

writing in practice



Expanding the Creative Narrative: Why it Matters

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Writing in Practice
volume 6, 2020

CrossRef DOI: 10.62959/WIP-06-2020-04



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Why it Matters

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ABSTRACT

Idris Elba (2016) and Riz Ahmed (2017) addressed the UK Parliament regarding increased representation and inclusion in the film and TV industries, emphasising the need to embrace “expansive narratives” representative of wider society in terms of age, race, disability and more. This is equally relevant to the publishing industry. Within publishing, in 2018 Penguin Random House adopted an inclusions policy to redress the existing imbalance in representation within the industry, stating; “books shape the culture of society ... too often, culture is shaped by those from a narrow section of society.” 2017 book sales demonstrate that crime fiction (CF) outsells all other genres, making it the most influential contemporary literary form. As a CF author, I employ expansive narratives and argue that, in order to continue shaping and redirecting society’s understanding of cultures beyond the confines of socially-constructed boundaries, CF should embrace wider narratives. My Creative Writing post-graduate research considers these issues and reflects on my creative choices. This article considers inclusion and representation within the CF genre, explores the lack of “expansive narratives” therein, and suggests that, by being more inclusive, the genre has the potential to help shape and redirect perceptions. It also considers the ethics and responsibility of writing the “other.”

As part of my current practice-led Creative Writing PhD, I am researching aspects of my own writing practice. One of the things my research and journaling of my creative practice has revealed is how important representing wider society is to me as a writer. I live in Bradford, a very ethnically diverse city, and I set my books there too. Although representing diverse ethnic communities in fiction and in the arts is imperative, I believe that expanding the creative narrative is wider than that and should incorporate representation of diversity in all its forms. Expansive narratives are all about ensuring that the diversity that already exists in society is included and represented. As Verna Myers a world-renowned inclusion strategist, says; “Diversity is being invited to the party ... inclusion is being asked to dance.” (2015) It is about removing barriers, smashing glass ceilings and implementing policy to enable more equitable representation, inclusion and participation of and in wider society.

From government to educational institutions, to businesses (both private and public), inclusion policies and strategies have become part of everyday life, with initiatives to ensure the equal inclusion and representation of people from diverse backgrounds, including Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic (BAME), LGBTQ+, class, age, gender, disability and more. The Home Office document *Inclusive by Instinct* states that, “diversity is about recognising the value of difference” (HO 2018: 4). However, the mere recognition of diversity does not equate to an appreciation of that diversity, nor does it guarantee that it is valued. Furthermore, even recognising the value of difference, inclusion is not necessarily achieved. It is for this reason that the inclusion and normalisation of diversity in all areas is so important.

As Myers states, “Inclusion is inviting you into the mainstream ... [about] having the opportunity to show what you are capable of doing.” (2015) This is about valuing diversity in the workplace within creative industries, and about making sure that the people in the room are representative of wider society. This can, in part, be achieved through policy and, as Idris Elba stated in his address to the UK parliament about addressing inequitable representation of diverse individuals and communities, through “diversity of thought” (2016), and recognising the worth this brings to all of us. In order to ensure inclusivity throughout society, the potential of currently marginalised groups must be progressed in order to achieve more equitable

representation, thus maximising opportunity for all. To this end, the Home Office’s statement on inclusion – “Inclusion is about ensuring we get the best from everyone” (2018: 4), by offering opportunities for under-represented groups, and by removing the barriers for people from these groups – is much more proactive, instead of merely encouraging diversity in the workplace. Its commitment to propagating the potential of that diverse workplace is supported by a strategy to monitor inclusion. Thus, my own academic institution, like all others, has a Diversity and Inclusions Strategy (Leeds Trinity University 2018), while local government, the EU, and businesses are all adopting inclusion policies with the aim of being more representative of society.

Kit De Waal cuts directly to the heart of the issue when she observes that, “the more we reinforce the stereotypes of who writes and who reads, the more the notion of exclusivity is reinforced. It takes balls to gatecrash a party.” (2017) If we are not inclusive, we are leaving people out, denying them opportunities and, as a consequence, are at risk of missing out on talent. If we acknowledge that inclusion is a good thing and that the representation of currently under-represented groups in all areas is a good thing, then it follows that the publishing industry should become more inclusive, and it is important to consider what employing expansive narratives would mean to both readers and authors.

For the reader, expansive narratives would include those stories that sometimes feature characters and storylines that reflect one or more of their identified characteristics; their class, gender, age, gender identity ethnicity, disability, and more. More than that, in an expansive narrative, these characters would sometimes drive the narrative, be the hero, hold pivotal roles in the story and not be portrayed in a stereotypical way. Likewise, expansive narratives would enrich the reading experience by sometimes reflecting and exploring plots, characters and worlds that are significantly different from the reader’s own lived experiences.

For the author, employing expansive narratives offers choice and loosens restrictions on creativity. It allows the author to explore and create characters that do not share their identified characteristics (albeit with the need for consideration of responsibility, research, exploitation and appropriation of voice, which will be discussed in more detail later in this essay), to sometimes be more representative of a diverse

society rather than restricted by their personal lived experiences. If expansive narratives were the norm, the author would not be expected to represent only their identified characteristics in their writing. Stella Duffy echoes this: “I want to write and read work that is as multifaceted as our society. I think it’s vital we write widely and inclusively to help shift publishing from the mostly middle class, mostly white place it is now. Men need to write women knowing that they are writing from a place of privilege – that they are likely to earn more than women and are more likely to be reviewed. White writers need to write BAME characters knowing there are many more white writers published. The same for straight people, and able-bodied people, middle-class people, and on.” (2016). As Patrice Lawrence sums up: “culture is ever changing and in the publishing industry, that should be addressed.” (2018)

In his address to parliament, Idris Elba (2016) highlighted “the disconnect between the real world and the TV world,” and further asserted that by “not reflecting the real world, too much talent is wasted.” Elba’s theme was about changing mindsets, about being imaginative, about being fairer and about holding the industries to account by benchmarking industries’ progress in terms of inclusion. The following year, the address was given by Riz Ahmed who explained the importance of bridging this disconnect; “Every time you see yourself in a magazine, on a billboard, TV, film, it’s a message that you matter. You’re part of the national story; you’re valued; you feel represented.” (2017), He also emphasised how it is not only important to see yourself reflected back through literature or on screen, but how enriching it is for *everyone* to have insight into lifestyles dissimilar to their own, to be able to share and normalise diversity, to broaden perceptions, to challenge misconceptions and to extend everyone’s imagined boundaries beyond the narrow confines of small microcosms. Ahmed sums it up in his conclusion: “The power of stories to allow us to relate to experiences that do not resemble our own is phenomenal. And every time we see those experiences, it reminds us that what unites us is far greater than what divides us. Culture is a place where you can put yourself in someone else’s shoes; and a one size shoe shop just doesn’t make any sense.”

