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# THE BOOK EDIT WRITERS' PRIZE

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2023

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## The Book Edit Writers' Prize Anthology 2023

Welcome to 2023's Book Edit Writers' Prize Anthology. This is the third year we have run the competition—open to all unpublished British and/or UK-based novelists from communities currently underrepresented in UK publishing—and the first year we have partnered with Legend Press, an independent publishing house dedicated to championing original voices. By joining forces with Legend, we hope to further amplify the voices of writers from underrepresented communities and provide them with the necessary tools and resources to bring their stories to the forefront.

We're incredibly proud of the writers associated with the prize. From 2021 winner Malachi McIntosh – who subsequently won the Royal Society of Literature's Giles St. Aubyn Award for his ground-breaking group biography of the Caribbean Artists Movement (forthcoming with Faber in 2025) and published a debut short story collection with The Emma Press earlier this year – to 2022 long listed writer Hamish Mojarra who has since sold his thriller trilogy, *The Harveen Gill Mysteries*, to Pan Macmillan in a pre-empt, these writers have gone on to great things. Many have also reported that the prize gave them a much-needed confidence boost and sense of community, both so vital for emerging writers.

Of course you can't run projects such as these without the help of others, and I'd like to extend my heartfelt thanks to all those involved: Deepa Anappara, for being our fantastic judge this year; Rebekah Lattin-Rawstrone for her brilliant reading, rehearsing, hosting, editing and everything in between; the team at Legend Press: Tom Chalmers; Lauren Wolff-Jones – who will deliver individual mentoring sessions for all the winners – Lucy Chamberlain and Olivia Le Maistre; and Aidan Walker, with whom I dreamt up the prize during the depths of the pandemic, and without whose support the prize would not exist.

The eight finalists are all compelling winners. Journeying from Lebanon to Arizona, Kent to Sudan, their stories explore everything from grief to gangs, rebirth to rage. Thank you for reading. I hope you enjoy them as much as we have.

Emily Pedder

Founding Director, The Book Edit

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## Contents

<i>Tapha</i>	4
Emily Abdeni-Holman	
<i>Mirror, Mirror</i>	8
Pavan Amara	
<i>Ashland</i>	13
Joe Eurell	
<i>Kala Polari</i>	16
Clare Ramsaran	
<i>I Dream of Strictly</i>	19
Marion Shaikh	
<i>Butterfly Wings</i>	23
Stephanie Torrance	
<i>You Look Better in the Sun</i>	26
Nathanael Wheatcroft-Brown	
<i>The Minaret Boy</i>	30
Rosalind Yarde	
Notes on Contributors	34

## *Tapha*

by **Emily Abdeni-Holman**

Tapha is a boy growing up in Lebanon in the 1960s. Rooted in the village of Jamhour, his family has a deep and mystical relationship with the land, particularly the pine trees grouped by the house. As tensions grow and outbursts of violence become more frequent, their relationship with the country changes. With Lebanon a source of pain and instability, they discover what it is like to lose their sense of rootedness in a place, their belonging. As Tapha comes of age into civil war, with growing numbers leaving, he and his family must choose—each for themselves—whether or not to stay.

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He is still a very young boy the first time he hears it. It could be he's heard it before, but this is the first identification, the first time he's understood what it is he's hearing. It's on the street outside, if he can just—he drags the stool to the window, clambers up, and cranes his neck right back to see through the glass, too high on the wall. It's dark outside, there's no light other than the stars, which are bright, vivid, dreaming, as they always are. But they cast no light, or not enough, and he's not able to see more than movement, which might be his thoughts anyway. Impossible to tell. But he did hear the sound. It was loud enough to make him listen, intrude into his night-time sleepiness and make him suddenly eager, adventure, adventure, only it's fading a little now, and he'd like to hear someone's tread on the stairs, like to hear someone open the door and then discover him, say, Tapha! Out of bed! What are you doing there? and he'd say, brilliantly, Looking, and they'd sigh or laugh or say something about how he's growing so fast and before you know it... and they'd trail off and swing him from the stool, one quick motion, strong and fast and adult, and tuck him up in bed, kiss his forehead, and when the door was shut again he could get back out, go back to the stool under the window, and know they'd know he was doing it. Whereas at the moment there's no sound in the house, he's heard nothing since the gunshot, not a cry or sigh or door, not a car, though those are rare enough. Should he go down? Perhaps no one knows what has happened. It would be curious, though, because it is his brother who has told him, this is a sound to be alert to, Tapha; it was a time he hadn't noticed anything at all, and his brother said, the loud bolt, like something exploding, didn't you hear it, and Tapha

thought back over the last few moments and thought perhaps there had been something, he wasn't really sure, but he nodded at his brother anyway, and Boutros said, when you hear that, you put your head down, it's a gun, Tapha, you know what that is, you've seen Pascal with one. But this isn't a game, not like it is with Pascal, so if you hear it like that—head down. Got it? And Tapha said yes. Boutros loves to tell him what to do, always a big brother, something he takes so seriously, not like the brothers of other boys; it isn't showing off. Boutros is nine years older, that makes the difference. He wonders again if he should go downstairs. He can still see the darkness outside, darkness covered by stars when you raise your eyes, and if you do that it becomes hard to make out darkness as anything other than black once you lower your eyes again. His dad told him so, saying, it's amazing, really, how what you can see depends on what you've seen seconds, moments, before. Light compels you and urges you to look at it, it's bright and dancing and happy, and so you never really give darkness a chance.

He shakes his head, tries to see a bit more clearly. There is still nothing visible, still no sound. Just the gunshot, then silence. Years later, when he tries to remember what his first memory was, it won't be this that comes to mind. Instead he'll remember a happy feeling he had at Sunday lunches, all of them together, and he'll wonder which was the one that did come first, the happy feeling or the sound of the gunshot.

Tapha!

He heard nothing of it, not a sound, but his father is there. His father, a long narrow shadow in the doorway, moving towards him.

Dad!

What're you doing?

I'm looking, I heard the noise—the—was it a gun, Dad?

Yes. His dad is kneeling beside him, next to the stool, so their heads are level. For a moment Tapha readies himself to jump, to become taller than his father.

What's it for? he asks.

Skirmishes—you know, like little fights. They're getting serious more quickly than they should.

