poets and the poetry establishment was highlighted when the Next Generation Poets list was first drawn up. It featured no poets of colour, and the organisers were forced to contact presses working with BME poets and ask for submissions.

"I am very sceptical of that whole procedure," confides Tony Ward, managing director of Lancashire-based Arc Publications. "If you have to scout around they're either not there or someone hasn't done their homework. There are plenty of very able BME poets out there, so you decide what happened." The debacle was the inspiration for this project.

### Poets' apprenticeship

Publishers' suspicions that the two sides are not talking to each other were confirmed by BME poets' responding to this survey. There was a lack of awareness of what presses want.

Editors repeatedly complained that poets submit their work without doing their homework first. Faber's Keegan and Carcanet editorial director Michael Schmidt are not alone in complaining that too many poets have read very little by their peers, while Tony Ward sums up general feeling when he complains: "We get a lot of people from minority ethnic communities who send work in and it is clear that they haven't bothered to do any research about what we publish."

Ward believes frustration on both sides

could be easily avoided if poets did some research. "We get four or five manuscripts a week that don't fit our criteria – they are religious or children's poems or prose works," he explains. "One quick click on a mouse would explain what we want and save a lot of frustration."

The issue of workload is a considerable factor in the ability of presses to look for talent outside their comfort zone, and an unconscious contributing factor to why editors fail to spot talent in the Black and Asian communities.

The number of editors reading unsolicited submissions at even the best known poetry presses is in single figures, while the number of unsolicited scripts landing on even the tiniest presses' doormats every week is well into double figures.

"We receive hundreds of poems a week and there are just two of us to read through all those submissions," Martha Kapos, assistant editor of the influential journal *Poetry London* explains. She is typical.

The impact of that workload should not be under-estimated. Like their counterparts in the prose world, poetry publishers are snowed under, and the majority of what comes through the door is not very good. But hidden in the slush pile are a handful of poems that fit an editor's taste.

It is an inefficient system that militates against innovation and investing in poets with talent whose work has some way to go before it is page ready. Editors are just not hungry enough to ➤

break the culture of complacency that is endemic within publishing.

Even if they had the time to hunt down Black and Asian poets in their own territory, why should they when there is enough work worthy of publication coming through the door every month?

Besides, most are not making enough money to justify signing up poets far from ready for publication. It is a point about which Peter Lewis, who runs Hexham-based Flambard Press with his partner Margaret, feels strongly. So strongly, in fact, he has applied for funding to set up a mentoring scheme he hopes will benefit Black and Asian writers he has spotted, but has not had the resources to develop.

"The most exciting person we have had approach us is a young Asian woman," he says. "We are trying to get some money to mentor her. It is something we have done before. When we set up we said that we were interested in publishing new and neglected writers, and there must be good writers out there who haven't had much luck, so we can help them."

While it is encouraging to hear presses such as Flambard take mentoring seriously, it is a piecemeal approach. There needs to be a formalised programme of mentoring, adequately funded and administered that benefits both presses and poets.

### **The critics**

Of course no amount of mentoring will make a difference if audiences do not hear about poets' work, which raises another issue highlighted by publishers:

the critics. Very little poetry is reviewed, but publishers crave reviews. In a crowded market with a narrowing retail base a review is critical. But, the critical establishment is perceived as "hideously white".

Carcenet's Michael Schmidt claims it is wrong to believe that a public school mafia rules poetry handing out prizes to friends and reviewing each other. "Yes a lot of people are from Oxbridge, but a lot of people in poetry are not," he says. Instead, he claims, the blame lies in the tendency of the media to marginalise, a tendency is not limited to the work of Black and Asian writers. Women writers tend to be reviewed by other women, books by Black writers are sent to Black reviewers, and so on, bunching together writers whose only commonality is their gender, race or sexual orientation, he asserts. "It is convenience that causes literary editors to do that, but is also a kind of laziness," he says.

This has a dual affect, it sends messages to readers that the books are "minority interest" and, because the same names tend to be reviewed and the same faces hauled in front of the microphone to represent Black or Asian writers, the impression is created that there are few writers from BME backgrounds, which prevents new voices emerging.

Bertel Martin admits some blame for this marginalisation lies with minority ethnic poets themselves. The emphasis on polemic rather than poetic in BME communities has reinforced perceptions among some critics that Black poetry in

particular is a political not a cultural medium. Communities need to give more support to what is good and not just political if they are to fight such prejudice, he contests.

"It is a two-way thing," he says. "There has been within communities a lot of support for people 'telling it like it is' rather than looking at the quality of their work. Sometimes the best examples of work by BME poets are not held up to the light by BME communities."

He hopes City Chameleon will chip away at those dual perceptions, building and promoting poets who should be read because their work is of a high standard and because it has something to say to everybody. "Within the arts it is taken as a given that work by white writers is universal," he adds. "Whereas with Black artists it has to be stressed that this work is universal. We want to change that." 





## VIEW point

Valerie Mason-John,  
London



**"I began as a journalist and that gave me the confidence to write in whatever form I felt like. I write both page poetry and performance poetry. It is hard hitting and held within classical, traditional and contemporary forms. Fifteen years ago a friend asked me to write a poem for an exhibition. I wrote my first two poems, *Tangled Root* and *The Colour of My Skin*. The London listings magazine *City Limits* did a review of the exhibition and singled out my work. I knew then I had to write. Since then *The Colour of My Skin* has been part of a touring exhibition, which opened at the National Portrait Gallery.**

I was invited to submit to an anthology, *Word Up*, published by Centerprise Literature Development Agency. But having a collection published has been my toughest challenge. I think the fact that I am not only Black, but an out gay woman has meant people were a bit too scared to take a risk.