Both addresses focused on the importance of the inclusion of under-represented groups in film and television, but also on how the stories we see on screen and, by extension, in our literature, shape our

culture. The benefits they outlined were for all of society. However, both Elba and Ahmed also spoke about the huge economic influence of the creative industries on culture. The Department of Digital Culture Media and Sport (DCMS 2018) reported that in 2017 the creative industries:

- contributed £101.5bn to the UK economy,
- generated a significantly higher Gross Value Added than Sport, Gambling and Telecoms,
- increased their economic contribution by 53% since 2010,
- were the second highest income generator in the DCMS,
- generated £6bn from the publishing industry.

These figures demonstrate that from film to television, to theatre, to literature, art and music, the creative industries in general are extensive and economically solid, and therefore have the very real potential to shape and direct a wider, more diverse, and therefore more representative narrative. Within this context, the publishing industry generates a sizeable amount of income through literature sales, again pointing to its potential influence in shaping culture through its readership.

Culture plays a key role in shaping how people co-exist in societies. All around us we encounter cultural influences in the form of narratives on the screen, on radio, on social media, in galleries, on walls in the form of public and graffiti art, and in literature that we are asked to invest into socially, emotionally and cerebrally. Problems arise when the discourses we are offered through these avenues are representative of only certain groups that make up society. If cultural narratives exclude groups, they perpetuate a narrow perception of what and who is important to our society; they cause alienation. As Ahmed points out, “when we fail to represent, people switch off. They switch off on telly, they switch off the ballot box, and they retreat to other fringe narratives, which is sometimes very dangerous.” (2017) But it’s more than that; it’s about how society as a whole views groups with whom they may not identify. If diverse experiences are not part of the narratives we encounter culturally, then common understandings, shared experiences and appreciation of diversity is at risk. As Ahmed says, “what’s at stake here is whether or not we will move forwards together, or whether we will leave people behind.” (2017) When non-inclusive narratives thrive at the expense of expansive ones, so too do misunderstanding, mistrust, disharmony, fear, and victimisation. Therefore, it is imperative that we

use all art forms available to normalise expansive narratives, thus eradicating the negative effects that result from exclusion upon both individuals and society as a whole.

E. V. Roberts and R. Zweig usefully define literature as “compositions that tell stories, dramatize situations, express emotions and analyse and advocate ideas ... literature helps us grow both personally and intellectually.” (2012: 3). As a writer, the concept of literature as being powerful enough to spotlight the essence of society’s morals and practices, to stimulate debate, to broaden horizons and transport us to other worlds, to share lived experiences in order to promote empathy, resonates with me, and I believe that there is no more compelling argument than that for inclusivity in the publishing industry. The current disconnect between the people, groups and lives we are able to read about (what is published and accessible to readers either digitally or physically), and the actuality of our rich, complex and diverse societal make-up, is not only symptomatic of the lack of inclusion in the publishing industry, but also impoverishes us all. With this in mind, I shall now turn to the imbalance in representation of marginalised groups in the creative industries, literature in general, and the crime fiction genre specifically.

Inclusion in the Publishing Industry

In order to actively encourage the publication of more expansive narratives, it is beneficial for the publishing industry itself to be inclusive and representative. However, in recent years there has been an exploration of the publishing industry in terms of diversity, inclusion and representation of many under-represented groups from working class writers, BAME writers, to women and more. A number of reports have considered the make-up of the publishing industry as well as the demographic and cultural diversity of authors signed. There has been discussion around the narratives offered, as well as expectations placed upon authors to produce specific narratives.

Lee and Low Books’ *Diversity in Publishing Baseline Survey* (2015) compiled statistics around race, gender, sexual orientation and disability and discovered that:

- Over 75% of the industry overall were white, women, heterosexual and non-disabled.
- At executive level the percentage of white,

heterosexual and non-disabled increased to over 85%.

- The proportion of women in executive posts fell to only 59%.

The Publishing Industry Workforce survey (2018) also reflects these figures and demonstrates a regional under-representation as well as under-representation in other marginalised groups. It highlighted that the industry has a higher representation of middle-class employees originating from London, with employees from Scotland, Ireland, Wales and the North of England being under-represented. A proportionately higher number of executive positions were filled by white male employees. The report also highlighted a sizeable gender pay gap, mainly attributed to policies surrounding unpaid internships and the like. This trend is also reflected in the authors signed up by the larger publishing houses and reinforces the continued need for more proactive strategies to ensure equality, inclusion and representation.

On the whole the data discussed below demonstrates a need for more proactive strategies by the publishing industry in order to redress lack of representation.

BAME Representation

A. Flood’s article in *The Guardian* (2019) criticised the lack of inclusion in the publishing industry, using the Publishing Industry Workforce D&I Survey (PIWDIS) 2018 figures (p.12). The PIWDIS 2018 figures showed that, despite the publishing industry being predominantly London based, where 40.2% of the population identify as BAME, only 11.6% of individuals working in the publishing industry identified as BAME. This is even lower than national statistics, which show that 14% of the overall population identify as BAME. So, it is clear that in terms of BAME representation in employment, the publishing industry is lacking. However, what is more damning is that in comparison with the PIWDIS 2017 figures there has been a decrease of nearly 1.5% of employees from BAME backgrounds. This means that those making the decisions around which authors and/or which novels are published are predominantly white. Although figures were provided regarding the role of women at senior management levels, there were no figures to demonstrate the roles the BAME employees (or for that matter any of the other under-represented groups) occupied within the industry, which makes it unclear how much influence for change could be

asserted by those BAME employees.