Fights?

Yes, fights. More than arguments, these. The body gets involved, it's less about talk, more about... hurt.

Tapha nods. But why here?

His dad angles his neck towards the window. Coincidence, my love, just chance. Which makes it all the more foolish, and all the more frightening, too. Why here indeed. Of all places, in Jamhour!

Frightening?

Well, look at you, out of bed. And the rest of us—downstairs, heads down, straight to the floor, away from the windows. And you—

I looked!

You mustn't, Tapha. His dad stands up, a half-torso taller than Tapha on the stool. Gently he draws the curtains. Even when I came up here, I crept, I kept my head down. It's serious, it's not a game, not a joke. Do you understand? You're a boy, yes, you're young, yes, but you've got to understand you're not immune. I'm sorry to tell you it, my dearest, you've got to know. Your best chance to be immune—it means safe, do you see? Your best chance is to put your head down and keep well back. Do you hear me, keep away, when you hear something like that, or see anything—

But I didn't see anything, Dad! I tried, I was looking, there's nothing out there, except—maybe something moving, I couldn't tell. Should we look, Dad?

His dad puts his hand on his shoulder, right at the curve of the neck, soothing him there, fingers warm. My boy, I'd love to think what you're saying is brave, but I only think it's foolish. We keep back. It happens outside our door, but we don't open it, not a single centimetre. Especially not a house like this, unprotected, beside the forest. If you're in the city, it's something else, you work with other people, you collaborate, you put your heads together and come up with a plan. Here, you recognise it's bigger than you and you do one thing. What is it, Tapha?

Head down!

You betcha.

His dad swings him off the stool, one quick motion, just as Tapha thought it would be, swings him across the room. But instead of plopping him onto the bed, his father says, want to come down?

Oh yes please!

Well. I think it's one of those nights. Good to be together, isn't it?

Yeah!

Pascal is here, and Abou Tony. Not Tony though. And Naim too. You don't mind?

Of course not. Dad?

Mmm?

Did you all really just drop to the floor? Even Pascal? Even Boutros?

Of course. My love, it's what you have to do. Give no thought to it. Gunshot: get down. Promise me?

***Mirror, Mirror***  
**by Pavan Amara**

Sandeep Dhaliwal (twenty-six) spent her childhood dreaming that she was a straight white girl, with blonde hair, blue eyes, and a ‘normal’ name. But she’s a broke, brown Londoner who’s attracted to other women. When Sandeep vanishes, a glamorous blonde influencer called Emily Johnson materialises. But Emily isn’t real. Thanks to cosmetics and an invented past, Sandeep has passed for a middle-class white woman. The world treats her differently when she’s in ‘whiteface’, until her real identity is exposed.

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My Name Is

I was born to it, like it or not. Some people tell me it’s a good thing. The ones who say that tend to be called Jenny or Sarah or something.

Most of the time it’s a problem. My name is Sandeep Dhaliwal.

Don’t close the book – you can just call me Sandy like my girlfriend does.

Her name is Victoria. I met her in a pub on a Thursday night while I was completing a wordsearch in the corner. She was drunk and thought I had a lesbian vibe. I didn’t confirm or deny it. I just kept sipping my Guinness and filling letters into squares. I let her carry on talking at me because she looked like Scarlett Johansson.

She asked my name.

“Sandeep,” I said.

When I said that, she began chewing her bottom lip, but not in a sexy way.

“Sand Deep?” she said. “Like a dune or something?”

“Well, no. Sandeep. Like, one word.”



“Can I go with Sandy?”

“Yes,” I said.

It’s one letter short of my real name. If Sandeep doesn’t work for you, imagine it’s Sandy but with a silent ‘p’ at the end.

### First Dates

Before Victoria, I dated men. Friends who turned into more.

There was Matthew Leung, with perfect skin and the type of sculpted cheekbones that you could hang washing off. I felt about him like dog owners must about their fluffed-up Pomeranians. He was cute and all the other girls wanted one, so I kept Matthew for a bit.

Then came Miraj Shah. Six-feet-tall with a topless selfie as his iPhone screensaver. Sexually, he did something for me. I experienced a glimmer of straightness with Miraj. After a year or so, it had fizzled out. We became best friends who watched box sets together.

My last boyfriend was Dwayne Mason, a plumber. He did all the right things: called at night, texted me during the day, and bought flowers. One day, Dwayne stopped texting. I knew I should be upset, but I wasn’t.

These men didn’t repulse me, but they didn’t blow up my world. We’d have sex and I’d fantasise about women. I thought all women did that. Maybe because my first crush was Pamela Anderson and I assumed every other girl had a crush on her too.

I knew the rules. Don’t talk about it, pretend you have a crush on Ronan Keating instead.

I didn’t think I was anything ‘gay.’ I was this: I slept with women in my head, and dated men in real life. I was twenty-six, a straight woman, I’d never loved anyone. Until the perfect woman – someone who looked like Scarlett Johansson – dropped out of my head and into real life.

After meeting Victoria, I wrote a list in my phone’s notes app. It said: lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, hypersexual, asexual, sexual fluidity. I found all these words through Google.

I deleted asexual.

Then hypersexual.

Then I got stuck.

Lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, sexual fluidity.

Day-to-day, all that mattered was that Victoria wanted me. I wore my clothes for her, something tight. I did my hair for her, a high sleek ponytail.

Before her, I was about sweatshirts, jeans, hair loose and half-combed. After meeting her, I bought a book about wine and practised at home.

“A fruity, jammy type,” I told the bathroom mirror. “Buttery flavours racing to the surface with this one.”

I wanted to be the woman she desired, without a day off.

### Art Parties

She was a lawyer in Mayfair and her parents were the partners at her firm. We went to the Tate art gallery on the weekends because she was a member. Sometimes, she took me to the Fulham Road art parties that her friends threw. I stayed quiet at these, nodding, while very thin people talked about their feelings towards paintings.

Victoria knew all that stuff.

“That’s not how you serve this wine,” she’d tell waiters. “It’s corked.” They’d listen and apologise.

After a few glasses of malbec, the same thing always happened. She’d start slurring to her art friends about how her mum was born in a council house.

“My grandad was born in a Liverpool tenement,” she would tell them. “I’m a working-class girl at heart.”