What encourages me are my audiences. They continue to ask if I have anything published and tell me they love my work. If it wasn't for them, I wouldn't have work out there on the book shelf. What knocked me back were rejection letters. But I didn't give up. I continued to perform and write plays. Then Get A Grip Publishers said they wanted to publish my work, which was great. I had my poems, plays, prose published in one a book, *Brown Girl In The Ring*. Once published, people took me more seriously. But I'm still

waiting for a publisher to publish a standalone collection of my poetry.

I think my performance skills, my persona and my ability to write in other genres are the things that have helped me break through. My one-woman show *Brown Girl In The Ring*, put me on the map. It is an hour-long performance poetry production. My first novel *Borrowed Body* has put me on the map as a serious published writer. Interestingly, people say it's very poetic. Poetry is my art form.

Performance poets are taken far more seriously today. Patience Agbabi broke through on the scene, and there are now prestigious monetary prizes for performance poets. It was not considered worthy of comment when I started, we were seen as protest poets with a chip on our shoulder. The irony is that Sappho, one of the greatest poets of all time, was a performance poet.

I would tell poets starting out to see themselves as poets. Don't categorise yourself as a Black or ethnic poet. There's no need to, the media will do that for you. If you see yourself simply as a poet, it will free you up to write about whatever you want."

# Head to head

Why are so few Black and Asian poets published?  
Writer **Bernardine Evaristo** and poetry editor **Neil Astley** of Bloodaxe Books discuss the causes.



**Bernardine Evaristo:** I think there are two major factors why so few new Black and Asian poets have been published in this country over the last 15 years. Firstly it seems to me that most poetry editors are suffering from a certain cultural myopia, which is evidenced in the exclusion of poetry which draws on Black and Asian cultures; and sadly, this generally goes unchallenged.

Unlike fiction in this country, which has been enriched by British writers with origins in so many different cultures, many of whom enjoy great critical and commercial success, the selection criteria for poetry does not have to take into account commercial considerations to the same extent, and so editors' personal taste, which is justified by that most subjective of terms "quality", is more of a deciding factor.

All the editors of poetry presses in this country are white, and this is generally reflected in their lists. Don't you think this shows a terrible lack of imagination? I think they need to follow the example of the many fiction editors who are white and successfully publish diverse works.

**Neil Astley:** I don't think this exclusion is limited to poets drawing on Black and Asian cultures. I know this is our focus, but it's part of a wider and more fundamental problem with the ethos of poetry publishing. I think the root cause is that most poetry editors don't publish poetry for readers but for poets. Every time I've said this my comments have been greeted with applause by readers and people who promote poetry at grassroots level, but with scorn and derision from poetry insiders.

Readers don't have access to the diverse range of poetry being written, because much of the poetry establishment – including many publishers and reviewers – has become narrowly based, male-dominated, white Anglocentric and skewed by factions and vested interests. Too often, editors think of themselves and their poet friends as the only arbiters of taste, only publishing writers they think people ought to read and depriving readers of other kinds of poetry, which many would find more rewarding.

What you call personal taste I think is too often a disguise for elitism. I've always seen my own remit as an editor as being responsive to writers and readers, giving readers access to a wide range of world poetry: Black and Asian writers form part of that diverse spectrum, as do the many exiled writers from Middle East countries who now live in Britain, and are similarly excluded.

**Evaristo:** I have long thought that the poetry world is far too nepotistic and insular for its own good, with a misplaced sense of pride that poetry as high art is never going to shift many units. And the myth of the poet in the garret, who will find fame posthumously because his or her poetry is far too superior to be appreciated in this day and age, is also still disconcertingly alive and well.

Sometimes the poetry world appears to be a huddle of back-slapping, back-biting, self-aggrandising, self-mythologising, navel-gazing cliques which are far too self-important and self-protective to want to open out to poetry which draws on, for example, Black and Asian cultures. Surely, if editors broadened their scope

and brought into the equation a diverse readership, sales might actually become more buoyant.

But sales aside, it is critical approval that is the engine behind the poetry world and this is closely protected: poets review other poets (often friends, associates or from the same publishing house) and poets sit on panels and present awards to each other; disproportionately so compared to fiction. So what we have is this: poets write for each other, dedicate poems to each other, review each other, and read each other. Validation comes totally from within. It is the most tightly-controlled literary genre and other than some tokenistic gestures, its hegemony functions to keep out those who are not in the club or clubs. I have never been part of any club so I speak with an outsider's eye. As verse novelist I sit comfortably in the world of fiction because it's a much more expansive world to inhabit in every sense of the word.

**Astley:** You're right: the publication, dissemination and reception of poetry is controlled by a tiny group, but what they are actually engaging with, protecting and promoting, is just one small part of contemporary poetry. Yet the whole of modern English-language poetry is a set of multiple interconnected traditions, including the more culturally diverse oral-based and literary traditions of African American, Black British, Caribbean and South Asian poetry, with poetry in translation a parallel source of nourishment for poets and readers alike.

Poetry editors may be more interested in the work they've grown up with, but we live in a changing world with evolving literatures, and readers are much more


interested in poetry by writers from all kinds of backgrounds. For example, Imtiaz Dharker's work is concerned with childhood, home, displacement, exile, religious strife and terror – all themes which any reader can identify with, as indeed they have done, because Bloodaxe's publication of her books has led to many invitations for her to give readings, television interviews and most recently, the inclusion of her poems on the GCSE syllabus. But she hasn't had a single national press review.

Last year Bloodaxe published a first collection in English by Choman Hardi, a young Kurdish exile living in London, which again has really taken off, with Choman getting numerous readings. But while her book has sold a lot of copies, most of those sales have been made at readings. Again, she had no national press reviews, and consequently most bookshops haven't been willing to stock her book. Next year we will be publishing the African American poet Elizabeth Alexander, her first British publication. She's very well-known in the States and her books receive national reviews there, but what will happen here?

