

Press release: for release Monday 12 October

## An iron angel with its feet on the ground: new works seek to tell the story of the contemporary North East

From surfing and shopping through politics, community and identity, an ambitious new series turns a spotlight on the contemporary North East to uncover the stories that are rarely told outside the region.

**New Narratives for the North East** is a series of 20 podcasts, essays and creative writing commissioned by New Writing North with the North East Cultural Partnership supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund and the North East Local Enterprise Partnership.

The original works are now published on the Durham Book Festival website as part of the digital festival which runs until 18 October. Durham Book Festival is a Durham County Council festival produced by New Writing North with funding from Durham University and Arts Council England and support from BBC Newcastle.

There, writers including David Almond, Carmen Marcus and Alex Niven take on some of the major concerns of the region, getting under its skin to find what makes the North East people tick, and giving voice to those who feature all-too-infrequently in the mainstream media.

New Narratives for the North East was launched following major political events for the region, including the Brexit vote and the 2019 General Election. The commissions were made during a global pandemic in which the North East has been amongst the worst hit in Britain. Yet, the pieces capture not just this startling moment in time, but something deeper and more lasting about the contemporary North East.

The series offers a kaleidoscopic view of the region, zooming into focus on real lives and unique places. Lisette Auton considers the 25% of people in the North East who are disabled and wonders why they are not taking up space in the region's culture. Mim Skinner introduces the reader to the regulars in her Chester le Street community café, reeling from the shock of lockdown but finding support amongst one another.

As Andrew Hankinson looks at the Metrocentre, once a shining emblem for the region's transition from heavy industry to services, so Alex Niven surveys the North East as birthplace of the railways, whose progress has since been derailed. Richard Benson examines the very identity of the region – innovative, practical, problem-solving, but perhaps a little modest – exemplified by its globally-important but little-discussed offshore renewable energy industry. 'What other region could be represented by an iron angel with its feet on the ground?' he asks. Richard T Kelly wonders if we have unheralded allies at the heart of government.

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Elsewhere, industry gives way to vast expanses of wilderness. What if we built a new country in this wilderness – considers JA Mensah, in a work of fiction – what would its founding principles be? The sea, and the region’s connection to it, runs through narratives of surfing and fishing. Writers consider both the perils and the freedom of living on the edge of things, as well as the possibilities afforded by looking outwards to the sea, to Europe, and beyond.

"They tell us that we live on a tiny crowded island. They try to tell us that we are tiny within ourselves. Tell them to come up here with the skylark, to forget what they think they know, and to look down upon the vastness of the North," writes David Almond in his lyrical essay, Sing the North.

In every piece, place plays a starring role.

**Claire Malcolm, Chief Executive of New Writing North, said:** “For too many years, an unwavering story has been told about our region, that perhaps has not served us very well and perhaps doesn’t reflect the opportunities that the future holds. To bring some new voices and some new ideas into the conversation we asked some of our region’s leading literary voices to reflect on the idea of new narratives for the region. They have done this wonderfully - drawing on our histories and legacies but challenging our perceptions and digging into what the people of the North East are really about and through that, considering what direction our shared future might take. The work is provocative, unexpected and provides much food for thought as well as celebration.”

**Matthew Jarratt, Partnership Manager at North East Culture Partnership, who supported the project said:** “We know the North East is a distinctive, vibrant and innovative region, and now, in New Narratives for the North East we see that come through in spades.

Place, politics, community and identity are all used by these writers to tell stories of our rich cultural heritage as well as our hopes for the future, our radicalism and our sense of humour. We’re delighted to have supported this project and equally delighted to see it come to fruition.”

**Alan Welby, Innovation Director at the North East LEP, said:** “New Narratives for the North East has been a thought-provoking project and one which was great to be involved in. We all know our history but looking at that history through fresh eyes and with a nod to how we forge a new future with a new narrative for our region has been particularly rewarding and insightful.”

**Cllr Joy Allen, Durham County Council’s Cabinet member for transformation, culture and tourism, said:** “We’re really pleased to be able to bring these outstanding works to people through Durham Book Festival.

“These are difficult times for everyone but things like reading and podcasts provide a great form of escapism and we would encourage people to log onto the festival website and enjoy these fascinating pieces.”

The essays, podcasts and creative writing pieces are available for free as part of New Narratives for the North East at the Durham Book Festival website <https://durhambookfestival.com/programme/new-narratives-for-the-north-east/>

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## Notes to Editor

**For all media enquiries including interviews and images contact Laura Fraine, Senior Marketing and Communications Manager at New Writing North 07411164837 or [laurafraine@newwritingnorth.com](mailto:laurafraine@newwritingnorth.com)**

The podcast episodes are made by Sonderbug Productions with music specially composed and recorded in Newcastle by Jayne Dent.

## Commissioned writers and their work

### David Almond (@davidjalmond)

David is the author of *Skellig*, *The Dam*, *Joe Quinn's Poltergeist* and many other novels, stories, picture books, songs, opera librettos, radio programmes and plays. His work, all set in the North East, is translated into over 40 languages. His major awards include The Carnegie Medal and the Hans Christian Andersen Award.

