



## How did I get here?

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### Catherine Johnson: A glass half full

Catherine Johnson was born and brought up in North London in the 1960's. Her mother was Welsh and didn't speak English until she was 12, and her father was Jamaican. She attended a horrible girl's school and then St Martins' School of Art where she studied film. She has written eleven novels for young adults including *Stella*, *Landlocked* and *Face Value*. Her latest book, *A Nest of Vipers*, was published in April 2008. She also writes for radio, film, and TV and was co-writer on the hugely acclaimed award winning British film *Bullet Boy*, directed by Saul Dibb and starring Ashley Walters. Catherine has worked as a mentor for the British Council and Royal Literary Fund and was writer in residence in Holloway prison. She was Reader in Residence at the Royal Festival Hall's Imagine Children's Literature Festival and runs creative writing workshops in schools.

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#### A lot about luck

How did I get here? Well, I think I have to define 'here', and it really does depend how you look at it – some days my 'here' feels great, nine novels finished, eight published, one on the way, a feature film credit, last book listed in top ten teenage novels of 2005, being able to support myself and family without a part time job. Other days it doesn't look so good at all – eight novels, no prizes, no great sales, no big advances, no publicity, plaster in the hall coming off the walls, and to cap it all the woman in the shiny brand new bookshop around the corner refusing to stock my books....

It really is glass half full or half empty with me, but most of the time it's half full. I feel incredibly lucky just to have got to this point, and I think it is

a lot about luck. There are so many books, so many really good books, which just get ignored – *The Sterkarm Handshake* for example – that it is churlish to complain about mine.

I didn't think I'd ever write a book, not since I was about eight and trying to produce my own books (I never got further than half way) although one of my first ambitions was to be a poet. Poetry was a viable option in my house. My Dad knew more English poetry than any English man (he was Jamaican) and my cousin was and is a published poet (in Welsh): '*look there's your cousin winning the National Eisteddfod!*'

But I had a horrible secondary education where my teachers convinced me I was rubbish, and I happily showed them how rubbish I was. I went to art school to escape writing and had fun, and then did a course in film, which was even more fun, but it was the eighties and it was resolutely

anti narrative. I can remember watching whole films, which consisted of nothing but a leaf going in and out of focus.

So I worked for small film companies but my heart was never in it. I had babies relatively young – early twenties – and it was when I went back to work that I realised I didn't want to be out in the weather holding bits of booms or cameras. So I started working in the office (which was boring too) and I sent out some ideas for films. The first one I submitted got me my first ever writing job for Sgrin (the Welsh film organisation). It was a treatment for a film which never got made but that's another story. The second I sent to S4C (Welsh Channel Four) was an outline for a children's TV drama. It was six paragraphs, not a book at all, but they thought the idea would work much better as a book. They hooked me up with Pont, a new imprint of a Welsh publisher who were looking for writers.

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## Get yourself on a residential writing course

Pont were interested in my six paragraph story outline and they held my hand throughout the whole process, because of course I had no idea how to write a book. All those words! I realise now what an absolutely fantastic deal this was – no money but confidence boosting, and hand holding, and two free residential courses with the late great Jan Mark, Bernice Ruebens and the not late at all but still wonderful Catherine Fisher. They did me the world of good and I still look rather longingly at Arvon and Ty Newydd course brochures. If anyone has the time or the money – and remember they do give out bursaries – get yourself on one. I think a lot of writing is confidence and I gained space to think what I was doing was worthwhile. It's hard when you come out of full-time motherhood to imagine you can do anything.

I was (am) lucky living in London because there are so many groups for writers, but it took a long time to find one that was comfortable. I went to the City Lit first (I needed a daytime place with a

crèche) but the other writers were mostly writing wish fulfilment stuff about being marooned on islands with nymphs. Then, more successfully, I went on a Hackney Council-run local workshop (also with crèche) which was full of such interesting women and all levels of writers too. The classes were mostly simple exercises, on the spot stuff – playful and confidence building. There probably still are very few daytime classes so I know I was very lucky. A good group can be fantastic – it's so useful to see what other people are doing. I did find Centerprise eventually and went to one of their evening classes, a very useful advanced course which dealt with work in progress.

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## Read, write and learn from the experts

My first book was published when my youngest was two and I kept at it. I discovered new writers, Lesley Haworth, Susan Price, Melvin Burgess, Malorie Blackman, and I read and read and wrote and wrote. It got easier as the children grew. I had a part-time job in a local bookshop, which didn't earn me much but it meant I could read as much as I liked.

I am sure you are thinking, oh she must have a husband who is raking it in (a lot of children's writers do). Unfortunately mine was/is a drummer:

Q. What is the difference between a drummer and a deep pan pizza?

A. A deep pan pizza can feed a family of four.

I started a children's book week at my kids' primary school. This meant fundraising, but it also meant I could see how the experts did their thing in front of an audience.