**Evaristo:** It's interesting to note that many of the poets from Black and Asian backgrounds who were first published in the UK in the 1980s or earlier, gained their reputations on the burgeoning live literature circuit of the time; writers who have also been on the GCSE syllabus, such as John Agard, James Berry and Grace Nichols.

Their careers could advance in spite of the brick wall of the poetry establishment because an audience developed for their work, an audience that loved the work and bought the books. Most importantly, these were careers that ➤





were not brokered by the mainstream poetry establishment. Did they get reviewed in the mainstream press? I'd be very surprised if they did.

But the main difference between then and now is that they were actually getting published. Where would they be if they were trying to break into print in the '90s or Noughties? As well as Agard and Nichols, I'm talking about writers such as E. A. Markham, David Dabydeen, Fred D'Aguiar, Valerie Bloom, Linton Kwesi Johnson and several others. Yet today, with the exception of Bloodaxe and Peepal Tree Press, who publish Kwame Dawes and recently published Dorothea Smartt and Raman Mundair, new poets of colour, especially British poets, are pretty much invisible on the poetry lists.

Both Smartt and Mundair draw on their respective British/Caribbean and British/Indian backgrounds. Neither received mainstream reviews yet both regularly give readings and have a strong following, in particular among Black and Asian women. Why should that marginalise them? It's also interesting to note that the poets who were published in the '80s and earlier, without exception, came from the Caribbean, and without wanting to be reductive or judgmental, there was, dare I say it, an "exoticism" in how their poetry was perceived, although of course it is never the poet's intention.

In the '80s African-American women novelists began to be published in the UK and made a huge impact. At the same time British women novelists of colour couldn't get published because they were told that there was 'no market' for our work. It was then easier to publish writings from abroad than it

was to accept writers who are Black and British-born or raised and who are writing from inside our culture. I definitely see a similarity with poetry publishing today.

**Astley:** Your parallel with fiction publishing is good, but the difference is that novelists from diverse cultural backgrounds get substantial review and feature coverage. That's not the case with poets, with the exception of Jackie Kay, but then she gets most of her publicity for her fiction.

Where poetry is concerned, writers of colour might just as well be invisible, because when they do get their poetry published, whether with specialist presses or mainstream imprints, they are almost without exception totally ignored in the national press. So there's a commercial problem for the poetry editors here: when they do take on books by Black and Asian poets, they don't get press coverage. Without that the bookshops won't stock the books.

They do get picked up by BBC arts producers for radio features and interviews, but radio producers are responsive to their audience and they know that there is a lot of interest in new poetry from Black and Asian writers, whereas the reviewers are drawn from the same pool as the poetry editors. So I think the Arts Council needs to talk not just to the poetry editors but also to literary editors, and to encourage them to draw on a wider range of poetry reviewers, so that poetry by Black and Asian writers is covered by knowledgeable critics.

**Evaristo:** I think performance poetry has become synonymous with poetry from Black writers, and that has been




to the detriment of poetry that has the complexity, nuance and texture required to withstand scrutiny on the page. But over the past 20 years there has been a steady build up of performance poets who are Black and are among the most celebrated and visible poets in this country. Consequently they become role models for younger poets, many of whom aspire to become performance poets.

I do accept that these poets may not choose to be role models, and why should they? But as public figures the truth is that this is what they become. I am not objecting to performance poetry per se, which I see as a literature/performance genre with its own specialised craft and production values, but I do object to the fact that it has taken precedence over poetry not written for performance. As a result hardly any writers of colour are making the journey onto the page.

**Astley:** I agree, that's another problem that needs to be aired. On the positive side, the flourishing of performance poetry has encouraged poets who might see themselves as writing more for the page to become better readers of their own work, and that has improved the standard of poetry readings and meant audiences have become more excited about all kinds of poetry.

And there are poets with their feet in both camps. For example, my introduction to Choman Hardi's work was hearing her read at an Apples & Snakes event in London, and I went up to her afterwards and suggested she send me her work. She'd benefited from being mentored by Moniza Alvi, and over the next year or so she was able to build up a publishable collection with the help of further mentoring by George Szirtes on

a Jerwood scheme. Imaginative mentoring programmes can be very helpful to new poets from diverse cultural backgrounds, not just from a literary point of view, but through the contacts they're able to make.

Readings can give helpful exposure, as was the case with Choman, but I rarely see other poetry editors at readings. I've bumped into Arc's Tony Ward and Angela Jarman talent-scouting at festivals, but where are the others? I believe you can't be responsive to what's happening in world poetry from behind a desk. You can't rely on what turns up in the post, you have to get out there and be proactive. 

\* *BERNARDINE EVARISTO is author of two acclaimed novels in verse, Lara (Angela Royal Publishing) and The Emperor's Babe (Penguin), and novel-with-verse Soul Tourists (Penguin). She has written extensively for radio, theatre and national newspapers and advises a variety of organisations, including Arts Council England. In 2004 she was elected a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature.*

\* *NEIL ASTLEY is editor of Bloodaxe Books, which he founded in 1978. He has edited over 800 poetry books, including two bestselling anthologies, Staying Alive (2002) and Being Alive (2004), and has published two novels, The End of My Tether (2002), which was shortlisted for the Whitbread First Novel Award, and The Sheep Who Changed the World (2005).*



# Get with the programme

Mentoring was top of their wish list for most Black and Asian poets surveyed. **Kadija George Sesay** explains how it works.

Mentoring is one of the buzzwords of the new century and poetry is not immune. But what is mentoring? Mentoring programmes give new poets the benefits of hindsight offered by better established poets. Whether it is advice about writing, getting published or making money, mentored poets benefit from their mentor having been there before.