One night she added this: “I think that’s why me and Sandy connect. I understand working-class women. I’m even learning to speak Urdu.”

She didn’t mean it, I told myself.

In the cab home, she was breathing all over my face with: “What’s wrong, baby?”

She lunged to kiss me.

“Why did you say all that stuff?” I said.

She jerked back. “What?”

“About Urdu. Wrong language anyway, but that doesn’t make me working-class.”

“Darling,” she said, spilling a long leg over mine. “It’s okay. I get your background. I had an aunt who didn’t go to university.”

“I went to university, Victoria,” I said. “I’m a midwife.”

I didn’t fall for her when we first met. She looked good, but stomped around and talked too loudly for my liking.

I found some things about her bizarre. I once took her to McDonald’s and she asked for the menu. She could afford new clothes but liked buying second hand ones. She told people that she rented the flat that her parents had bought her.

After a few months, I got to know other things. Her sudoku obsession. It matched my love of wordsearches. She collected tea pots. I had an extensive loose-leaf tea collection, and accompanying array of infusion accessories.

Some of her tea pots had cupcakes or London buses stamped on, and she showcased them around her kitchen, balancing them precariously on top of cookery books and mantelpieces.

She’s a one-off, I remember thinking.

Victoria had a big laugh and a gap between her two front teeth. When she got drunk, she’d shove a fifty pence coin in there and smile at me.

“Hello,” she would say, with a coin jammed in her face.

That’s how it started.

I began to imagine her with silver hair, still talking at me, my hands holding her liver-spotted ones. I was always a bit all or nothing.

## *Ashland*

by Joe Eurell

*Ashland* is a crime novel about the first female Chief of Police of a small town in Arizona, who must solve its first murder in a generation to win the respect of its people. It is *Mare of Easttown* meets *All the Sinners Bleed* and explores equality, identity and institutional corruption.

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### CHIEF NASH

The pickup was nose deep in the ditch, its rusty shell matching the dirt. Nash breathed diesel, the engine still running.

She climbed down, past angry taillights, gravel shifting under her feet. Her palms were clammy and she struggled with the gloves, rubber squeaking as she edged them over her hands until they snapped against her wrists.

Bluebottle's head-butted the windshield. Inside, the dash was speckled red and a figure was hunched over the steering wheel. There was no need to check for a pulse. The bullet had scalped him to the eyebrows.

Nash rested an elbow on the roof, burning her skin. Arizona only had two seasons. Hot and hotter. Someday she'd up and leave for a place with all four, where she could fish on the lake in summer and watch the neighbourhood kids skate on it come winter.

'Bullet was high-calibre,' she said to Deputy Stark, watching from above. She poked the hole in the windshield with her finger. 'Maybe .308.'

Nash looked over her aviators beyond the endless plain, wild and wind-smoothed with scars scattered across its belly, towards the hills in the distance. There was no way. Not unless Annie Oakley herself was up there.

She turned off the ignition and the car slowly stopped revving. That's when the other sounds came through. The flies pushing past her to feast, the hawk hollering as it circled above, the boy quietly sobbing, curled up in the footwell of the passenger seat.

The boy squirmed as the paramedic examined him. The ambulance had been five minutes behind them and Stark spent four of them bitching after she made him fetch his soda

for the child. It had been sweating in the cruiser. Cowboy cold. He wouldn't say a word to either of them, only opening his mouth to glug it down after she'd powered out of the ditch with him in her arms. He looked around four or five. Too young to fully grasp the horror of what had happened. Old enough to remember this day when he was.

'Can you believe it?' she said. The dead body wouldn't stay with her nearly as long as the fear in the boy's eyes as the paramedic shone a flashlight in them.

'I know, didn't even offer me a sip.' Stark was not her choice of deputy. He was Sheriff Galloway's son, giving her no choice at all. 'Think he saw?' He made a gun with his thumb and index finger and mimed it going off against his head, his floppy hair bouncing back and forth. 'Maybe he was playing Game Boy or something.'

They hadn't searched the vehicle yet but the pickup was an F-100, nearly older than her, let alone Stark, and the boy's *Power Rangers* tee was oversized and reeked of mothball thrift. It wasn't the only thing they smelled of, his pants damp as she had carried him, his heart beating in his chest like a canary's wings against the bars of its cage. The only entertainment this family could afford was the view from the window that had shattered along with the boy's world.

The paramedic would be the first of many here. There would be state, then federal, news crews before or after them depending on how quickly they caught the scent. There hadn't been a murder in Ashland, Harlow County, for thirty years but this was something else. This was an assassination. The paramedic made them keep their distance while he examined the boy but Nash needed to know whether he was still in danger, whether the shooter was still close by.

'This is bullshit,' she said. 'We're going over.'

He met them halfway, leaving the boy in the back of the ambulance, shivering with a blanket over his shoulders when the mercury was north of ninety. Shock. The paramedic's stomach was so large that his shirt untucked itself as he dabbed the sweat from his forehead with a sandpaper-grade napkin that only came with truck-stop tacos.

'Don't worry,' he said, shaking Stark's hand. 'The blood on the boy isn't his.'

'That's great,' Nash said, 'but I'm the Chief of Police here.'

Panic radiated from the paramedic like the heat that came off the road in waves. Nash let him squirm, the silence between them as hot and heavy as the air they breathed.

'Erm, sorry,' he said. 'But it's remarkable really. There's barely a mark on him.'

Not on the outside, Nash thought.

'He said anything?' she said.

'Not a word,' the paramedic said.

The boy had dark features, the opposite of Nash. The Irish in her meant that she always wore sunscreen, extra deodorant over the top so she didn't smell like she was on vacation. If she ever took one it would be somewhere she could do without both. But the victim's hair, what was left of it around the sides, was white-blond, same colour as hers when she was little and her father would make her wear his Denver Bears cap whenever the sun so much as lurked behind a cloud.

The paramedic's stomach rumbled so loudly that he put a hand over it. She didn't miss shift work, the anti-social hours, eating off greaseproof paper, but Nash's gut was telling her something too so she pushed past him to the boy.

'The man in the car,' she said. The boy's eyes moved from the badge on her chest to her mouth, as she switched to heavily accented Spanish. *'No es tu padre.'*

He shook his head.