Writing for young people – which of course is not serious writing like the stuff people do for adults – is paid much, much less than other markets. J K Rowling and Jacqueline Wilson are blips. We have to work like mad to survive, and that means appearing in schools, flogging books and doing

whatever necessary. I was lucky enough to book some wonderful writers for our local Hackney Primary. We had Anthony Horowitz, Jill Murphy, Malorie Blackman and Jacqueline Wilson amongst others. It was a great learning tool for me.

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## Making a living

I work mostly in secondary schools and the audiences I am working with will stop listening after ten minutes, so I tend not to read but to do writing workshops which makes them producers rather than consumers and shows them that writing doesn't have to be essays. Everyone is different and it is important to find a way of working that suits you. Try things out for free with your children's (or friends' children's) schools.

I didn't have any help getting schools work until a few years ago. I relied on local literature development organisations and Pont helped with work in Wales. They are very proactive about getting their authors out and about. OUP are getting better and better at it and I usually get several bookings a year that come through my publisher. I have done mail-outs in the past but you get very few bookings that way – well I do. Now I am with a London schools bookseller who puts me into libraries and schools in the southeast which is very useful. I used to do the odd event for them, recommended by other authors when they couldn't do it, and have 'moved up' gradually.

I have had plenty of part-time jobs, with Centerprise, a literature development project in Hackney, at Booktrust, and residencies in schools and in Holloway Prison. I have been a Royal Literary Fund Fellow – a great scheme for published writers – and mentored writers all over Africa via email for the British Council (Crossing Borders). I have worked with young writers in London and with the Welsh Writing Squads. I have been to Malawi to work with adult writers and to Albania to help promote teenage reading.

I would love to do more for the British Council, but I got the Albanian job when the author they had booked couldn't do it and recommended me. I think most of these jobs come up through being in the right place at the right time. I would love to do more overseas now my children have grown up but of course now I want the work there's nothing on the horizon.

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## Only network

I cannot stress that networking with other children's authors has been a major way of getting work and opportunities. If I am asked to do something and can't, I will recommend a friend and vice versa. Make friends with writers who work in the same market as you. I think writers for adults tend to be a lot more precious than children's writers. We will swap notes, bitch about publishers, and pass on jobs. It is fab.

I have worked in Tates Britain and Modern with a project called Young Cultural Creators. I also had the very wonderful opportunity to work at the Royal Festival Hall with the Imagine Children's Literature Festival and to interview David Almond and Michael Morpurgo – I said I was lucky.

A lot of the work I have had has been because of contacts, and writing is a very solitary job, but because of Centerprise I have worked with literature organisations all across the capital. Even though it was only for two years and five years ago. I was offered the *Bullet Boy* feature film job because Centerprise recommended me. Someone from the film company called them up because they needed a writer who knew Hackney and could write families. I went to the initial meeting in West London – all film companies are in West London – and the director was my next-door neighbour (but one). I know I am lucky.

The other job that has been very useful was working for Booktrust part-time. It was only a year's contract but through that I met so many

people in children's literature. It meant I had the opportunity to talk to people I would never meet working away at home. I think it is hard to market yourself, I have always found it easy to get young people to write but feel very shabby asking them to buy my books – especially when you're working in inner city schools where you know there is very little money. I have got a bit harder over the years but when you know how many really good children's writers there are, it seems very churlish. I think it is important to get yourself out and about, meet and talk to other writers. We all have the same problems and there is nothing like having a moan with people who understand.

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## You have to keep hoping

In 1996 I was awarded an Arts Council Writer's bursary in the first year they opened them to children's writers. I was thrilled, I had never earned that amount from a book. I went to Rome for the weekend and had new sash windows in the front room. I thought the unpublished work that won the award must be of value and tried to get an agent with it and I was approached at the award ceremony by one of the top children's agents. Unfortunately I was drunk, and probably a bit rude, and even the grovelling letter I wrote afterwards didn't put things right.

That book did eventually get me an agent and it's thanks to her I was introduced to OUP. But I had written three books for Pont and one for the Women's Press by this point.

It wasn't the sort of deal you read about in the papers and I am still very definitely low down the mid list but OUP have at least been nice, and they've published five of my novels.

Since *Bullet Boy* I have written a TV drama – as yet unshot – and additional dialogue for a Working Title feature film and have a couple of irons in the fire. I am also very close to finishing another novel. But my daughter is due to start university in September and I have been offered a post teaching creative writing to art students at

the London University where I did my RLF fellowship and I am flirting seriously with the idea of a regular income.

I have been lucky so far. I am happy to live in what my daughter calls a hovel in Hackney, drive a car that just about goes, but have a job I love. You also have to keep hoping that the next book will make it onto a 3 for 2 table, onto an awards list, into enough people's consciousnesses.