In 2004 Peepal Tree Press started the Inscribe programme to work with mid-career writers, although they were not necessarily published. We soon found that what poets most wanted from their mentors was not just feedback on their work, but other kinds of support.

Poets want mentors:

- to encourage and motivate them with a specific piece of work
- to help build their confidence as writers and performers
- to assist in the development of a specific area/technique of writing
- to help make contacts within the poetry world
- to give career advice.

There are now many schemes for poets to access mentors, but there are very few published poets of African and Asian descent in the UK and therefore they are spread thin as mentors. One solution the Inscribe programme found to this problem was to have virtual mentors, who used the internet to overcome geographical barriers.

So at what stage in your career do you need a mentor? What should you look for in a mentor? And what should you expect?

Quite early in your writing career a mentor of the same gender or ethnicity may seem essential. Early work may be very culturally specific and cathartic, so having someone who understands your world view may be helpful. If you have moved on from this stage, the mentor sought is likely to be one who understands your writing but is able to offer constructive criticism to which you can respond positively.

This raises an important point in the mentor and mentored relationship: it is no good having a mentor if you are not prepared to take on board constructive criticism. After all, one reason to seek a mentor is that you want to improve as a poet and that means that you are willing to receive criticism from someone whose work you respect and admire.

A formal mentoring scheme is helpful for several reasons:

- it will probably have funding to pay your mentor
- it will probably have a tried and tested formula and programme that the mentor has already agreed to
- its organisers will act as a third party in any disagreements
- it should have formalised contracts between mentor, mentee and the organiser that all agree to uphold.

If you are not able to take advantage of a mentoring scheme, it is okay to search for a mentor on your own. The best of such informal mentoring arrangements form organically, for example through meeting someone through your work, a reading or a personal introduction.

Once you have decided what you want, only then can you decide how to work with your mentor. Find out about their motivations and interests and whether they have ever taught or been a mentor before.

Take time and have at least one social meeting in which you can explain the reasons you are looking for a mentor. Be respectful of your prospective mentor's time, since they are usually giving it with little or no financial recompense in mind.


It is important to formalise arrangements. Things to discuss include everything from the number and length of face-to-face sessions to agreeing specific times and dates when you can call your mentor and for how long. It is also worth clarifying whether he or she is willing to introduce you to his or her agent. A solid mentoring relationship can become a lasting friendship, so it is worth the investment up front.

In the meantime, discovering a fruitful relationship and sourcing a writing partner is a good alternative. Friends and colleagues who have been through the process of establishing themselves as writers can be helpful. For many spoken word artists, even those with



one collection to their name, a mentor remains a valuable asset.

But the more progress you make the more difficult finding a mentor becomes, as there are fewer suitable candidates available. No wonder those that fit the bill are in demand!

One final point that sometimes concerns burgeoning writers – mentors are not out there to steal your work. Any resemblance in their work to yours is simply that, a resemblance. Never forget you selected a mentor whose work you admire, and so it is to be expected that there will be similarities in style and substance. 

\* KADIJA GEORGE SESAY is project co-ordinator for *Inscribe*, founder and publisher for *SABLE*, *LitMag* ([www.sablelitmag.org](http://www.sablelitmag.org)) and editor of *Write Black*, *Write British: From Post Colonial to Black British Literature* (Hansib Publications).

### MENTORING TIPS FOR POETS

Writers on the Inscribe programme offer their tips to make a mentoring relationship work:

- Trust your mentor.
- Provide your mentor with your biography.
- Decide on the scope and makings of the relationship before you start.
- Your mentor should be able to draw out from you why you are writing.
- Your mentor needs to learn about your aims if there is to be progress.
- The mentor has to be 'part diviner', as you may not always be sure what you really need.

'...The name has changed but it is still Bedlam' ~ **POEM**

**KAREN McCARTHY**

### WAR'S IMPERIAL MUSEUM

Inside the old asylum, underground,  
Auschwitz is shrunk to an icy cake,  
pristine and architectural.  
I have seen this blueprint before:  
the who, how, what, where of  
stuffing everybody in.  
This is what scares me.  
Not the emaciated corpses tipped  
into mass graves like landfill.  
Nor the reality of shoes.  
Or the fact that Roman Halter,  
who buried hope with his father,  
still goes to synagogue but cannot pray.

Mercy is a muzzled dog as I meander  
from Genocide – 1st Floor to Genocide –  
Lower Ground, before arriving at  
Crimes Against Humanity: Level 4.  
Pol Pot, Kurdistan, Rwanda: touch screen  
technology enables the death counts  
to scroll like football scores.  
Now it is the 21st Century, I wonder  
if soon we will be required to dismiss  
that which has happened the century before.  
Who remembers Armenia now?

The name has changed but it is still Bedlam.  
Departure is harder than I think,  
it takes time to exit this predatory basement.  
Out past jaunty fighter planes that dangle  
in the atrium. Out past the thrusting  
guns, two of them, long as a street.  
Out into the air, grateful for frost  
and buses, which glow like lamps,  
luminous in the dark afternoon.

# Just rewards?

How do poets make ends meet? **Katy Massey** finds out.

Popular imagination may have poets starving in garrets while they pursue their art. But in reality poets subsidise their creativity by keeping up the day job, according to Mark Le Fanu, general secretary of the Society of Authors. "Poets make a hand-to-mouth existence from reviewing, readings, talks, residencies and journalism," he says.

The duty of public funding bodies to ensure representation of minority groups has benefited minority ethnic poets, who have found work leading workshops, in residencies, at schools and in community projects. But, argues poet John Siddique, the benefit of these day jobs can backfire, and poets find themselves with no time to work on getting published. "People get sidelined into spoken word activities rather than engaging with literature in a wider way," says Siddique, who has worked full-time as a poet for the past 10 years.