Moving on to look at signed authors' experiences of the publishing industry, *The Writing the Future Report* (Spread the Word 2015) highlighted that many barriers existed for BAME authors. Some BAME authors felt that they were expected to portray limited narratives of their cultures, whilst others felt their work was rejected because it didn't tally with white expectation of their writing and many felt they were being shoe-horned into only representing BAME issues in their writing. This illustrates a real barrier to producing expansive narratives. If the authors' offered narratives are rejected, then their stories are devalued, ignored and shut down in favour of the narrow imagined boundaries created by the most prevalent culture. Taking this a step further, if BAME narratives are judged by people who lack the imagination Elba and Ahmed called for in their addresses to parliament, and then rejected on that basis, then we are very much in the remit of a shoe shop where one size is all that's offered. Understandably, some of the authors interviewed expressed discontent at being limited to representing BAME issues in their writing. After all, the whole concept of Creative Writing is to be creative, to produce imaginative writing that explores worlds, so why should any author be limited to explore only their own world?

D. Barrett, in his article "Unusual Suspect: the writers diversifying detective fiction" (2018), highlights the fact that most of the best loved detectives in fiction are white and male, from Sherlock Holmes, to Rebus, and beyond. However, whilst there are a few notable BAME authors in the industry (A. A. Dhand, Dreda Say Mitchell, Patrice Lawrence), this has not translated into a representative increase of inclusion of BAME characters in literature. This again raises the question of whose responsibility it is to ensure that inclusion and representation in our literature is equitable. Clearly, the need to employ more people from BAME backgrounds in the publishing industry at influential levels (editors, agents, publishers) is imperative, as is the need to dip into a wider pool in order to redress the existing imbalance in authors. Alongside this, though, the content of what is published needs to be scrutinised in order to ensure that wider narratives become the norm and are not reliant on restricting our BAME authors to take up the mantle on behalf of their communities.

Working Class, Working Class Women and Older Women representation

The BAME communities are not the only ones under-represented in both the publishing industry and in the authors published. Unfortunately, the PIWDIS (2017 and 2018) has no figures to correlate the class of employees. However, if we look at indications like education, we see that nearly 50% of employees had a degree, 36% had some qualification whilst only 14% had no formal educational qualifications. Of course, this gives a clear picture of educational attainment, it does not necessarily provide an accurate guide to class backgrounds of employees. However, the *Panic! It's an Arts Emergency* (2015) survey demonstrates that people of working-class origin are still being excluded from the creative industries. Specifically, the workplace demographics showed that only 12.6% of those employed in the publishing industry identified as working class.

Some leading literary figures have commented on the barrier to publication for working class people, and specifically working-class women. Kit de Waal's article *Make Room for Working Class Writers* (2018) highlights the fact that the publishing industry is the least socially diverse of all the creative industries, regarding not only class, but also race, gender and age of those who are employed. She observes that, "working-class writers, it seems, must endlessly regurgitate their own life stories – or versions of them – whereas middle-class writers can explore the world, the universe and beyond." This echoes the experiences of BAME writers outlined above. Furthermore, De Waal claims that because of a lack of inclusion, the working-class narratives published lose their authentic voice as they are diluted to suit the narrow focus of the over-represented white, middle-class employees in upper echelons of the industry. Again, this echoes the complaints of some of our BAME writers and substantiates the claim that there is a need for a more diverse workforce in the publishing industry so that the views of wider society can influence publishing choices. In her radio programme discussing *Where Are All the Working Class Writers?* De Waal refers to some of the barriers to becoming an author if you are from a working-class background: "Real equality is when working class writers can write about anything they like – an alien invasion, a nineteenth-century courtesan, a medieval war. All we need is the space, the time to do it – oh yes, and some way to pay the bills." (2017)

Fortunately, the publishing industry is taking the need for inclusion and representation more seriously. The Penguin Random House (PRH) inclusion policy opens with a bold statement: “Books shape the culture of society. They inspire TV shows, films, stage shows, podcasts and more. Yet too often culture is shaped by people who come from a narrow section of society. That needs to change.” (2018) It goes on to express a desire to be more representative of society in terms of employees and the authors they sign by 2025, by taking into account ethnicity, gender, sexuality, social mobility and disability. To back this up, PRH have established various initiatives, such as the #WriteNow project which specifically works with under-represented groups throughout the country to create publishing opportunities. They have also created #PenguinPride, and many educational initiatives have been taken into schools throughout the country to try to make the publishing industry more accessible for young people.

The Harvill Secker and Bloody Scotland (2018) BAME prize for crime fiction offers an opportunity for members of the BAME community to be mentored, and Harper Collins 4th Estate imprint gives a route to publishing for BAME authors with their annual short story prize. The Killer Women Mentoring Scheme (2019) funded by Arts Council England and the Working-Class Writers’ Festival (The Bookseller, 2018) planned for 2020, for example, both aim to encourage broader representation amongst authors. However, these initiatives have been met with mixed reactions. Author Lionel Shriver asserts that, “PRH no longer regards the company’s *raison d’être* as the acquisition and dissemination of good books. Rather, the organisation aims to mirror the percentage of minorities in the UK with statistical precision ... literary excellence will be secondary to ticking all those ethnicity, gender, disability, sexual preference and crap-education boxes.” (2018) This infers that a more representative workforce, combined with greater inclusion of authors from under-represented groups and wider narratives reflecting the voices of those authors, somehow diminishes the quality of literature published. It does not account for the possibility that dipping into larger, more varied pools of talent, might actually increase excellence and revitalise an industry which has been slow to respond to changing culture. The implication that because you belong to an under-represented group means that what you offer will be inferior to the existing

cohort of non-representative authors is offensive and illustrates exactly why we need these policies and initiatives. PRH is a commercial business after all and, as demonstrated earlier, wider representation of narratives is economically viable. Beside which, Shriver’s comments are misleading, as within the PRH policy it is stated quite clearly that, “This is an ambition, not a quota. We will always publish – and hire – based on talent, first and foremost.” (2018) The fact that PRH are nurturing marginalised voices in no way infers that their standards have fallen, but rather that they’ve widened the goalposts to allow those voices that are not often heard to have the opportunity to be published. As author Abir Mukherjee asserts, “the playing field isn’t level ... What PRH is doing is making it easier for hugely talented individuals from marginalised parts of our society to have their voices and their stories heard ... this is about better reflecting the world we live in and publishing books that appeal to a wider cross section of society, rather than tokenism or box ticking.” (Flood 2018)

Whilst these positive moves will almost certainly lead to more diverse narratives, I would argue that, alongside this, there is a real need to normalise expansive narratives in the fiction published. Although publishing a wider, more representative cohort of authors will expand the narratives available, the issue is larger than that. It is also about expecting a proportion of all narratives produced to be expansive and that means not relying solely on, for example, gay or black or working-class authors to write these narratives, but to normalise diverse narratives from all writers. As De Waal, Elba and Ahmed argue, it’s about removing barriers for under-represented groups to the creative industries, whilst ensuring that creative choice is not limited to expected narratives. Already in the reports outlined above, writers from marginalised groups have expressed annoyance at being expected to write a certain kind of narrative. It is only by encouraging all writers to embrace expansive narratives that these issues can be addressed.