'Did you see what happened? Is there anybody else here?'

He shook his head again.

'What's your name?'

'Jorge,' he whispered through lips as cracked as the dirt.

'He can't hurt you anymore, Jorge.' She took his tiny hand, swallowing it in her own. *'Esta terminado.'*

## *Kala Polari*

by Clare Ramsaran

In the 1950s, Eddie Narayan lives with his family in the Caribbean colony of British Guiana. A political activist, campaigning for independence, Eddie also grapples with his attraction to other men. We join Eddie, and his brother Vikram, as they migrate to England, where they meet Irishwoman Kathleen, and other young people. We follow them during their first year in London in the pursuit of love (of the interracial and queer varieties) – and justice.

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“Where you going, Edward, at this time of night?” Eddie’s mother had spotted him heading towards the front door.

“Off to meet some of the others at Party HQ.”

“You not had enough of your comrades this week, boy?”

Eddie ignored his older brother, trying to get a rise out of him as usual. He rubbed a glob of Brylcreem between his hands and smoothed it through his hair, as he met his own eyes in the mirror.

“Checking your hair now. You sure it’s your comrades you’re meeting and not some girl?” Vikram just wouldn’t let it drop.

“I’ll see you later.”

Eddie shut the door behind him and ran down the steps into the humid evening air and the chirping of cicadas. It was dark tonight, with barely a fingernail of moon above him. He crossed the Parade Ground, its boundary marked by a tall line of palm trees, each one alone, at a uniform distance from the next.

As Eddie approached the rum shop, the door opened. He heard men’s laughter and the clack of dominoes when a group of customers emerged. He studied them, looking for anyone he knew. His brother’s handsome friend Lou was a regular here. Eddie had always looked up to Lou when they were boys, and as he got older, he tried to turn his mind away from the sinful thoughts he’d started having about his brother’s friend. But as for Lou, he barely noticed Eddie.



There were no familiar faces in the group of boisterous young men. Eddie didn't want to be recognised tonight. Anything he did could get back to his family so easily. He took a quick detour via Party HQ on Charlotte Street. Best to keep as close to the truth as possible. Less chance of being found out. The lights were still on. Looked like a couple of his comrades were working late.

But not Eddie. Not tonight. His country was important to him. Independence and all that. Of course, it was. But sometimes he had other priorities.

He remembered listening keenly to the gossip about the docks when he was a schoolboy. At the time he was intrigued but wasn't exactly sure what the older boys were talking about. Then there'd been the banter amongst the others on his cricket team as they unbuckled their shin pads after a match. Georgetown Docks was where the pansies went to meet the sailors spilling out of the visiting ships. The men joked and teased each other. Raj, you never married. Maybe you want to go down to the docks and find yourself a stevedore? But, in between the banter, a couple of the midfielders described exactly what they'd do to those pansies if they ever met one. Eddie kept his mouth shut. But it set him thinking. There were other men like him, after all. And apparently Georgetown Docks was the place they went to meet.

The first time he visited he was terrified. In fact, he'd lost his nerve and turned back a couple of times before he finally made it. That night, an older man had approached him, and Eddie just followed his lead. He never knew the man's name. They barely spoke. But Eddie remembered the scent of good strong sweat which surrounded them, and something else, something spicy and acrid, that he'd never noticed on other men in his cricket team after a match.

By the end of Eddie's second visit, he'd begun to observe a choreography to the way the men moved, in and out of the shadows. Even in this illicit game, it seemed that there were unwritten rules.

Tonight was his third visit to the docks. He was nervous but excited. As he neared the Atlantic, Eddie was met with the familiar smell of seaweed and soon, the shape of the red and white striped lighthouse came into view. He stopped by the sea wall for a cigarette and to calm his nerves. Eddie's short-sleeved shirt jack stuck to his back, partly due to the warm night but also from the anticipation of the evening ahead of him.

He only went to the docks when he couldn't help himself. He wasn't proud of what he did there with other men – the groping in hidden corners, the fear and shame. Wordless if not soundless.

It wasn't too late to turn back. But now he wasn't sure which would be worse – carrying on or slinking back home.

Stubbing out his cigarette he continued by the ocean, skirting the Custom House to make his way into the docks. The water slapped rhythmically against the hulls of the foreign vessels. Unlike last time, the bulk of a British troopship loomed over him, tethered to its moorings by clanking chains. His skin grew cooler now, as he walked alongside the hulking flank of the ship; vast and grey, more like a building than a boat. The British had brought their troops over to teach the colonials a lesson. Well, they'd see about that.

When he reached the usual spot, he could sense rather than see the others around him. He slipped into a dark corner; waited and watched. His heart thumped in his chest; his desire grappling with his fear.

Within a few minutes, there was a slight movement in front of him. A figure emerged from the shadows. Another stranger – nervous as a stray dog. Eddie could see him trembling. Maybe it was his first time here. The shape of the man's head, the way he held his shoulders reminded Eddie of Lou. He had studied Lou's features so often. He had even made sketches of Lou's face from memory. This man had the same high cheekbones and small ears, his Afro hair cut close to his shapely skull. Just like Lou's.

But it couldn't be, could it?

## *I Dream of Strictly*

by Marion Shaikh

Chubby fifteen-year-old Asha Gupta dreams of being a professional dancer on *Strictly*, giving her supportive parents a massive dilemma: do they let Asha follow her dreams or do they risk upsetting fearsome matriarch Auntie Preeti who thinks wearing tight costumes and dancing with a boy is shameful? In secret, Asha wins a place in a Latin dance team. Her first competition is coming up, but can Asha cover her tracks from Auntie Preeti and show the world what she can do?

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So, I'm dressed in a shiny blue skater dress waiting to audition. My hair is doing its own thing and I'm sweating right down into my fishnet tights as I stand at the back of a queue of perfectly turned-out preening girls in a dank corridor which smells of a weird combination of feet, bananas and chicken korma.

I'm not sure what I'd expected a professional dance school to be like, but it wasn't this. Just like the flyer had said, the studios were above an Indian restaurant. Diva and I wouldn't have found it if it weren't for the metre-high model of an onion bhaji stuck outside.

'She probably thought this was the audition for High School Musical,' snorts one of the preening hopefuls in front of us.