*“The North is a wild place. For centuries it lay at the furthest edge of civilisation. Now, all of us need to be rewilded if our damaged earth is to survive. My piece, poetic and experimental, written in northern rhythms, will try to conjure and to share the distinctive nature of the North, its beauty and ugliness, to embody its place in the wider culture and history of the world, to show that the North is very ancient and is forever new”.*

## Lisette Auton (@lisette\_auton)

Lisette is a disabled writer, activist, poet, spoken-word artist, actor, theatre-maker and creative practitioner. She's an award-winning published poet, a Penguin Random House *WriteNow*, mentee, the recipient of an Early Careers Residency for Literature at Cove Park and is on the TSS Publishing list of Best British & Irish Flash Fiction. All her work seeks to make the invisible visible.

*Using reportage, poetry, verbatim speech and found poetry Auton has created a work exploring a new narrative for disabled culture in the North East. "I want to talk about the missing... 25% of people in the North East classify as disabled. We do not take up 25% of the cultural space. Where are the missing? How do we say: 'you are welcomed and important?'"*

## Lyndsey Ayre (@lyndsey\_ayre)

Lyndsey won New Writing North's inaugural Sid Chaplin Award for working-class writers in 2019. She was an Emerging Critic for the *Scottish Review of Books* in 2018 and was shortlisted for the Observer/Burgess award in 2017. She's interested in challenging perceptions of working-class identity and in writing about the urban experience.

*Ayre has been exploring the city of Newcastle upon Tyne since she was thirteen. In this new essay she walks the city to explore the changing profile and experience of the city and investigates how the city has changed and is changing and how this shifting landscape impacts on those that live here.*

## Richard Benson (@\_RichardBenson)

Richard edited *The Face* from 1995-2000 and writes for newspapers and magazines. His memoir *The Farm: The Story of One Family and the English Countryside* was shortlisted for the Guardian's First Book Award and was chosen for Richard & Judy's Book Club. His second, *The Valley: 100 Years in the Life of a Family*, won the James Tait Black Prize for Biography, and the Portico Prize, and was shortlisted for the Gordon Burn Prize. His new memoir, *The Meadow*, will be published in 2021.

*Benson has written a narrative non-fiction documenting the relationships between work, innovation and self-image in today's North East. Based on the renewable energy sector and the people who work in it, it will consider contemporary identity, social relationships, and attitudes to work, and ask what they might mean for the future of the region.*

### **Bethan Curley** (@bethancurley)

Bethan is a Year 10 student currently studying at Excelsior Academy, Newcastle upon Tyne. From a young age she has had a passion for making positive change in the world as well as raising awareness of global issues such as climate change. Earlier this year, Bethan featured in the Young Writers' City project, *Stitched: a Hip-Hopera*, and has showcased her writing at the Inside/Outside event held at the Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art.

*The North East is a place of discovery where each day you find out something new, and Benwell in the West End of Newcastle is no different. The community spirit, how people know each other and have grown up together, forms the basis of this piece, which aims to reduce the bad publicity, and to tell the true story of the people who walk those streets.*

### **Lauren Davies** (@LittleTurtleSOS)

The first of Davies' five novels, *Serve Cool*, was a Times Top 10 debut. She wrote the feature documentary, *Waveriders*, winning the Dublin International Film Festival, and created the story for a BAFTA-nominated innovative game. Lauren's environmental children's book *Little Turtle Turns the Tide*, launched in 2020.

*"If God had intended Geordies to surf, some would say, he wouldn't have invented football". In a creative non-fiction piece Davies explores the little-known surf culture of the Eastcoast, spanning Tynemouth's Longsands to Seaton Sluice and Blyth. She tells the story of the characters that made it, and give us a surfer's perspective of the coastline, viewing from the sea, the region's industry, history and natural world*

### **Andrew Hankinson** (@AndrewHankinson)

Andrew is a freelance journalist whose work has appeared in the *The Guardian*, *Wired*, and the *New Yorker*. He wrote the award-winning

book, *You Could Do Something Amazing With Your Life [You Are Raoul Moat]*. He is currently undertaking a PhD in Creative Writing at Northumbria University.

*A creative non-fiction piece about the North East's enthusiasm for shopping and how the Metrocentre filled the transitional period for the region when heavy industry had gone, and the region was looking to new service and retail economies. The Metrocentre was the first UK shopping centre of its kind and heralded the start of new era which itself now appears to be coming to an end.*

## India Hunter

Growing up in a post-industrial town with a father in the steel industry has given India Hunter, a young writer from Teesside, a unique experience of the issues facing the NorthEast today. She is particularly interested in the way that recent political events have shaped the mindsets of those living in areas that would be considered more 'economically deprived' and her writing aims to eradicate the negative stereotypes. India is a member of the Tees Women Poets.