As creatives, writers are more than able to develop narratives that transport readers to places they may never have visited, through the experiences of characters they may never have met, having encounters they might only be able to imagine: stories that may never be their own, and may reflect societies/lives they have never inhabited. It is the authors’ very special skill – their job – after all.

Therefore, how hard can it be to use our creativity to be more representative of actual society in our narratives and to think and write outside the narrow box of the publishers' authors' and readers' cultural expectations? Clearly, to expect every narrative to be representative of all aspects of wider society would be unreasonable, but to be mindful of how we are representing the worlds we create is integral to proper inclusion, and this requires us to be conscious of the possibilities available to us, to be aware that a diverse society lives beyond the confines of our own worlds and to occasionally dip into that pool to ensure that we are as Ahmed (2017) said, "not leaving anyone behind" whilst opening up access to wider worlds and experiences.

Whilst the discussion above has been about the need for expansive narratives in the creative industries and literature in general, my Creative Writing PhD research is specifically on the need for expansive narratives in the crime fiction (CF) genre and, because my PhD is practice-led, how that impacts on my own writing as an established CF author. CF is the most popular genre in contemporary adult fiction:

- Nielson Book Research (2015) showed that seven of the top ten print books sold and eight of the top ten e-books sold were CF.

The Publishers Association (2016) reported that, of the top 15 borrowed library books for 2015-2016, five were CF and the other ten were children's books. Singh (2018) reported figures from The London Book Fair stating that in 2017 the crime fiction genre outsold all other fiction.

From these statistics it is clear that CF makes an extensive contribution to the creative industry economy and has the potential to be a real cultural influencer if it adopts expansive narratives. CF is also widely accepted as the pre-eminent genre that shines a spotlight on societal injustice, the one that takes up the mantle for the disenfranchised and voiceless. As C. Nickerson (1997) asserts, CF can release "explosive cultural material." This implies that the genre is forward thinking and unafraid to challenge the status quo. In 2020, the explosive cultural material that should be released by the CF community is expansive narratives; narratives that broaden, include and represent society more equitably. Nickerson goes on to note that CF "represent[s] in a generally realistic style the most anxiety-producing issues and narratives of a culture."

(744-745) Renowned crime fiction author Denise Mina states that "crime fiction illuminates, informs and explores societal rupture" (2018), and Sophie Hannah says, "I feel I am writing about ordinary people in the real world – but with the proviso that nobody is really that ordinary." (2019) Whilst in agreement that the genre does indeed address many societal issues, my research indicates that it is sadly lacking in representing many of the "narratives of a culture." The genre is not reflective of broader society, nor is it inclusive in terms of ethnicity, class, gender, gender identity, sexuality, disability, age and more, and on occasion it is stuck in the rut of tokenism, with marginalised characters being presented in stereotypical or two-dimensional ways in subsidiary roles. The number of authors from marginalised groups being signed by publishers, although rising, is still unrepresentative, and the narratives published by the CF community of authors are often not expansive in nature. I would posit that employing expansive narratives would produce an even more realistic and authentic cultural narrative.

Part of my PhD research involved conducting interviews with twenty CF authors. Of the twenty:

- eight (40%) were men and twelve (60%) were women.
- eight (40%) were under forty-five years old, eight (40%) were between 45 and 60 years old and four (20%) were over 60 years old.
- one identified as BAME (5%), nineteen as white (95%)
- three specified they had a disability (15%)
- all identified as heterosexual (100%).

During these interviews, I asked three questions which drew answers that pertained to the notion of inclusivity in CF. The first was: "What draws you to write CF?" The overwhelming majority of responses echoed Mina and Hannah's earlier comments around writing within the genre in order to explore societal rupture and characterisation. There was also a definite emphasis on exploring the psychology of characters (both protagonists and antagonists), the search for resolution and justice, exploring darkness, personal (work life) experience, compulsion to write, conflict, escapism, and an emphasis on the challenge of creating a puzzle. The responses which particularly illuminated the authors' awareness of, or desire to incorporate, expansive narratives included the following:

- "I like to give voice through my work to the voiceless."

- “It’s the last stronghold of the everyday hero, the hero the reader could actually become.”
- “I am interested in the authority of the CF genre to reflect society and to explore issues of political, economic and moral weight.”

Nine of the interviewed authors expressed a desire to *reflect real life*, to give *voice*, to include *credible characters* and to explore *issues and dilemmas*. However, whether these authors would produce expansive narratives would depend on their personal perceptions of ‘real life,’ which is why it is important that there is wider representation within the CF author community. Alongside this, there needs to be a more pro-active response from publishers to ensure that narratives offer wider representation of society, thus sharing the representation responsibility more widely and not only with those from under-represented groups.

One author wanted the reader to identify with the “hero” (I use the term hero in the same way I use the term actor or author; as a unisex term) and believe that they could become that hero. This again raises the question of, if the reader is from an under-represented group, does that hero share any of their identified characteristics? Another author credited the CF genre with having “authority” to reflect society, as if there is an expectation that the genre will do just that, but again this is reliant upon the author’s concept of how society is made up. It seems that it is only by employing expansive narratives that we can effectively deliver the sorts of things the CF authors feel the genre represents; to create heroes that mirror the expectation from the reader that they could one day be that hero, whilst representing wider society and giving voice to the voiceless.

My experience as a reader of CF is that, as a genre, it does to an extent fulfil these expectations. CF does explore societal rupture, spotlight social injustice and give voice to the voiceless. Let us look at a few examples of CF that does just this. Mark Billingham’s *Love Like Blood* (2018) is a novel about “honour killings”. It most definitely spotlights social injustice and gives voice to the disenfranchised characters killed for “dishonouring” their families. *Dead Memories* (2019) by Angela Marsons explores issues around society’s responsibilities to abused and vulnerable children and how fragile their security can be. Both Jane Casey’s *Cruel Acts* (2019) and Brian Freeman’s *The Voice Inside* (2019) scrutinise flaws in the US and the UK justice systems

respectively, and how corruption, politics and the media can exacerbate existing flaws. However, whilst highlighting these very important issues, the narratives are still, to an extent, exclusive. The protagonists are rarely from a marginalised group and, although the overall narratives have a number of BAME characters, none of these characters figure amongst the three protagonists in each novel. Often the marginalised characters are the victims. In two of the examples, the protagonists are women, but in one instance, the woman’s opinion is considered less valid than that of her male counterpart. There are no characters from the LGBTQ+ communities, all protagonists bar one are between the ages of twenty and forty, and none is physically disabled, although two suffer from PTSD.