'More like Monster High,' chuckles her friend.

There are at least five girls in front of me with their prickly dance mums. Each girl is immaculately dressed in professional-looking practice wear.

I suddenly feel very exposed.

'Will you stop doing this to yourself?' chides Diva as she spots me checking out the competition. 'Stop worrying. You don't need a snotty dance mum to big you up or fancy clothes. I've seen you dance. Every night practicing those moves from *Strictly*. How much more determined can you get?'

'I'm stacked, Diva. These girls look like they've been dancing since they were about two!'

I spot a frail, pale girl who looks as though she's about to faint. Her mum is standing like a prison warden next to her. I smile at her and she smiles back with a thin, desperate get-me-out-of-here look.

A young woman with a clipboard pops out of one of the dance studios. Her eyes scan down a list of names. 'You must be Melissa Rockfort...' Her voice trails when she looks up and sees a chubby Indian girl. 'Oh,' she mumbles, a note of shock in her voice.

'Asha Gupta,' I say.

'The Bollywood classes are down the corridor.'

What! Just because I am Asian means that Bollywood is my only option? My cheeks burn like molten lava.

'Did you register for the audition? I can't find your name.' She makes a big show of running down the list with her pen. 'You also need to be with an adult.' Her eyes cut to Diva's face and then zoom in on her silver leggings.

Panic! I feel sick. Not just mini-sick, but projectile vomit sick.

Diva calmly folds her arms and squares up to the woman. 'Actually, I'm her sister,' she lies. 'I've got my university ID with me.'

'Wait here, I'll check.' She spins around and disappears somewhere.

'Look, Diva, I am outta here.' I make for the exit but Diva grabs my arm.

'Stop worrying. You've prepared your routine, it's brilliant. I've seen it multiple times and you want to be a dancer more than anything in the entire history of wanting things.'

The jive number that's on is winding up. I want to escape. And I seriously need the loo.

'Asha, you're on!' says the woman, now looking a bit more smiley.

It feels like there is a giant hairdryer hovering over me as I stand in front of the two dance coaches who are sitting behind a table. Suddenly I don't want to escape anymore.

'I'm Shelly and this is Leon, senior Latin dance coach,' says the woman. 'Tell us why you want to join our Latin dance team.'

My mouth goes dry.

‘Cos dancing means everything to me.’ God. This is so cringey I feel like vomiting. It looks as though the senior coach wants to as well.

Leon rolls his eyes and scribbles something on a pad.

‘What makes you more special than the other girls we’ve seen?’ presses Leon.

‘Nothing,’ I admit. ‘Cos everyone is special in some way. But no one could be more dedicated to dance than me...err I’ve wanted to be a dancer my whole entire life.’

I’ve messed up. I just know I have. Leon looks bored and I have given him yet another reason to cross me off his very long list.

‘Why do you like dancing?’ asks Shelly with a kind smile.

‘It makes me feel alive.’

Leon raises his eyebrows and sighs as if blowing an invisible bubble. ‘Begin.’

A cha-cha-cha number comes on and my body starts to move but not necessarily in time with the music.

I do a few wobbly double turns. Then I propel myself across the floor with my signature crossover flicks move. Like a professional, I curve my spine into an S shape and fling an arm up for a few New Yorks followed by some twirly hip twists.

The music stops.

‘Have you actually got any dance experience?’ snaps Leon.

‘Sort of,’ I reply uncomfortably. (I have if you include the time I danced with a boy in our Year Six rendition of *West Side Story*. He fell on top of me during a turn and farted in my face. But Leon doesn’t need to know that.)

‘Your arm styling was really quite...messy and your timing was off.’

‘But your footwork was unique and your presence on the floor was bewitching,’ cut in Shelly. At least she is still smiling. ‘Wait in the corridor please.’

‘You were awesome!’ Diva squeals, hugging me tightly.

‘You reckon?’ I ask doubtfully.

After a million years, Leon and Shelly step out into the corridor. Total silence descends.

‘We’ve now made a decision,’ says Leon. ‘Chantelle Richards, congratulations.’ The pale, frail girl’s mum prods her in the back. I clap enthusiastically for her, but my heart just fell off the side of a mountain.

Shelly is beaming at me, her smile as wide as a horizon.

‘And Asha Gupta, thank you for reminding us of the magic of dance.’

## ***Butterfly Wings*** **by Stephanie Torrance**

Sophie and her mum aren't like other people. They have wings, can prophesy death, and when they die it isn't forever. Sophie doesn't want to be like her mum. She wants to be normal, to escape the generational cycle of poverty and go to uni. *Butterfly Wings* is a queer coming-of-age novel set in working-class Scotland that deals with mum issues, intergenerational trauma, and falling in love for the first time to the backdrop of the early 2000s Indie Sleaze club scene.

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The third time Mum died; I was eight. We were staying at her flat because I used to go there on Saturdays to see her for a bit before her shift started at the pub across the road. I didn't really like her flat all that much. It was too cluttered. Old copies of *National Enquirers* strewn about and stained with rings of tea, coupled with empty fag packets crumpled on the dinner table. The clothes that needed ironed were always in a haphazard pile in the corner of the room, with a basket of maybe, actually ironed clothes precariously placed on the top like the glittery star on a decaying Christmas tree. That iron had broken a couple of weeks ago, she said, when Gran dropped me off, so she was saving the little coupons you got in the cigarette packets to get a new one. But, she said, it would be a while off yet until she got the one that she wanted because the 'ratio of coupon to fag was not in the favour of the consumer.'

Mum had a particularly bad habit of breaking stuff. The tumble dryer had also gone earlier that day, so she decided to try microwaving her shirt dry for work. I think about that decision, and what happened afterwards quite a lot since and I still don't know what the fuck she was thinking. Mum's brain I don't really think works like other brains. Anyway, so I was through in the living room having a drink of some strawberry milkshake (which may or may not have been a half-drunk can of Mum's Slimfast) and watching an old rerun of Morecambe and Wise when I heard this huge bang. I went through to the kitchen, and there she was. Lying clean on her back and dead on the floor. The microwave door had exploded off its hinges. The shirt she was attempting to dry was on fire beside her with all of the buttons missing. Those, along with bits of glass from the microwave plate and door were wedged into her face like these tiny, melted bullets. The force from hitting her head against the floor had cracked the back of her skull, and a halo of blood was beginning to surround her. Her eyes were clear and open like a porcelain doll, and if it wasn't for all the blood, she would have looked a bit like Snow White waiting for a kiss

to be woken up. At that time, my mum's phone only accepted incoming calls because she'd run up this huge bill calling a psychic hotline that Gran had refused to bail her out on. So, I just sat there in the hallway on my jacket and faced away from Mum's staring, pockmarked face. And I slowly drank the remains of my strawberry milkshake, the sickly, gummy, claggy liquid sliding down my throat, until Gran showed up, as she always did, at seven.