*India works weekends in a Chinese takeaway in Teesside and she will write a poem about a typical night at work and the people she meets there. The piece attempts to address the lazy stereotype of working-class people. "We are not lazy, we are not charity cases, we are the same as everyone else, we just have to fight a bit harder to get where we want to be."*

## Richard T Kelly (@RichTKelly)

Richard is the author of the novels *Crusaders*, *The Possessions of Doctor Forrest* and *TheKnives*. His fourth novel, *The Black Eden*, is forthcoming from Faber and Faber. His other publications include various non-fiction books and biographies, including *Alan Clarke*, *Sean Penn: His Life and Times* and *Keegan and Dalglish*. He has written for *Prospect* and the *NewStatesman* among others and is a contributing editor to *Esquire* and *Critical Quarterly*.

*In, A Wicked Issue – The case of Dominic Cummings, and who speaks for the North-East? Kelly investigates how the Durham born Cummings shaped his unique philosophy and whether he is more on the side of the North East than we might think? More broadly the piece will explore where the 'Geordie voice' features in our national politics.*

## Carmen Marcus (@Kalamene)

Carmen's debut novel *How Saints Die* is a semi-autobiographical account of her life as a fisherman's daughter. Her poetry has been commissioned by national festivals and BBC radio. She designed The Writer's Plan in 2019 to support working-class writers entering the industry. Marcus is currently working on her second novel, *The Bait Boy*.

*In a collection of micro-fictions, Finfolk, Marcus tells mythic stories about the North, it's people and their relationship with the sea. The sea offers a powerful new narrative to explore as it occupies absences, roars over silences and remembers what was lost.*

### **J. A. Mensah**

Juliana has written for theatre with a focus on human rights narratives and the testimonies of survivors. Her first novel won the inaugural NorthBound Book Award at the Northern Writers' Awards and will be published by Saraband. She lives in Newcastle upon Tyne.

*On 31<sup>st</sup> January 2020, in a world similar to our own, the UK leaves the EU and Scotland leaves the UK. On this day, a forgotten area of land between England and Scotland, which was once fiercely contested, suddenly belongs to no one. Four disillusioned friends move to the area and decide to create their own country: a small and inclusive nation of diverse millennials. But how do you create a country? What traditions from their cultures should they incorporate? How do you write a constitution or establish a government? Should they practice democracy? Should they let old people in? How will they gain international recognition? And what if the neighbours hate them?*

### **Alex Niven (@Alex\_Niven)**

Alex's writing has appeared in *The Guardian*, *New York Times*, *New Statesman*, *TheIndependent*, *VICE* and *Pitchfork*. His previous books include *Folk Opposition* (2011), *Definitely Maybe 33 1/3* (2014) and *New Model Island* (2019). He is currently Lecturer in English Literature at Newcastle University.

*A creative non-fiction work that will examine the political and human aspects of travel and movement in the North East. The piece will examine the illustrious history of transport in our region from Stephenson's Rocket and T Dan Smith's metro and combine it with a contemporary political analysis and the writer's personal reflections of travelling in, around, away from and back to the North East over the last 35 years.*

## **Bronwen Riley** (@BronwenRiley)

Bronwen is a writer with a special interest in the Classical world and Romania. Her books include *Journey to Britannia* and *Transylvania*. Committed to the promotion of culture and research in and of the North, she is a trustee of the Lakeland Arts Trust and the Cumberland and Westmorland Antiquarian and Archaeological Society.

*Telling the love story of Barates and Regina in a work of creative non-fiction written in the continuous present, Riley will explore this disturbing love story between a Syrian and a slave from Southern Britain living on Hadrian's Wall in the classical era. A story about how the fate of the North East became so bound up with that of Caledonia and how our regional story is built on a long history of people of different races, religions and backgrounds.*

## **Mim Skinner** (@MimSkinner)

Mim is a writer and social entrepreneur and the founder of REfUSE, an award-winning social enterprise in Chester le Street which collects and redistributes food that would otherwise go to waste. Her book *Jailbirds*, about working in a women's prison, was published in 2019. It was serialised in *The Guardian* and has been optioned by BBC Studios. She has written for *The Sunday Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Huffington Post* and *Elle Magazine*. She featured on the 2019 Elle List of '50 Game Changers' for her campaigning work and writing.

*Taking as her starting point the stories of the community of the REfUSE café in Chester le Street, Skinner will look to tell a story of how North East communities come together in response to challenges and express unity in the face of adversity. Can such alternative non cash-reliant models which accept multiple forms of payment and that recognise value in a tangible way be part of our future narrative? Can kindness?*

## **Melissa Tutesigensi**

Melissa is a journalist, writing and broadcasting across multiple platforms. Her love for storytelling grew during her time at Durham University where she studied Philosophy and Theology. She believes in the nuance of British identity to celebrate narratives that strengthen our cultural memory.

*In, A Tale of Two Cities, Tutesigensi charts her time in Durham as a student and explores the dualistic experience of the city and the multi-layered textures of identify that exist there. The city is both a bastion of the elite and a working-class cultural touchstone. It is also a place where people of colour, the migrant population and resident artists testify to a narrative beyond this.*