## Career choices

There is a good reason why poets choose to pursue spoken word careers. Performance promoters are successful at attracting audiences, which in turn attracts sponsorship, which means the chance to get paid.

Poetry producer Renaissance One has recently toured Britain with a series of limings, which mix readings with food and drink in a casual, non-literary atmosphere. Similarly, The Watchmen Agency, a marketing and events agency specialising in urban culture, has been involved in spoken word events and tours sponsored by Guinness Extra Stout.

What characterises the approach of their events is that they link poetry to the entertainment industry rather than the literary world. Similarly Poetry In



Motion, a monthly poetry and music event held in London, turns into a club after the mike stands are put away. The club atmosphere helps attract a crowd of hundreds of people from outside the poetry mainstream.

Bertel Martin, a Bristol-based performance organiser and poetry publisher focused on BME communities, says the importance of spoken word events as a marketplace for poetry publications is underestimated and underexploited. He wants to work with writers as performers and published poets.

"Publishing is important, as it illustrates the depth and perspective that writers are bringing to their work," says Martin. "A lot of work can't be performed, it has to be communicated on the page. It is an entirely different way of engaging with an audience."

He believes also that BME poets are missing out on the opportunities available from other media. "I try to get them to see themselves as writers, not simply poets, novelists or whatever. There are opportunities in theatre, film and radio, which they could take advantage of."

Commerce also meets poetry at Poetry in the City, a fund-raising vehicle for the Poetry Society, which supports the society's educational work. Founded by City lawyers Bates, Wells & Braithewaite, Poetry in the City has held events as diverse as a T S Eliot celebration, a performance by African poets at the headquarters of Amnesty International and an evening of Punjabi poetry, which, according to its director Graham Henderson, was well-supported by members of the Punjabi community.

### Limited opportunities

Despite poets carrying out paid work ranging from readings to workshops and school visits to residencies, opportunities to be published remain limited.

Even if a poet is successful and finds a publisher, there is no guarantee that they will earn any money from their collection. Advances, if paid, are generally no more than a few hundred pounds and it can take years for sales to pay back that advance. Even established minority ethnic poets have struggled to receive royalties. Two poets, who declined to be named, had collections published, but didn't receive a penny from their erstwhile publishers. "I didn't get anything upfront, but should have got 10% of the royalties. In the end, I got nothing as they never paid up," bemoans one.

Straight questions poets want answered by poetry editors include: how do they decide who goes into print and who receives a rejection slip? What should poets expect to earn from their published work? And how many copies need to be sold before a book is considered a success? Publishers are willing to provide few straight answers. In fact some, who gave generously of their opinions elsewhere in this report, become evasive when asked about money.

Once accepted for publication, poets are usually entitled to buy a number of copies of their work from their publisher at a discount. They can then sell these copies at events for a profit. The number of books poets expect to sell at events varies from none on a bad night to a dozen on a good one. Book sales at events are increasingly important for poets and presses, ➤

### DALJIT NAGRA

#### ARRANGED MARRIAGE

My mum cramming a globe of ladoo  
against the will of my gob  
then flushing it through thanks to the slick  
of syrup. There in the cramped  
moist temple, on cue, she oozed from  
her crocodile purse a wad  
of firmed notes - circling their halos  
for ages over my head  
for the ceremony with video crews.  
Dropped her load. Dropped  
again for the cross-legged bride. Emptied,  
she cleared a bow for her god.

Granny hobbled out a ladoo  
and crashed it home with prune  
fingers, the mash of their beads  
on my gritted teeth, a feast  
for flies, as the preacher chorused  
the whole hush-temple rose.

Zombying behind both me and the bride,  
each fixed pose was frozen in line,  
moth-ball scented, a twenty-twenty  
video vision of ponies, monkeys  
floated in turns by wedlocked pairs.  
Soft the parting that bullioned the air.

Numb, I sat	necklaced in flowers,
a costumed prat	from another world,
as the cash bedded	between my lap
I deadened my head	inside the turban
from holy muzak	of moaning harmonium
(and buk-buk-buk	that bored me rigid),
still feeling sick	when my deaf grandad
started to let rip	in fake posh-Indian:

Who says today's children don't eat the old food?  
Did you see how my boy has stuffed his ladoos?

Ladoo – saffron-coloured sweetmeats about the size of a golf ball

because most are denied access to traditional bookshops.

Crista Ermiya, is coordinator of Independent Northern Presses and runs her own small press, Dogeater. It is possible for presses to make money, she believes, although profits are minimal and most exist on a shoestring and need public subsidy. "Dogeater supports itself because the editing and artwork are done free and I have found a very cheap printing house," Ermiya explains.

"I have to sell about 70 copies to cover the costs of a title, and these sell mainly through spoken word events," she adds. Performance is everything, no matter how much better a poet may be on the page. Sales are heavily dependent on how good the poet is at communicating their work and a good performance equals good sales.

#### **Do it yourself**

Many poets short-circuit poetry houses by self-publishing. Former art director

Ray Hollingsworth has built up a cult reputation by self-publishing his collections (which use high-quality formats and graphics), which he managed to get into Waterstone's. However, the start-up and development costs associated with his venture would have been considerable.

To be a success, self-publishing demands huge commitment in time, energy and money. For DIY publishers, the art of self-promotion is even more important than it is for poets published through established presses. Once your book has arrived from the printers you alone are responsible for getting it out there. That means hustling bookshops, agencies and press. If sales are through a website, it means time and money spent fulfilling online orders.

It is a selling job and is easier with some bookshops than with others. Ottakar's gives branch managers a budget to use at their discretion, and local branches are open to persuasion from local authors. But how long that will last if Waterstone's, W H Smith or one of the other bidders for the chain is successful is a moot point.


