

# OUR WORDS

Our Books Now's Literary Magazine

~ Issue 2 ~



# HELLO FROM THE EDITOR

We launch the second issue of Our Words at the beginning of Pride month, when we can also celebrate some positive news – the introduction of Instagram pronouns and the world's first nonbinary mayor in Wales, to mention a couple. We're seeing progress in LGBTQ+ rights, both globally and in the UK, but there's still so much essential change ahead.

In this issue, we focus on some of the significant challenges faced by the LGBTQ+ community, including how schools should do more to protect non-binary and queer students; the fetishisation of bi women; the necessity to recognise the experiences of queer Black women and People of Colour for full queer liberation; and the lack of representation in mainstream media.

Changes like these are vital to make a more inclusive, safer and stronger society, where anyone is free to explore their identity and gender – and to love who they choose without obstacles.

*Marianne Voyle*  
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## trigger warnings

This issue covers some sensitive topics and may be triggering for some readers. Each article will be marked with a specific TW and we advise readers to seek support if needed.



# STOP WHITEWASHING LGBTQ+ HISTORY

Queer-identifying Black people and People of Colour have always been at the forefront of queer resistance. Their stories can't be forgotten

Historically, 'queer' was used as a derogatory term against the LGBTQ+ community. The term was reclaimed by American LGBTQ+ groups as a badge of pride and empowerment, particularly during the AIDS epidemic that disproportionately affected the LGBTQ+ community. Although for some people, 'queer' still triggers past traumatic experiences of discrimination, the term is now widely accepted, encompassing gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and non-binary identities.

Assigning a stringent definition to 'queer' negates its core principle of challenging hegemonic identity stereotypes, even within its own community. It can't be rigidly categorised, and its meaning differs between queer-identifying people. According to Hugh Ryan, queerness has always referred to marginalised sexual and gender identities. If marginalisation is at the core of queerness, as Ryan suggests, then the experience of being queer is further complicated for Black people and People of Colour (POC).

TW homophobia, racism

Written by HANI THAPA

Illustration by CARO WINDMULLER

The illustrator was inspired by Alia Romagnoli's work when creating this illustration. Original source: [@a8lia](#)

White supremacy oppresses queer Black people and POC, erasing their historical struggle and pioneering role in advancing LGBTQ+ rights. White gay men dominate popular media representation of the queer community. For example, the 2015 film *Stonewall* recounts the American uprising that unfolded after the police raided the Stonewall Inn through the lens of a white, gay man. It dismisses the prominent role of queer Black activists such as Marsha P. Johnson, depicting white queer-identifying people as the sole pioneers of gay liberation. (1)

Racism is rife within the British queer community. In 2018, it was reported that 51% of Black, Asian, and minority ethnic people have experienced discrimination in their local LGBTQ+ community due to their ethnicity. The lack of inclusivity in these spaces has led to events such as the UK Black Pride (UKBP), bringing LGBTQ+ people together of African, Asian, Middle Eastern, Latin American, and Caribbean heritage. >>

>> Historically, South Asian queer-identifying people have been excluded from Western LGBTQ+ spaces. In *We Have Always Been Here: A Queer Muslim Memoir*, Samra Habib grapples with the lack of diverse queer spaces in Toronto, Canada. British queer people of South Asian heritage similarly struggled for representation in the 80s and 90s. This is because gay bars were predominantly white, and Bhangra parties, fusing upbeat dance music from Punjab, India, with Western beats, were primarily heterosexual. Consequently, South Asian queer-identifying people created their own spaces and gathered in each other's homes to socialise.

These house parties were intimate and personal, forming a close community of people who recognised they needed one another, especially as they were left out of the mainstream culture. In her memoir, Habib refers to these 'chosen families' as 'a cornerstone of queer culture'(2), especially for those rejected by their biological families. The familiarity of knowing other regular partygoers meant that house parties were safe spaces, allowing the South Asian attendees to be themselves in an authentic way to both their culture and sexuality.