'Oh, come on to fuck, Val,' Gran growled, dragging Mum by her feet into the hallway. 'You're scaring the bloody bairn.'

I don't think I was scared though. This was the second time I'd seen her like this and at least this time her head was still attached to her body. The last time was way more brutal. Bits of Mum had splattered across the pavement, and we weren't sure how she was going to change after that one. Gran's movement of the body had caused a thick strip of blood from Mum's cracked skull to slide through the flat like a shiny, sticky red carpet. Like a glossy red version of the river Thames in the *EastEnders* opening credits. Finally, she stopped in the living room and stuck a couple of old greying towels under her head while she decided what to do next.

Eventually, Gran turned to me as I was standing in the doorway, Slimfast can still in my hand, and she looked at me with pity, 'I can't carry her down the stairs right now love, we'll just need to sleep here in this shithole. Just until, you know, she's a little bit smaller.'

I nodded, took a big breath, and entered the room. The thought of her body was always a lot worse than what it actually looked like. I had to remind myself of that. I had to remind myself that she wouldn't look like this for long. That she was coming back.

Gran and I spent the rest of the night watching crap TV in silence. Well, I say TV. I spent most of it watching Mum's body for any sign of her changing. I'd never seen it before. Last time was like Christmas. I went to bed while she was a decapitated corpse and when I woke up she was shiny and brand new again. I wanted to know how it happens. Just before bed, Gran moved her again. This time to the corner of the living room, behind the dining table. Hidden away. A final resting place until morning.

I fell asleep that night quickly and deeply. I dreamt of Mum's face, the blood congealing like tears from her bullet wounds and then in the morning when I woke up, there was the most intense, pained screaming that I'd ever heard. I had slept in Mum's big double bed all night by myself, and I didn't even know a bed could be so big so I rolled like a sausage out of one side, and came through to see Gran in the living room, furiously trying to shush a naked baby in her arms. 'Honestly Sophie, your mum is the worst. She manages to kill herself, in this shit tip with no food.' I tried to tell Gran that there was some Slimfast in the fridge actually, it tasted quite



nice, but soon I was left with Mum crying on one side of the sofa. I was to watch her as Gran nipped to the corner shop.

## *You Look Better in the Sun*

by Nathanael Wheatcroft-Brown

After joining a violent gang in a town in the North of England, Eddie barely escapes with his life intact. College seems to promise a new start for Eddie... but there 'you' are, Leonard, the boy who Eddie and the lads had once beaten in a savage homophobic attack. Whilst challenged with hiding this dark secret, Eddie begins to sense his deep attraction towards Leonard. But how could he ever face the guilt of what he'd done? And why does shame run deeper than any memory he can find? An exploration of internalised homophobia and a closeted teenage relationship in a working-class environment, *You Look Better in the Sun* calls attention to overlooked themes in contemporary LGBTQ+ YA Fiction.

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Shadows curtained the streets. Fog crept below the thin necks of streetlamps, their pale orange heads unable to stare out the dark surrounding them. Their eyes would be better off shut, I thought. Turned away.

Light had no home here.

We made our way north, moving through ginnels and shoulder-tight snickets. This was my first night with the lads. Darren had said I needed to join them, said I needed to start hanging round with the right mates, get me a head start in life.

"You ain't a pussy, are ya?" Wayne came up beside me and put his arm round my neck. He stank of cigarettes. His body was strong, almost like an adult's.

"He won't do shit," Jord spat. "Darren just bent for him, ain't he?" Jord was thirteen, my age. He never liked me. He was always doing some crazy shit in school before he got kicked out.

"Piss off, J," Darren said. "He a sound lad."

"All am sayin' is he beh'er not be a pussy." Wayne tightened his grip round my neck. I couldn't breathe right.

"You ever box before, mate?"

I shook my head.

“Am tellin’ ya he won’t do shit,” Jord said. “He were a propa fairy at school.”

“Fairy were ya?” A weight smashed into the back of my head. I stumbled forward, barely keeping my balance as the street rang out in front of me.

“Ay, leave off.” Darren pulled Wayne back, grappling onto my coat. “You alright?”

“Canny even take a slap.” Wayne laughed. “He gonna get ‘is ed kicked in if he a pussy.”

“Na, he alright.”

“You speakin’ for ‘im now an’ all?”

We turned into a park. Suddenly my feet were boulders, my legs slabs of iron. I didn’t want to move, didn’t want to go in there. I saw... faces, pained and hollowed out in the trees, their black eyes pleading me not to enter, not to go forward into what would become the darkest moment of my known life...

“I ain’t a pussy,” I said, looking down from the faces.

“Next guy we see.” Wayne spat out a rocket of phlegm near my feet. “You know what we do, yeah?”

I pulled the hood of my coat up over my head, and muttered, “Yeah.” The wind warped and groaned through the bodies of the trees, possessing them, stabbing their limbs across the moon’s light. “Darren,” I whispered as Wayne and Jord advanced a few feet ahead of us. “Darren,” I whispered again, “a don’t wanna—”

Something hard gripped onto the back of my neck. “Shut up, man,” Darren’s voice fumed into my ear. “He ain’t joking, y’know. Youse out ‘ere with us tonight. You gotta do what we do.”

“What if a run?” I said. “Darren, what if a just run? A don’t—”

“Listen, you even think ‘bout it then you done. You think the lads ain’t gonna know where you live if you start actin’ up? What you a pussy now?”

I jerked away from his hand.

“They see you out again then you gonna get the fuckin’ shit kicked outta ya.” Darren hooked his arm round my neck. I hated that. It made me feel powerless. I gritted my teeth, flung his arm back.