Though Waterstone's managers have some discretionary budget, most books are chosen at head office. The chain has buyers specifically tasked with dealing with self-published and independent presses. Head buyer Scott Pack has championed small presses and self-published books. Pack is leaving the chain in the summer, so, if you have the chutzpah, approach him quickly (email: [scott.pack@waterstones.co.uk](mailto:scott.pack@waterstones.co.uk)).

The increasingly rare, local independent bookshop should be at the top of self-publishers' lists, as they and they alone decide on what they stock. Again,

direct approaches to local outlets can work. Otherwise, talk about representation to a sales agencies such as Compass (020 8994 6477) or Turnaround ([www.turnaround-uk.com](http://www.turnaround-uk.com)), which will pitch your book at chains and wholesalers supplying independent bookshops. Be warned the boom in self-publishing means the sales agencies are getting more picky about what they will represent, so you need to have a convincing argument about why your collection will sell.

#### **Must try harder**

Everybody interviewed for this piece agreed on one thing: the market for poetry is limited, but it could be bigger if presses tried harder to convert the audiences at poetry events into book buyers. This audience enthusiastically engages in poetry workshops and ventures out on wintry evenings to listen to readings.

It is not a lazy audience, nor an ignorant one. It is difficult not to conclude that this potential readership has been underestimated, and that the poetry books that might meet its need for creativity, enlightenment, or even entertainment are simply lacking. 

\* *KATY MASSEY is a published poet, journalist and teacher based in Newcastle upon Tyne. As well as performing and writing poetry, she writes a monthly money column for Cosmopolitan and is a part-time lecturer in media, film and creative writing. She may be contacted on [katymassey@aol.com](mailto:katymassey@aol.com).*

## **SELLING YOURSELF AS A POET – HOW TO THINK LIKE A PROFESSIONAL POET**

**Gather testimonials from successful events:** these are like references when you approach organisations for work or with ideas.

**Put together a well-presented 'press pack':** include a chap book or other sample of your work, testimonials, a CV, visuals of successful projects, anything which shows people what you're capable of.

**Use technology:** online blogs, simple websites, and online networking all help to build an audience.

**Look at mutually beneficial relationships:** Consider how your work can support the work of organisations such as schools, hospitals, colleges, community centres, galleries and museums – poetry can bring a static exhibition (pictures, photographs, books etc) to life.

**Be bold:** Approach organisations and publishers with well-thought out and well-presented ideas – spelling mistakes, or missing contact details won't go down well.

**Persevere:** Consistently submit work to journals and magazines – set a target (eg one of two pieces a month) and stick to it.

**Work on your performance technique:** look for workshops and courses aimed at actors/performers.

**Negotiate:** Ask for too much money and you'll price yourself out of the market. Too little, and you are showing you don't value your work enough.

**Network:** Like most businesses, people prefer to deal with people that they know. Networking is important – get out there and mingle!

# Read then write

Faber poetry editor **Paul Keegan** and Carcanet publisher **Michael Schmidt** on getting published.

One thing both Paul Keegan and Michael Schmidt agree on is that the best thing a budding poet can do is read, read and read some more. "The danger is that you tend to think, especially if you come from a minority ethnic background where there is a complex story of integration and adaptation, that that experience is the most important thing about you," Keegan explains. "That is only half the story. How you relate to the wider experience is almost equally important, and the more you read then the better

you become at what you are trying to communicate."

Schmidt agrees. "Writers can improve by reading widely and not just within their own space," he says. Not reading the work of other poets is a basic failing of many aspiring poets, he adds: "One of the things that you discover from interviewing people on poetry courses is that they all want to write poetry, but they have read very little."

Not reading shows in a poets' work, because it lacks basic components needed to communicate clearly with readers, says Keegan. "The problem with a lot of unsolicited poems sent to us is that they are clearly written by people who have written more than they have read. They need to get away from the sense that they can

communicate without the machinery for doing so."

Poets, say both, need to acquire an armoury of weapons that will help them achieve their goal of communicating with readers, otherwise they risk being misinterpreted, obscure or even solipsistic. They also need to be aware that traditional poetic structures can be liberating, decluttering their work of distracting ideas and images.

"You need to know that certain kinds of formal constraint are not inhibiting," explains Keegan. "For instance, if you are writing a sonnet and the 14 lines you use excludes more than it includes of what you want to say, that is not a bad thing. If you make things difficult for yourself that is probably better," Keegan also advises poets to build a

publication c.v. "Rather than sending in unpublished poems, it is better to use the structures that are out there – such as chap books, competitions and poetry magazines – to publish work and then approach us," he explains.

Schmidt says two questions come to mind when he reads unsolicited submissions. They are questions he believes poets should ask themselves before submitting work. The questions are: what is the poem trying to do? And: was it worth doing?

If he feels satisfied with the answers to those two questions, he then asks is the poem interesting? If the answer to that is yes, only then does he ask the final question, the one all poets want to hear answered in the affirmative: "Should I publish it or not?" **FV**

## VIEW point

Alison Solomon,  
Birmingham



**"I would say that my work is observational, written for the page and performance. I was a closet writer. Then, when I lived in Derby, I was put in touch with the local literature development officer and from that I became involved with other writers and painters. Now one of my pieces has been included in the Bull Ring redevelopment in Birmingham after I won a competition.**

It is very difficult for Black and Asian poets to be taken seriously, treated on a par with white poets. Opportunities are difficult to come across. I have friends who have been trying for years but are only now breaking through. The problem is breaking out into the wider community. A lot of it is about who you know.