Unlike queer-identifying British South Asians, Habib didn't find her chosen family in house parties or gay bars. Instead, Habib sought her community at the queer Unity Mosque, where she was finally among people who were visibly like her and had similar experiences. Habib describes being queer as 'who you are, whether that means rejecting traditional gender roles or embracing non-normative identities and politics.'(3) Like being queer, practising Islam is a fundamental part of who Habib is, and both of these aspects of her identity intersect inextricably.

Although queerness is non-conforming, normative ideas of sexuality, race, gender, and religion affect a person's experience of being queer. For example, Habib feels oppressed by her parents' expectations of what a practising Muslim woman should look like: solemn and dutifully married to a man. That image holds no space for being queer, so her sexuality becomes invisible. On the other hand, there are little to no queer brown-skinned Muslim women in the queer spaces she frequents; therefore, Habib feels alienated due to her religion and race. However, at the queer mosque, Habib doesn't have to choose between these facets of her identity, and she marvels at the joy of being her true self: 'I was glad to be in the company of people who didn't ask me to change who I was in order to share space with them.'(4)

For queer-identifying British South Asians, liberation from heteronormative and white supremacist ideology came from organisations such as Club Kali and Shakti. They were the first South Asian queer spaces in the UK, pioneered by DJ Ritu, Shivananda Khan, and Poulomi Desai in the late 80s. The opening of Shakti not only recognised that there was a queer community within the South Asian diaspora but also offered them a support system and refuge from racism and discrimination. >>