If we look at one of the most prestigious CF awards, The Theakston Old Peculier Crime Novel of the Year (2019) shortlist, we can again see this trend perpetuated. Of the six shortlisted novels – Belinda Bauer’s *Snap* (2018), Steve Cavanagh’s *Thirteen* (2018), Mick Herron’s *London Rules* (2018), Val McDermid’s *Broken Ground* (2018), Liam McIlvanney’s *The Quaker* (2018) and Khurram Rahman’s *East of Hounslow* (2018) – only Khurram Rahman identifies as BAME and his is the only novel featuring BAME main characters. Val McDermid is gay and the main character in Liam McIlvanney’s book, based on the real-life Bible John killings, is gay. *Snap* is the only one to feature main characters outside the usual twenty to forty age group, with the main characters being children, whilst McDermid’s *Broken Ground* is the only to feature a female main protagonist. Whilst in no way denigrating the talent of these writers, it seems that at the top of the CF genre there remains a need to include more expansive narratives. In order to break the glass ceilings that authors from under-represented groups come up against, the publishing industry should be both seeking out CF narratives that are more expansive, and pro-actively seeking talent from under-represented groups.

The second of my author questions relevant to expansive narratives was: “Do CF authors have a responsibility to society?” Interestingly, one author responded that their only responsibility was to themselves. Three responded that they had no responsibility to society, but added provisos, such as that they would not write gratuitous violence or use certain language in deference to their readership. One specified that their aim was “to entertain not to

influence” whilst acknowledging that other authors “inject social justice into their work”. One author responded “Absolutely not. We have a responsibility to pull it [society] down”. Some observations from the other fourteen authors who felt they, as writers, had some responsibility to society include:

- “I would never paint a particular group in a negative way ... although I may paint them that way through the eyes of somebody whose values needed to be questioned.”
- “In a nutshell... to portray people in a fair way, challenge prejudice.”
- “CF (and other) authors have an obligation, for example, not to perpetuate damaging stereotypes.”
- “Writers have a responsibility to avoid cliché ... but be true to reality. Not every Muslim is a terrorist. Not every short blond is a dumb victim. Not every politician is corrupt.”

Clearly the desire to “do no harm” and to expose “societal wrongs and social injustice” and not to “perpetuate stereotypes” is very high on the agenda of most of the CF authors interviewed, yet although they intuitively challenged and spotlighted issues leading to inequitable representation, only two made reference to wider narratives by mentioning avoiding stereotypes. However, in order to avoid over-compensation (tokenism) it is important to portray a breadth of characters from marginalised groups. Just because a character is from an under-represented group does not mean they are a “nice” character. This goes back to Idris Elba’s concern about being labelled a “black actor” when he is so much more than that. It’s about being able to represent, for example, a gay man as a villain, because he is not *only* a gay man – he is more than that – and could be a villain, a nurse, a father ... and gay. However, the worry of portraying under-represented characters in a stereotypical way is ever-present, as the last observation showed, and this can be difficult to navigate as a writer.

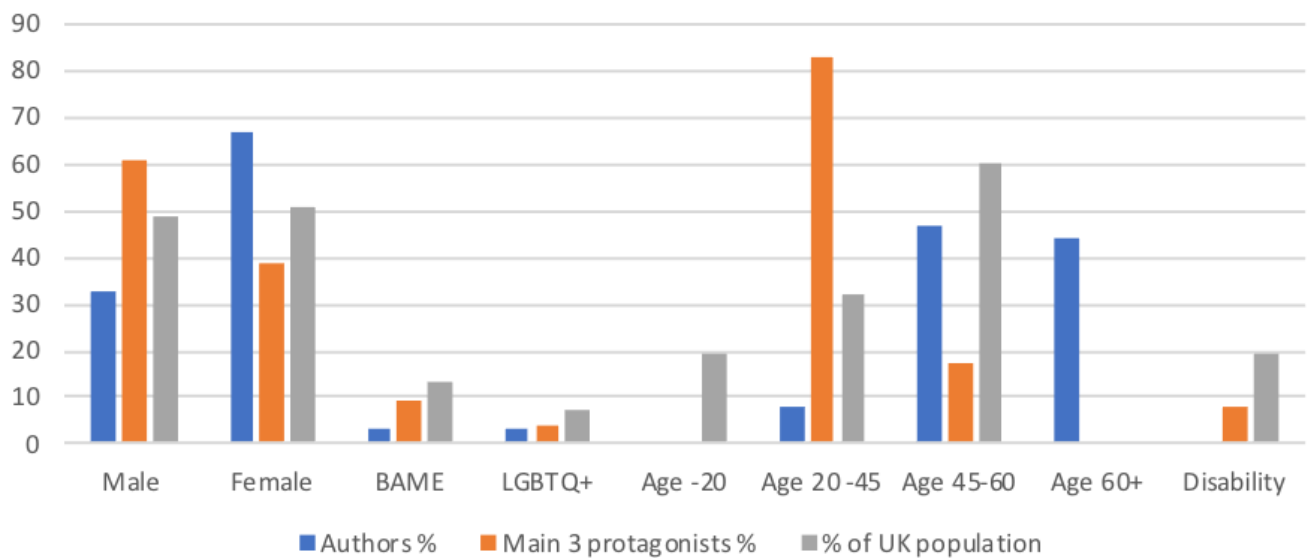
In order to gain more clarification around this, I posed the question: “Do current discussions/debates around, for example, the portrayal of marginalised groups, violence towards women, etc., in CF influence how or what you write?” Six respondents said that they would not be influenced by current debate. One of those cited the fact that not conforming to current “thought” around certain issues could be a barrier to being published. Two

cited their method of writing as “pantsers” (those who do not plot), for ignoring current debate. The three spoke about being true to their writing and not being forced into writing stories which didn’t interest them. These three spoke at length about writing to expose inequality, whether it was fashionable or not. The fourteen who acknowledged being influenced by current debates commented thus:

- “If you want to keep current and authentic, then you must be broadly aware of all possibilities.”
- “Yes, I discuss this a lot with fellow writers.”
- “I’m keen to see people from the BAME community represented accurately and not placed in stories where the fact that they are BAME is the purpose of them being in the story.”
- “Representation is important, good representation is imperative.”
- “I often cover controversial topics that a lot of authors would shy away from, but these things happen in everyday life and I can use my voice to bring attention to these things.”
- “I’m in a position to expose corruptions, abuses, conspiracies and social injustices that happen in real life.”
- “I tend to focus on domestic violence and misogyny as themes ... there is still more work to do in creating awareness around these sensitive subjects.”
- “As a feminist I do make a conscious effort to ensure my work subverts the stereotypical victim trope.”
- “I do intentionally try to explore social issues in my writing – especially the disempowerment of women.”
- “Yes, I don’t know if it’s entirely true that CF is now a radical genre (plenty of it remains very conservative) but it does provide a vehicle for exploring the experiences of oppressed and disenfranchised groups.”
- “Many of my books try to give expression to the experiences of disenfranchised groups or individuals.”
- “It is inevitable that the debate around different groups has an impact on writing. I think the exploration of this can be a good thing.”

From these responses it is clear that representation is a consideration among CF authors, with how BAME and women characters are represented in CF being the groups most cited. Interestingly, the author who identified as BAME made the BAME

Comparison between % representation of authors, characters within novels and national UK statistics in the groupings below.



observations, whilst one of the authors mentioning the disempowerment of women was male. This is perhaps an indication that being in an under-represented group makes it more likely that an author will consider representation of that group. Although oppressed, disenfranchised and different groups are mentioned in loose terms, there is very little indication of which precise groups the authors questioned are referring to. On the whole, the interviewed authors are socially aware, try to represent broader society and the issues faced by marginalised groups, and are committed to giving voice to marginalised groups. However, if inclusion and representation of diversity is focused mainly on women and the BAME communities, what are the implications for other marginalised groups who still remain excluded? If we are not fully inclusive, then we are still leaving people behind: their narratives are not being told, their experiences not validated. This brings into question the way in which under-represented voices are created. Are the narratives about marginalised groups as victims, peripheral or marginalised characters, or are they about the marginalised groups being represented as equals – the “heroes”, if you will? If the former, then there is still work to be done. The need to encapsulate, as a matter of course, inclusive narratives, with members of marginalised groups playing the leading roles, is pressing. This is especially true if CF is to continue to be the genre that represents contemporary society in a realistic way.

To illustrate this point, I looked at available statistics relating to authors, and compared this to the representation of the main three characters from all 36 novels I have read thus far this year (note: not all novels had three identifiable main characters) and compared that to the national statistics outlining percentages for each of the groupings used. Of the 36 authors, 12 were male, 24 were female, one identified as BAME, one, to my knowledge, was gay, 16 were over 60, 17 were between 45 and 60, and three were between 20 and 45.

The 36 novels comprised:

- 18 traditional detective novels, although three of these were not police procedurals. Of the three, two were private detective novels and one was a cross between a police procedural and an amateur detective, with the main character being an anthropologist. Five of these had two main characters and a sidekick. One of the main characters was the detective (white, under 45 and straight), the other was the female serial killer (again under 45 and straight), the third was the black detective sidekick.
- 13 urban gothic vampire cross-genre amateur detective books (binge-read as research for a blog article).
- Three psychological thrillers; two with a female main character and one with a male main

character.

- One described as literary crime fiction.
- One Asian cosy crime novel.

This is what I found:

Looking more closely at the roles of the different characters within the books, we see clearly that even where there is inclusion of a member of an under-represented group, that character is mostly not the main narrative driver. For example, none of the four LGBTQ+ characters represented are main characters, nor is the one character with a physical disability. Out of the nine BAME characters, only two are main characters, one of which is a woman and is represented by a male BAME author writing a female BAME character. The other BAME characters are sidekicks to the main white characters. Incidentally, of the main BAME characters portrayed in the novels, only three are women. Of the seventeen main characters over the age of 45 only three are lead characters and I noticed a propensity for the older sidekick to be the calming influence on the younger, more charismatic, usually male, detective. None of the characters in any of the books identifies as anything other than gay, lesbian or heterosexual, demonstrating a lack of representation for the rest of the LGBTQ+ community and, more importantly, a lack of discourse around the issues of gender and sexual identity.

It is worth noting that five of the novels read were identified, by the authors, as being feminist novels, a further 13 novels were from an urban gothic vampire series, featuring a female main character, and three of the novels featured strong female lead characters, yet this still did not bring the representation of women in CF in line with UK population statistics. Furthermore, of the eight characters with a disability, only one of those had a physical disability and the others suffered from mental health issues. Whilst pleasing to see mental health awareness in fiction, what is the message to those with other disabilities and/or invisible disabilities? In terms of the victim pool in these novels, it is notable that:

- In all of the novels there are themes where women or girls were victims. However, to unpick this a little more, it is important to be aware that in nine of these, the women become empowered during the course of the novel. Issues such as male privilege, domestic abuse, gaslighting, rape, child trafficking, honour killing and terrorism are addressed in the

various narratives.

- In two of the novels there are only male victims.
- Most victims are under 45 years old
- In nine novels the victims are children, and a further 25 novels feature victims in their twenties. Only two novels feature victims over the age of 45.
- In 11 novels the victims are from BAME communities

These statistics demonstrate that if you are young, female reader you are more likely to see characters like you end up in CF novels as victims than as heroes. Although the represented CF novels feature no under 20-year olds as main characters, representation of this age group as victims rises remarkably. If you're a reader over the age of 45 you're unlikely to see yourself represented as either a victim or a hero and this appears to be true of the LGBTQ+ community, although the chances of a reader seeing characters similar to you portrayed as a victim if you're from the BAME community is fractionally higher. However, if you're a man between the ages of 20 to 45, you're more likely to be a hero with the chances of you being a victim being negligible. In sum, then, this indicates that disenfranchised groups of society, when reading CF, will be unlikely to see people with their identified characteristics portrayed. Expansive narratives would balance this out, ensuring that diverse readers, whilst being able to experience vicariously cultures, worlds and lifestyles different to their own, would also sometimes be able to see their identified characteristics reflected back at them in a variety of ways.