One of the issues is time – as well as money. If you are working full time, like I am – I have a day job running workshops with children involving arts and crafts and also working in casting for the theatre – you don't have time to get to events and classes. I have done one or two poetry courses, and they were really good, but I got to the point where I wasn't going to do any more because they were just about writing rather than anything else. They were great for learning about different styles, but there was nothing on them about getting published.

I have tried to find a mentor and have written to places like Apples & Snakes, for information, but nothing has come of it. It would be great to have somebody from the same

background, but what I want most is someone who knows the process of getting published. Someone I can ask: what do I do with my poetry once it is published? Should I be looking to get an agent? Is this a performance piece or can it work on the page?

As well as networking, I would like help with funding as I don't know many people who make a living out of poetry. I asked the Arts Council how I should go about funding and if I could go in and see them, but was told not to bother until I had a proper structure for what I want to do. There was nothing about how to move on from there. I haven't looked at alternative funding bodies because I don't know how. I don't think any of this is because I am Black, it is just knowing who to talk to and what to do."



# The prize guys

## FOR WHAT IT'S WORTH: The Society of Authors guide to fees

**Lectures, readings and workshops:** £250 for a full day, and £150 for a single session (or half a day) plus expenses.

**School visits:** should be as above but tend to be less: £150 for a whole day or £100 for a half day.

**Residencies:** authors should work out a fee based on an annual salary of £22,000.

**The Arvon Foundation:** £1,000 to tutors from Monday afternoon through to Saturday.

**Commercial companies and trade associations:** depends on the status of the author. Very few professional speakers charge less than £1,000.

**Talks at school conferences and training days:** £200 per lecture, or £300 to £500 for a whole day.

**Literary festivals:** £100 is the norm plus expenses.

*With thanks to Elizabeth Haylett and the Society of Authors*

Arts funding was an important issue for surveyed poets. **Katy Massey** reveals how and where to get it.

Poetry is rarely self-supporting and funding from public bodies, literary prizes and scholarships is invaluable. Getting your potential as a poet recognised through an award builds confidence and, more importantly, gives you time to develop your work.

The Arts Councils in England and Scotland, and ACW in Wales are the main sources of grants for starting new projects and winning time to complete existing projects. The application procedure is much less complicated than it used to be. It asks you to provide a breakdown of how the money will be spent, who will read your work and how it will benefit the wider community. All regional Arts Councils offer guidance for applications.

*decibel* was a £5m Arts Council initiative "to challenge the perception of arts in contemporary British society". With its emphasis on funding minority artists, Black and Asian poets can receive support from regional *decibel* officers (look at your regional Arts Council website for more information). In addition, in England Grants for the Arts holds public meetings offering advice from arts officers. Again information about when these events are to be held may be found on regional Arts Council websites.

Beyond government subsidy, there are privately sponsored and regionally funded prizes and grants. New Writing North in the north of England holds the Northern Writer's Awards, which are designed to support promising and established writers. The Society of Authors' website carries details of other sources, including The Authors Foundation, The K Blundell Trust and the Eric Gregory Ward, which are open to poets and support work in progress.

The Creative Skills Consortium offers bursaries for artists to undertake training to support their work (details on the Literature Training website). In the north east of England the Northern Cultural Skills Partnership runs a similar scheme.


The Scottish Arts Council is the main body for public funding of the arts in Scotland. Its funding comes primarily from the Scottish Executive, to which it is accountable. It runs two main schemes: one for individuals and one for organisations. Information can be found on its website.

The Arts Council of Wales (ACW), through Academi, offers two main funding schemes, for individuals and organisations, and its website has information on what is available.

To pursue funding available for groups it pays to think laterally. Newcastle-based poet Sheree Mack obtained ACE funding to start a writing group for minority ethnic writers in the region. As a result, she has published a collection, *A Taste of Liquorice*.

Down in Bristol Bertel Martin obtained a grant from his regional arts council to support a residency at the city's British Empire and Commonwealth Museum, and to pursue his community-based publishing project City Chameleon.

Other funding opportunities include bursaries from the British Council to pay for writers for travel overseas to visit festivals, overseas academic institutions and to promote books. The Wingate Scholarship supports post-graduate studies and individual creative projects.

An invaluable source is *The Writers and Artists Yearbook* (Macmillan). It can be found in all good bookshops and local public libraries. 



## USEFUL WEBSITES

For more information about **FREE VERSE**, visit [www.freeverse.org.uk](http://www.freeverse.org.uk). This website is the first place to visit if you are a poet and serious about getting published. It includes an expanded version of this report, details of poetry organisations and poetry presses across the UK, further guidance on getting published, and discussion boards to meet other poets and mentors.

**Arts Council England** [www.artscouncil.org.uk](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk)

Funding guidelines, downloadable application forms, etc.

**Scottish Arts Council** [www.scottisharts.org.uk](http://www.scottisharts.org.uk)

**Arts Council of Wales** [www.artswales.org.uk](http://www.artswales.org.uk)

**Academi** [www.academi.org](http://www.academi.org)

The Welsh national literature promotion agency.

**Society of Authors** [www.societyofauthors.net](http://www.societyofauthors.net)

Information about grants and awards, it also operates like an authors' trade union.

**National Association of Writers in Education** [www.nawe.co.uk](http://www.nawe.co.uk)

**NAWE Directory of Writers In Education** [www.artscape.org.uk](http://www.artscape.org.uk)

**The British Council** [www.britishcouncil.org](http://www.britishcouncil.org)

The British Council enables individual writers and groups of writers to travel abroad on academic visits, to attend festivals or to promote books. It also has a fantastic range of links to literary websites.

**Literature Training** [www.literaturetraining.com](http://www.literaturetraining.com)

An excellent online resource of paid opportunities in the creative industries, as well as mentoring schemes, calls for submissions, competitions etc.