## book information

**Title** We Have Always Been Here:  
A Queer Muslim Memoir

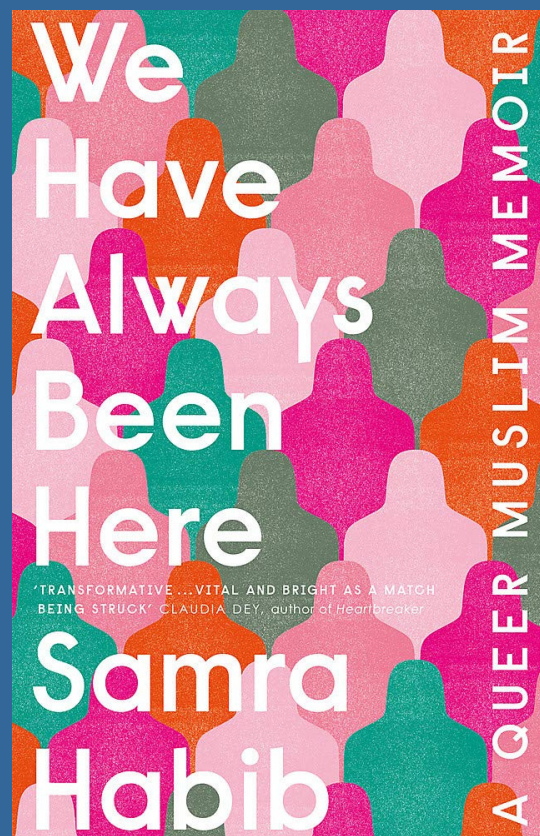
**Author** Samra Habib

**Year** 2019

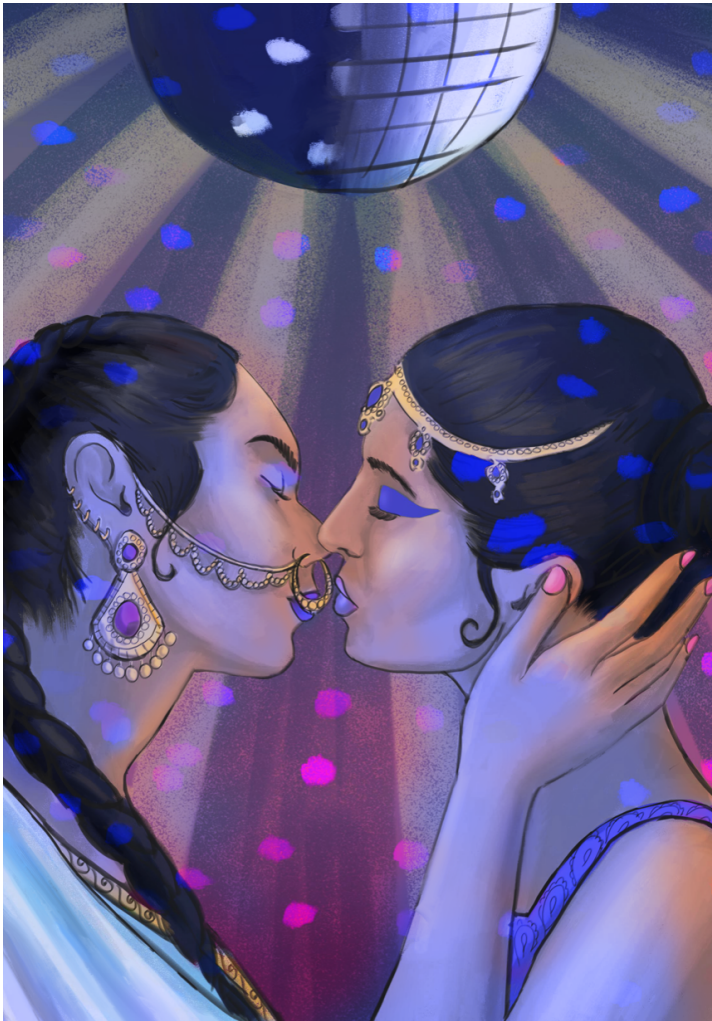
**Publisher** Viking

**Language** English

**Genre** Autobiography







## meet our writer

Hani Thapa is an aspiring writer based in Surrey, UK. She studied English Literature at university and has recently started a blog to grow her writing experience.

>> Club Kali quickly became a haven for South Asian queer culture, where people could gather without being ridiculed for wearing saris and salwar kameez, or listening to their favourite Bollywood songs and speaking in their native languages. On the podcast *Queer Recollections*, DJ Ritu fondly remembers how people felt like they were among family in Club Kali, whether they were South Asian or otherwise. This community's hospitality is one of the reasons why Club Kali remains popular today.

Club Kali was revolutionary for the South Asian queer community because they could simultaneously celebrate their vibrant culture, religion, and sexuality. Club Kali was symbolic in demonstrating that there isn't a definitive way of being queer, British, or South Asian. It was a place where culture, race, sexuality, and gender identity intersected but also one without borders, where people weren't limited by rigid ideas of culture, race, sexuality, and gender identity. Much like Habib, all of these intersections affected how the South Asian queer community was treated or rather discriminated against by society. So to have access to these spaces, where they didn't have to compromise who they were, was revolutionary.

Despite being excluded from their national community, historically, queer-identifying POC have created their own inclusive spaces in the form of clubs, house parties, and places of worship. However, LGBTQ+ history is often viewed through a white lens, and particularly the South Asian experience is excluded from popular discourse. For example, recent articles published by *Vice* and *Dazed* that explore queer British history fail to mention the South Asian queer spaces and figures that helped redefine queerness in the UK.

As Habib remarks, 'representation is a critical way for people to recognise that their experiences – even if invisible in the mainstream – are valid.'<sup>(5)</sup> The discourse of queer history must be diversified to destigmatise the suffering of queer-identifying Black people and POC and dismantle the white supremacist and heteronormative structures of power that oppress them.

Not only is diverse representation life-affirming, as Habib suggests, but it's also life-changing because championing diverse stories can challenge the hierarchy of gender, race, and sexuality by empowering those who are marginalised by it. Our reflections of LGBTQ+ history must be inclusive and intersectional, remembering the legacy of resistance pioneered by queer-identifying Black people and POC as part of queer history, not separate from it. ●

(1) C. Winter Han, 'The Deliberate Racism Making #Gaymediasowhite', *Contexts*, 16.4 (2017), p.70.