One of the last school visits I did was to a girls' school in South London. It was for World Book Day and the following Friday the whole school were dressing up as characters from books. One of the girls spoke to me at lunchtime when I was sitting in the library signing books. She was coming as a character from my latest book. I didn't stop smiling for a week.

April 2006

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## Useful links

Catherine Johnson  
[www.catherinejohnson.co.uk](http://www.catherinejohnson.co.uk)

Academi  
The Welsh National Literature Promotion Agency and Society for Authors with responsibility for a range of writer services. Offers funding to local authorities to set up Young Writing Squads.  
[www.academi.org](http://www.academi.org)

Arts Council England  
The national development agency for the arts in England. Funding for writers and literature professionals is available through the Grants for the arts programme.  
[www.artscouncil.org.uk](http://www.artscouncil.org.uk)

Arvon Foundation  
Offers a year-round programme of residential creative writing courses for all levels at its writing houses in Devon, Inverness-shire, Shropshire and West Yorkshire.  
[www.arvonfoundation.org](http://www.arvonfoundation.org)

#### Booktrust

Encourages people of all ages and cultures to discover and enjoy reading.

[www.booktrust.org.uk](http://www.booktrust.org.uk)

#### BBC writersroom

The BBC's online resource for writing for TV, radio and film featuring writers' guidelines, script archive, advice from writers and other industry experts and free script formatting software.

[www.bbc.co.uk/writersroom](http://www.bbc.co.uk/writersroom)

#### British Council

Connects people with learning opportunities and creative ideas from the UK to build lasting relationships around the world.

[www.britishcouncil.org](http://www.britishcouncil.org)

#### Centerprise

Literature development agency supporting writers at all levels in North and North East London through courses, information and advice, and networking opportunities.

[www.centerpriseliterature.com](http://www.centerpriseliterature.com)

#### City Lit

London's largest adult education college offering an extensive range of creative writing classes for all levels.

[www.citylit.ac.uk](http://www.citylit.ac.uk)

#### Creative Partnerships

The government's flagship creative learning programme, supporting innovative long-term partnerships between schools and creative professionals.

[www.creative-partnerships.com](http://www.creative-partnerships.com)

#### Crossing Borders

Creative writing development programme developed by the British Council, Lancaster University and a range of partners in Africa, providing cross-cultural distance-learning for young African writers.

<http://www.britishcouncil.org/uganda-arts-and-culture-2-crossing-borders.htm>

#### Floodlight

The official online/print guide to adult education courses in London.

[www.floodlight.co.uk](http://www.floodlight.co.uk)

#### NALD (The National Association for Literature Development)

The only national body for all those involved in developing writers, readers and literature audiences.

[www.nald.org](http://www.nald.org)

#### NAWE (The National Association of Writers in Education)

The one organisation supporting the development of creative writing of all genres and in all educational and community settings throughout the UK. Maintains artscape ([www.artscape.org.uk](http://www.artscape.org.uk)), an online national directory for arts in education.

[www.nawe.co.uk](http://www.nawe.co.uk)

#### Oxford University Press (OUP)

Publishes wide range of children books (fiction, non-fiction, picture books, poetry etc)

<http://www.oup.com/oxed/children/>

#### Pont

Imprint of English books for young people published by Gomer Press, the largest independent publishing house in Wales.

[www.pontbooks.co.uk](http://www.pontbooks.co.uk)

#### Royal Literary Fund Fellowship Scheme

Places professional writers in universities to offer writing support to all students.

[www.rlf.org.uk/fellowshipscheme/](http://www.rlf.org.uk/fellowshipscheme/)

#### S4C

Predominantly Welsh-language broadcasting across a range of platforms, including television and broadband.

[www.s4c.co.uk](http://www.s4c.co.uk)

#### The Society of Children's Book Writers & Illustrators

The largest children's writing organisation in the world with active branches in the UK.

[www.britishscbwi.org](http://www.britishscbwi.org)

The Children's Writers and Illustrators Group  
A specialist group within The Society of Authors  
which represents the interests of professional  
writers, writing in all areas of the profession.  
[www.societyofauthors.org](http://www.societyofauthors.org)

The Writer's Guild  
The trade union for professional writers in TV,  
film, theatre, radio, books and new media.  
[www.writersguild.org.uk](http://www.writersguild.org.uk)

Ty Newydd  
The National Writers' Centre for Wales, offering  
residential writing courses in English and Wales  
to people of all ages and at all levels of  
experiences.  
[www.tynewydd.org](http://www.tynewydd.org)

writernet  
Provides dramatic writers with the tools they  
need to build better careers.  
[www.writernet.org.uk](http://www.writernet.org.uk)