**TrAce's** [trace.ntu.ac.uk/traced/blackwr.htm](http://trace.ntu.ac.uk/traced/blackwr.htm)

Live arts site, which has a directory of websites of interest to Black authors.

**Spread the Word** [www.spreadtheword.org.uk](http://www.spreadtheword.org.uk)

A range of practical advice on getting published as well as information and details of courses, workshops and events for poets and writers of all genres. Spread the Word provides support to develop writers at all stages of their careers.

**Apples and Snakes** [www.applesandsnakes.org](http://www.applesandsnakes.org)

England's leading performance poetry organisation.

**Commonword** [www.commonword.org.uk](http://www.commonword.org.uk)

A creative writer/publishing organisation in the North West of England.

## ROGER ROBINSON

### KNOWLEDGE AND PRAYERS

There was the time when my mother beat us  
with a curtain cord slicing wails in our skin

and my father ran out the house crying.  
I heard that when he was young his father

made him boil his belt before being beaten  
with the belt buckle-side. Once his father

beat him on his back till his spine was bruised  
and he couldn't walk for thirteen days.

Another time he was put in a corner  
to kneel with his hands outstretched in the air.

His father left him there for an hour  
and then he placed an encyclopaedia

in his outstretched hands, and left him there  
for another hour. Then he added

a bible, and left him there, whilst his brothers  
were sent to bed. They left him there

overnight.

## VIEW point

Daljit Nagra,  
London



**"Before I started writing my own poetry, I'd already been through most of the key 'dead poets'. I wanted to get some pieces published after a one-hour session for new poets with Ruth Padel at the Poetry School. The session was really helpful. It gave me confidence to write and helped me find out about how to get published.**

I'm not sure if I initially struggled with publication of individual poems because I was writing about Indians in a very messed up way (confusing syntactical inversions, overly loose rhythms, Punjabi lexis and so on) or because these pieces were not very good. I suspect the latter as the main issue and the former as a small but significant issue.

I addressed my technical deficiencies by reading more poetry, critics and attending workshops. I attended my first Arvon Foundation course about four years ago and this helped me enormously with developing my style. I should have done one of these courses much earlier because the intense feedback from two good tutors – Mimi Khalvati and Kwami Dawes – made me more efficient at the editing stage.

My ambitions involve finding varied and interesting ways to write about the mixing of castes, cultures and genders in the UK. Recognition by receiving accolades may or may not be a useful sign that I am heading in the right direction, but it would be great for my confidence.

My advice to new poets would be: read all sorts of poetry; read critics and critical ideas about poetry; go to seminars, workshops, residencies; and don't get too precious about what you write – listen to criticism and make changes."

# The road

**Danuta Kean** summarises the main recommendations of *Free Verse*.

*Free Verse* has highlighted the issues facing Black and Asian poets who want to be published, and the issues facing poetry presses who wish to publish them.

Effort is needed on both sides to break down the barriers between them. The two boxes below summarise the recommendations in this report for minority ethnic poets who want to break out and for the poetry establishment – presses, journals, critics and arts bodies – to be both more inclusive and diverse. If everyone works together, the rewards are not just the discovery of new poetic voices, but of new markets that will benefit the whole poetry world. [FV](#)

# ahead...

## POETS – WHAT CAN YOU DO NOW?

### PRACTICAL ADVICE TO DEVELOP LINKS WITH PUBLISHERS

- **Research:** read magazines, and learn about their submissions policies and what they're looking for. Read as much contemporary poetry as possible and ask yourself: what is being written at the moment? Are there prevailing themes, styles and forms that are in fashion?
- **Network:** get out there, attend readings and festivals, try to meet poets, editors and anyone working in poetry publishing.
- **Submit your work to magazines:** be persistent, follow up submissions and ask, politely, for feedback. Take on board advice and don't be discouraged, learn from it and keep trying.
- **Learn:** attend poetry workshops, courses and writing groups. Sharing your work is a good test of how well it works and of the progress you are making. Seek constructive criticism and use it.
- **Develop:** if you can find a mentor, or an informal writing buddy or online tutor to give you feedback, do so or join an established scheme.
- **Advice:** seek advice from established poets. Most are approachable, especially at events, and as long as you don't bother them too much, they are keen to help.
- **Print a chap-book or pamphlet** and use it to submit work to presses and to sell at events. It will convince people there is an audience for your work. Set up a website and advertise your work.

## PUBLISHERS – WHAT CAN YOU DO NOW?

### PRACTICAL ADVICE TO DEVELOP LINKS WITH POETS

- **Network:** using the internet a network needs to be set up for all parties interested in expanding the representation of Black and Asian poets on the page. This can be used to widen the debate to include the disparate presses and organisations outside the metropolitan hub.
- **Co-ordination:** regional "lighthouses" – visible points of contact – need to be developed through which Black and Asian poets can access the poetry world and where the initiatives taking place in isolated presses can be shared with others and marketed.
- **Dialogue:** the poetry establishment and minority ethnic poets and organisations need to establish a dialogue through which they can exchange ideas about improving access for BME poets and breaking down the barriers, whether real or perceived, that stop them submitting their work. This would look at everything from the representation of Black and Asian people within the poetry workforce and the critical establishment to the criteria used to judge poetry.
- **Exchange:** Black and Asian-identified organisations' successful development of the BME market for poetry – whether through performance or print – holds lessons for the poetry establishment about opening up markets and developing commercial potential. The presses need to listen.
- **Development:** funding is needed to establish development programmes for Black and Asian poets whose work is not yet page ready. This could be used on projects such as formalised mentoring programmes, development of poets by presses and a web-based "dating service" that would match poets to suitable tutors, mentors and presses.



**spread**<sub>the</sub>**word** creating opportunities for writers