“Ger off,” I grunted.

But I was too loud.

Wayne turned sharply on his feet, stepped forward. “What that? We got Billy big balls over ‘ere all a sudden?” Now his arm was round my neck instead.

“Nobby no balls more like,” Jord goaded. “Don’t need balls when you take it up the arse.”

“A don’t,” I couldn’t stay quiet. I thought it would get worse if I did.

“What, you don’t got no balls?” Wayne jeered. “Oi, J, I think he a puffta! You say he always like this?”

“Mate, everyone knows. All the lads and that, swear they seen ‘im checkin’ ‘em out and shit int changin’ rooms.”

My heart was pounding. I looked up at Darren but his eyes were set straight ahead. Tonight he was different.

Blood then shot into my scalp. It was burning, and my head was yanked back towards the black daggers of branches. I yelled out. “He a squealer, ain’t he?” Wayne’s fingers clutched tighter on my short hair.

“Ger off!” I tried not to whine, throwing my arms up over my head. Jord’s face appeared in front of me. I could see the bones of his jaw under his skin. The dull scalpel of silver in his eyes.

“You know what we do with fag boys, don’t ya?”

“Am not!—”

I ripped a scream—Wayne yanked harder on my scalp. Jord flashed a dark grin, reaching down to his thigh. Shadows laid thickly over his bruised knuckles, yet what he lifted from his pocket was a sharper silver than the moon.

Just as my breath ruined in my throat, Wayne roared, “Ey, look who we got ‘ere!”

My head jolted forward as he let go of me.

A few metres ahead—a lamppost lit a dull circle across the path. And there you stood.

You buckled and turned back down the path away from us. Wayne shouted. You shifted into a sprint, but it wasn’t fast enough. Darren grabbed one of your arms. Wayne locked his hands round your shoulders and dragged you off the path.

You were pushed against a tree, the trunk blocking out the light of the lamppost.

Jord pulled up his balaclava to cover the bottom half of his face. “Empty ya pockets.”

I could barely make out your features. You were skinny, had dark skin, and were the same height as me. Maybe the same age, too. You did as you were instructed, your hands shaking under the ribbons of moonlight that tore across your skin. A phone. A wallet. A couple scraps of receipts.

Wayne grabbed the wallet and looked inside. “Where’s ya money? Nowt in ‘ere. You fuckin’ playin’? You empty ya pockets?” He snatched the phone from your hand.

You crossed a look with me. My eyes shot down. Terror spilled across my chest, yet I

couldn't help but feel a sick sense of relief that the attention was on you now and not me.

But that was only until Wayne said:

“Eh? The fuck you got a phone like this fer?”

I glanced up. Saw your phone case was decorated in flowers. “Look at ‘im!” Jord shouted. He sounded thrilled for a moment, before that thrill pierced into contempt, loud and hideous, “Look what he wearin’!”

My eyes had adjusted to the dark. I made out what Jord meant. Blue trousers. An embroidered jacket. A small rainbow badge on the cuff of the sleeve, bleak in the darkness.

## *The Minaret Boy*

by Rosalind Yarde

Set in war-torn Sudan in the early 2000s, *The Minaret Boy* is a literary thriller, in which an idealistic but troubled Black British aid worker is sucked into a web of corruption, exploitation and conspiracy. As her dreams unravel, she grapples with questions about her identity, long-held assumptions and her place in the world. Deceived by those she cares for most, she is forced to flee, not knowing who to trust and who to fear.

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### CHAPTER ONE

KHARTOUM

Friday 4 August 2006

4:20 pm

Ingrid blinked away the dust that had swirled up into her eyes and, now squinting, looked down at the boy below, from her hiding place on the balcony. He was sitting in the dirt outside the gate as he always did, legs bent unnaturally under his torso. His head was cocked, staring up at the minaret shooting skyward over the high walls of the mosque compound next door. He was in her dream again last night and this time his legs were whole, straight...

She raised the cigarette to her lips, pinched between middle finger and thumb and drew in her breath with a long scooping sound, like a spliff, breathing in memories of her past life with Karim.

Coughing, she let the cigarette fall, halfway done. She ground it into the beige veil of sand filming the ceramic floor tiles. An insect buzzed around her ear.

She blinked again and peered over the rail. The boy was still there, down below, separated by the fortress-black-and-gold bars of fencing enclosing her landlady's residence – a monstrous folly of Greek columns, faux marble and chandeliers, its grandeur set off by a deep green lawn that jarred with the sand of its desert city surroundings. Just metres away to the left,

sprawled a web of plastic and cardboard sheeting, one of the city's myriad squatter settlements, home to the long-time war exiles from the south.

A high-pitched screech broke through her thoughts.

*'Imshel!*

Ingrid looked down again, gaze scanning in the direction of the noise. Mrs. Abdelmajid – a flash of purple and orange fabric – was lumbering towards the boy, arms flailing above her head. Water droplets from the sprinkler lurched across the path, brushing her lightly as she bundled past.

Leaning further over the rail, Ingrid saw the boy turn his head towards the open gate then up at her on the balcony. She willed him to move, calling out at the same time.

*'Mrs. Abdelmajid!*

But her landlady had almost reached the boy. Only then did he break from his paralysis, trying to stand and move away but his useless legs failed. She was getting closer.

He tried to swing his body round but lost his balance and thudded sideways into the food debris littering the hard ground. A group of squatter children appeared from nowhere, edging forward and watching, as Mrs. Abdelmajid shouted again.

*'Imshel! I told you before to get away from my gate.'*

From somewhere inside the folds of cloth, Mrs. Abdelmajid pulled out a stick, cutting the hot air in exaggerated zigzags as she whipped him across the body, his frame jumping in painful bursts.

Ingrid moved before she had time to think, taking the steps of the outside staircase two at a time, propelled by the shrieks of her landlady.

*'I warned you, didn't I? Don't say I didn't warn you!'*

She reached the bottom in time to see Mrs. Abdelmajid strike the boy again, this time on the thin arm jutting out from the sleeve of his oversized T-shirt – a faded Manchester United-emblazoned cast-off. Slapping him once more across the head with her free hand, Mrs. Abdelmajid spat out an incomprehensible, quick-fire jabber.