In terms of authorship, the statistics indicate that it is not only the BAME authors who are representing BAME characters in their writing. Although on the whole the authors gave strong, three-dimensional representation of their characters, I was disappointed that one white author referred in their novel to one of the BAME characters as "exotic". If this description had come from the viewpoint of a character with little cultural awareness, the description could have been used to emphasise this aspect of their worldview. However, it wasn't; it was from the viewpoint of a main character who was very culturally aware.

Not every CF novel needs to represent all aspects of society. However, if the default is to perpetuate

the clichéd, hetero, young, white, male protagonist, then we, as writers, are missing the opportunity to incorporate the richness that expansive narratives bring to our writing, to vitalise wider society by exploring narratives that can take both author and reader out of our comfort zones and stretch perceptions of what people should or can do. Relating this back to the answers elicited from the author interviews, this begs questions concerning how effectively CF authors are addressing their previously stated aims of:

- “challenging stereotypes”
- giving “good representation”
- using our voices to “bring attention to these [controversial topics] things”
- exposing “social injustice”
- “subvert[ing] the stereotypical victim trope”
- exploring “the disempowerment of women”
- exploring “the experiences of oppressed and disenfranchised groups”
- “challenging prejudice”
- “not to perpetuate damaging stereotypes”
- “making sure tough subjects aren’t brushed under the carpet”
- giving “expression to the experiences of disenfranchised groups or individuals”
- “avoid[ing] cliché”

This brings us back to the function of literature to, on the one hand, sometimes mirror *all* of us and, at other times, to introduce us to others’ experiences.

Whilst initiatives like the Penguin Random House policy will ultimately lead to a more diverse workforce in the publishing industry, that alone will not expand the narratives. Fortunately, the increase in initiatives for BAME and working-class authors, as mentioned previously, LGBTQ+ initiatives, and Penguin Random House’s Write Now initiatives to mentor regional talent from under-represented groups are opening up avenues for writers from marginalised groups to break through the barriers in order to become published. In the last five years the CF world has seen a rise in BAME authors being published, for example, AA Dhand (Transworld Publishers), Abir Mukherjee (Penguin Random House), Alex Khan (Hera books) Khurram Rahman (Harper Collins HQ), and Vaseem Khan (Hodder & Stoughton). The range of publishers publishing BAME authors indicates a change in direction towards more expansive narratives. However, it appears that representation of BAME women CF authors is poorer with Zia Abdullah (Harper Collins

HQ), Dreda Say Mitchell (Bloodhound Books) and Dorothy Koomson (Headline books) being among the few to break into CF publishing. Clearly the publishing world is taking note, not only of who it employs, but also of the authors’ narratives they are publishing. Penguin Random House’s pledge that their “new hires and the books we acquire will reflect UK society by 2025” (2018) shows a commitment not only to a greater representation of society in terms of who they employ, but a greater representation of wider society in the narratives they publish. By extending the remit to include more expansive narratives, and by having manuscripts scrutinised by employees with wider experiences, the expectation of more representative narratives will increase. This will ensure that under-represented groups do not alone carry the burden of creating inclusive narratives to represent themselves but are free to explore their creativity with the knowledge that wider more representative narratives are not only being valued and sought after but published too. Expansive narratives are the only way forward to ensure better representation without pigeonholing authors from specific groups and restricting their creative practice.

However, alongside this, the subject of appropriation of voice must be considered. In no way should expansive narratives replace the creative industries’ commitment to equitable representation of marginalised groups being published. On the contrary, expansive narratives should complement equitable representation. However, issues surrounding identity politics and appropriation of voice in fiction – brought to a head by Lionel Shriver at the Brisbane Writers Festival (2016) and Yassmin Abdel-Magied’s response to it (2016), along with Anthony Horowitz’s claims, as reported by Kean (2017), that he was asked not to write black characters, and Boyne’s (2019) response to criticism about his transgender narrative – cannot be ignored. Indeed, it is a nuanced and delicate subject, which necessitates a degree of sensitivity, authorial responsibility and a deep knowledge that, as authors, the privilege we have to write a vast array of characters must be tempered by the duty to be responsible in the ways in which we do this. Kit De Waal describes it thus, “We have to ask ourselves who we are and what we are trying to say in speaking as ‘the other’. What are we trying to accomplish in our writing that needs that perspective? Are we the best person to say it? Have we examined our privilege and our attitudes sufficiently to give us the necessary perspective to be authentic, sympathetic and true?”

Are we sure that we are not dabbling in exotica, in that fascination with the other that prevents us portraying a rounded, rich culture with all its nuances, diversity and reality?" (2018)

With this in mind, I addressed the issue of appropriation of voice during the author interviews with the question: "What are your feelings about appropriation of voice in creative writing in general?" One author declined to answer the question, two more seemed to be unaware of any political dimension to the question, one understood the question to be about the use of first or third person narration, and one gave the example of a CF author who, in their opinion, had appropriated an African woman's voice badly. The words *inevitable*, *necessary*, *unavoidable* and *appropriate* were used a total of seventeen times, indicating that overwhelmingly the need to write in other voices was an integral part of the craft. However, most authors provided further detail to their answers:

- "I certainly wouldn't presume to write something that sits within another culture unless I was sure I was well enough informed to do it and that it was fair representation."
- "one of the most satisfying aspects of the creative process is adopting or representing the other."
- "... in depicting a different culture or identity any writer should take the responsibility seriously."
- "I try to represent my characters fairly and convincingly."
- "Writers need to do their homework to avoid harmful stereotypes."
- "Research is key. Understanding different cultures is key."
- "I would like to see some of those voices tell their own story."
- "The vast majority of writers are white and middle class. I seek to represent the world as I see it, so I write about people of different colours, religions and backgrounds. That's what authors do."
- "Appropriation of voice is inevitable in fiction."
- "If you couldn't write about anyone else, there would only be one story left – your own. You need to write what you want."
- "We must move into areas beyond our knowledge, understanding and expertise."
- "My feeling is that 'appropriation of voice' is a modern-day concern which should actually concern none of us."

- "Perfectly fine as long as necessary research has been done."
- "[Authors] sometimes get accused of not including minority groups in their writing but when they do, they are in danger of being accused of misrepresenting such groups. I think it's important to be inclusive but like any subject matter, it has to be handled sensitively."
- "As long as the voice is done in a professional manner that has been adequately researched and stays true to the voice then authors can do it very well."
- "I'm uncomfortable when authors appropriate material from other cultures for exploitative or meretricious reasons."
- "If writers were only allowed to write from within their own experience, the scope of fiction would be very limited."
- "If a writer chooses to write from another perspective... then they have an obligation to take the process seriously."