Ingrid pushed her way in between the woman and the boy whimpering on the ground.

*'Stop it. Stop it!'*

In reaching for the stick, she felt Mrs. Abdelmajid's voluminous flesh press against her. The woman was breathing heavily now and staring right at her, her scarf darkened with sweat and pasted to her forehead. Up this close, Ingrid could smell the sourness of her landlady's breath. She winced but pressed back into her chest.

‘Enough! Leave him alone.’

‘Is bad boy,’ Mrs. Abdelmajid smiled, suddenly calm, reverting to pidgin English. Lipstick smudged one of her yellowed front teeth.

‘He's just a child,’ Ingrid threw back.

‘Is bad boy...’ Mrs. Abdelmajid repeated. ‘But I know you *kbawajas*, you foreigners, even black like you...all sleep with you dogs.’

She spat out a globule of saliva into the sand then sighed, adjusted her scarf and, brushing past Ingrid, waddled towards the gate.

Ingrid reached down to touch the boy, then abruptly pulled away as his hands fisted and shot up to protect his head.

‘It’s okay. It’s okay,’ she murmured, stepping back.

The boy slowly uncurled his body. His left side was caked with sand and bits of food waste. The exposed brown of his legs and arms revealed reddish streaks. Something shuddered inside her.

Ingrid reached out to him again but, turning away at her touch, the boy hauled up his chest, then his legs and limped in his awkward swinging gait towards the walls of the mosque compound.

‘C’mon Ingrid, it’ll be all right,’ she told herself, stepping inside the gate and heading for the stairs.

*‘Inshallah’* – God willing.

The door to her apartment was wide open. Through the combined drone of the air cooler and the whirring overhead fan, she heard her mobile ringing – a synthesised version of El Toreador’s song from *Carmen*, which she had downloaded in England as a joke. Before everything.

Her stomach flipped. Maybe it was Karim.

‘Hello?’

A click and the line died.

Her palm, still wrapped around her mobile, pulsed then unfurled as the phone rang again.

‘Hello?’

A beep, a click, then nothing.

‘Who the hell is this?’

Another beep. Dead air.

The now-familiar longing rippled through her.



‘Where the hell are you, Karim?’

She reached for a cigarette from the pack she had earlier flung on the sofa, and with her other hand picked up the phone, scrolling through to his last text.

‘Ing, Sry didnt contact u b4. Just need to be home where I belong. Sorry. K.’

Ingrid crushed the cigarette in her fist.

‘Nice thought, Karim,’ she muttered. ‘Well, I’m here now, home...your home...and you’ve no idea what it was like, waiting, making excuses, having to tell Dad that his money was gone.’

## Notes on Contributors

**Emily Abdeni-Holman** is a British-Lebanese writer. Raised in Warlingham, UK, and Jamhour, Lebanon, she is especially interested in how the experiences of our lands shape who we are and how we go on becoming – how place forms the landscapes of our imaginations, the body of our souls. Her first book of poetry, *Body Tectonic*, exploring the last few years of Lebanon's economic crisis and sociopolitical instability, is out with Broken Sleep Books next year. *Tapba* is her first novel.

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**Pavan Amara** worked on *Mirror, Mirror* while studying as part of the selective HarperCollins Author Academy for writers of colour, which offered a three-month fiction writing course and mentoring. She has also completed online courses with Curtis Brown Creative (CBC). Her former career was as a nurse/midwife, and although she still does shifts, she primarily works as a freelance health journalist now.

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**Joe Eurell** is a prize-winning flash fiction and short story writer with a passion for crime fiction, particularly American Noir in the tradition of S.A. Cosby, Joe R. Lansdale and Chris Whitaker. He is also a graduate of Curtis Brown's flagship Write Your Novel course. Joe is originally from Birmingham but lives in London. Email: [joeeurell@gmail.com](mailto:joeeurell@gmail.com)

**Clare Ramsaran**, a writer of Indo-Guyanese/Irish heritage, holds a Master's degree in Creative Writing from the University of San Francisco. Her writing has been published in Britain (Virago Books and others) and the US. *Kala Polari* was longlisted for the 2022 SI Leeds Literary Prize, and Clare was selected for the Asian Women Writers mentorship programme. Clare has worked in human rights education, for the Mayor of London and as a technology trainer in Silicon Valley and Manchester. Email:

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**Marion Shaikh** is a UK professional teacher of dance and a civil servant who swapped Whitehall for the classroom to become a secondary school teacher of Spanish. Marion takes her inspiration from her personal experiences of the glamorous but not very diverse world of competitive ballroom dancing and her upbringing as a British-born Indian in Kent. Marion holds a Master's in English Studies from the University of Sheffield. Through her writing she hopes to inspire confidence in teenagers to dream big.

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**Stephanie Torrance** is a queer, working-class writer based in Glasgow. She gained her MA in English Literature at the University of Aberdeen before spending many years procrastinating and not writing the book that she secretly wanted to. Outside of writing, she enjoys eighties Power Ballads, sleep, and sparkly jumpers. She lives with her partner, and their two ridiculously friendly cats. *Butterfly Wings* is her first novel. Find her on Instagram @stephanie.torrance Email: [stephanietorrance@live.com](mailto:stephanietorrance@live.com)

**Nathanael Wheatcroft-Brown** is a writer from the North East of England. He completed his undergraduate degree in Filmmaking and his postgraduate degree in Creative Writing, Publishing and Editing. One of his poetry pieces placed second in the Young Poets category at the Wells Festival of Literature, and the queer short film he wrote and directed was showcased at HOME cinema in Manchester and at the Korea Queer Film Festival. *You Look Better in the Sun* is his debut novel. Email:

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**Rosalind Yarde** is a former newspaper, radio and television journalist, currently a writer, editor and media specialist at the UN in Geneva, Switzerland. She has lived and worked in Sudan and Tanzania. She directed radio programmes for internally displaced people in Darfur, made radio shows with Tanzanian street children and trained East African journalists. Rosalind writes fiction and non-fiction. She was runner up in the Geneva Writers' Prizes and has received the Guardian Research Fellowship and BBC Alexander Onassis Bursary. Email: [rosalindyj@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:rosalindyj@yahoo.co.uk)

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