The overall emphasis was that appropriation was necessary in order to provide diverse narratives, but that alongside this the author has an obligation to research, to be sensitive, not to misrepresent, and to be accurate. Some authors used terms like "fair representation," "responsibility," "sensitivity," "obligation to take the process seriously," and "professionalism," as well as stressing the need for research. These responses led me to consider who would be the adjudicator for all these concerns. Who would decide if the representation was fair or sensitively handled, or adequately researched, or exploitative? We have Ahmed and Elba pointing out the benefits of inclusive narratives and alongside that we have a publishing industry that is addressing the issue of under-representation of marginalized groups in the workplace and amongst authors, whilst pledging to publish more expansive narratives representative of wider society. Meanwhile we have notable authors like Lionel Shriver dismissing concerns over both appropriation of voice and the initiatives to redress the imbalance, whilst other authors, like Kit de Waal embrace these initiatives. It's hardly surprising then that CF authors are wary when it comes to creating characters from marginalised groups. As a result of this, the representation of marginalised groups in CF is still poor, which brings into question the CF community's assertion that this genre is the one that most represents society.

Despite the overall lack of representation of marginalised groups in CF, there has in recent years been an encouraging move by some authors to embrace more expansive narratives. With the ongoing presence of more aged characters like Ian Rankin's Rebus and Mark Billingham's Thorne, we see heroes well into middle age, who have aged with their authors. The introduction of Robert Galbraith's disabled character Cormoran Strike, Tony Forder's DI Bliss who suffers from Meniere's disease, and Alison Morgan's character in *Fat Chance* (2019) who has bipolar disorder, demonstrates that more disabled characters are appearing in CF. In terms of the LGBTQ+ communities, one of my own characters in *Last Request* (2019) is gay, and A. M. Peacock's main character is not only gay but also an older man, whilst Keri Beevis' main character in *The Darkness Beneath* (2017) is lesbian, and Patricia Dixon's character in *They Don't Know* (2018) is asexual. There's a host of capable female protagonists, from Angela Marson's Kim Stone to my own Alice Cooper, and many representing BAME main characters from my own DS Nikki Parekh, DC Sajid Malik and DI Gus McGuire, to Vicky Newham's Maya Rahman.

Having read all of these novels, I would consider the diverse characters to be well-researched and sensitively portrayed. I myself research carefully before portraying any character I have no lived experience of and, speaking to other writers, as well as the additional information gained through my author interviews, this appears to be the case for most authors. The point is that authors are used to researching in order to portray characters vastly different from themselves; for example, how many CF authors are serial killers or murderers? Authentic character development is an integral part of the craft that good authors have developed over time. Like all genres of fiction, CF is held up to scrutiny by its readership, literary critics, the publishing world and other authors. This makes authors accountable for their writing and it is their responsibility to ensure they have carried out the groundwork when they represent characters with different experiences to their own lived ones. The concept of accountability is further discussed by Chris Cleave: "readers are mostly ignored in this debate (appropriation), but the worldly and widely read reader has a hinterland, is quick to spot an agenda and is willing to call out fakes. Readers are more heterogeneous than writers will ever be and in their multiplicity a book finds its measure of truth" (2016).

It is not only about detailing and spotlighting issues faced by these groups, it is about empowering these groups by sometimes reflecting them as the heroes, the solvers, the ones who make a difference, the aspirational leaders that readers can look up to. Writing expansive narratives is something I actively pursue in my novels and by actively trying to avoid stereotypes and by considering the implications of my writing, by taking responsibility for my narratives and characterisation, I aim to be more representative of wider society. After all, I no more want to always write about a fifty some, working class, Scottish, white woman than the readership wants to read only one narrative and there is evidence to support this assertion.

Author, blogger, reviewer and reader, C. S. O'Kinneide said the following of my character DS Nikita Parekh: "We also need more characters of colour, or ethnicity or whatever you want to call not writing books about a whole bunch of white people of privilege. Nikki Parekh is neither white nor privileged. She's of dual heritage and lives on a housing estate where sleazy punks try to get her nephew to deal molly. Throughout the book she comes into contact with people of varying cultural backgrounds, sexual preference, and social standing. That makes for a rich human landscape in a novel. But here's the best part — there's not one cliché across that panorama. This is what makes this gritty noir particularly scenic, it's realist painting of a life mosaic that includes more than one view." (2019) In the same vein, actor, and narrator of the audiobook of *Last Request* (2019), Shaheen Khan tweeted, "It was my absolute pleasure to narrate #LastRequest. Fantastic to have had the opportunity to play a range of fabulous characters and wonderful to have a strong, complex Asian female lead at the heart of the thriller. Thank you Liz Mistry" (2019).

Kit De Waal states that, "As writers we have to be the other – without it we would have no literature, no great stories, no murder mysteries, no great romances, no historical novels, no science fiction, no fantasy – but when we become the other we need always to act with respect and recognise the value of what we discover, show by our attitudes and our acknowledgements that we aren't just appropriating but are seeking to understand." (2018). This is what expansive narratives can do, and if the CF genre does this then Nilsson's assertion that "Crime fiction [is treated] as a significant participant in the

international sphere of world literature,” because it “offers a particularly rich area of inquiry,” with “bestselling genre fiction fully illustrat[ing] what Marx and Engels enticingly describe as world literature’s “intercourse in every direction” (2017: 2) remains true, with CF evolving with changing culture and producing “intercourse” in the form of expansive narratives that extend beyond the readers’ experiences and represents wider society.

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Liz Mistry is in the final year of her PhD creative writing research at Leeds Trinity University. As a bestselling crime author based in Bradford, her work embraces diversity and inclusion through her use of expansive narratives. Liz has five published crime fiction novels and the first in a new series of novels, *Last Request*, will be published by Harper Collins HQ in October 2019. Her PhD novel *Unseen Evil* will also be published later in the year. Liz's practice-led research includes considering how current debate around cultural appropriation sits with the representation of marginalised groups in fiction and specifically considers the absence of the teen voice in adult crime fiction. Liz teaches Creative Writing and has presented her research at the National Association of Writers in Education annual conferences, the University of Central Lancashire, the international crime fiction conference: Captivating Criminality, and at UK literature festivals, including Bloody Scotland, Book Week Scotland, and Bradford, Huddersfield, Ilkley and Portsmouth Literature Festivals.