(2) S.Habib, *We Have Always Been Here: A Queer Muslim Memoir* (London, 2019), p.127.

(3) *Ibid.*, p.124.

(4) *Ibid.*, p.134.

(5) *Ibid.*, p.139.

# LOVE IS LOVE

Poem by ANSHUDHA GARIMELLA  
Illustrations by SOPHIE HINLEY

Love is in the air, if you truly care  
about love,  
Love is everywhere like the sky  
In flags and signs  
Crafted by people who swear allegiance to the cause  
To chase happiness at any price  
Why shouldn't they take pride  
In their lives?

Love isn't a blessing bestowed upon a lucky few  
Love isn't a privilege  
Love is a right  
And love is right  
Love is fluid, love is straight, love is gay, love is boundless

And to those stuck in the prison of their minds  
Always seeing things in black and white  
The same way every time  
I have one question for you

Why do you get to decide the shape love wants to take?

Why is it your decision to make?  
What gives you the right to design a life that isn't yours to live?  
Nobody should have such prerogative to change their minds, to  
burn their decor, to stop their hearts from loving

Why does society get to pluck the heartstrings of the hearts just  
longing to love?  
Just beating for each other  
Just bleeding to be loved?

When the close-minded have nothing left to say  
They'll call upon a higher force as an ally  
Calling love, a sin.  
But if God exists how could the Lord have any disdain for love  
How could the divine goddesses revel in the pain of those who  
are being denied their love?  
And the Goddess of Love lives in all of us

Love is divine  
Love is water, as you see the water flow as you see it electrify  
you can see the current ignite a light  
Love is worth the fight  
Love is water that takes many shapes and many forms  
None of them are wrong  
An infinite unstoppable moving force  
How can anyone even try to slow it down?

Love is an ocean that vibrates with the current and energy  
of a million crashing waves  
Love is an entity with the power to change the world

But, so is hate  
And I know the haters want to be loved too  
It's not the concept of love that upsets them but the evolving  
definition  
They can't seem to swim along with the changing course  
They love the definition that history has set  
A definition crystallised by time and defined by rules  
Cemented like a monument of truth  
Defined by a million words except for the one that matters - L O V E





Above all else, I'm in love with the idea of love  
And how I wish that old ideals and jaded hurtful words would fly away like birds  
One could say that this isn't my fight  
But every soul longing to love and longing for love is a friend of mine

Love is an infinite wave that is strong but calmer than hate  
So often the sound of love is quiet like a  
soft whisper  
That you can't hear over the screams of hate  
But you can always feel love

The colours of the P R I D E are vibrant and bright  
Love isn't going down without a fight  
As their flags sway in the air, they hold the hope  
that a new world is over the horizon  
We can no longer sing the same refrain  
Love washes over the past like rain and then the sunshine breaks its golden particles  
Forming a rainbow in the sky  
A new wave is on the rise  
Love is love

The colours of the rainbow will shine and fade away the past  
Old ideals cannot last  
And the haters cannot be changed they're too far gone  
Cowering behind their livestreams and their streams of consciousness  
Sharing their philosophies that only benefit them  
But they cannot stop the change  
They cannot stop love from cascading down from the universe  
To shape a new future  
Because love is a force that will change the course

Love can be hard to find  
As we are often blind  
To the beauty within us and each other  
But love isn't designed

To be this way or that way  
Love is divine  
Love is love  
Whoever you love, whoever you hold  
Whoever loves you  
We are all entitled to the same love  
To the same right to design our own lives  
We all want the same light.



# OUR SCHOOLS ARE NOT A REFUGE

TW suicide, mental health, oppression

Written by PHOEBE CAREY  
Illustration by JENNIFER MCDONALD

## Schools are still failing to support LGBTQ+ students – our writer explores how and why this is an issue today

In Sally Nuamah's book, *How Girls Achieve*, the author argues that schools should be a place of refuge, which is 'the state of being safe or sheltered from pursuit, danger or difficulty'.<sup>[1]</sup> Every day, I work with vulnerable children that see their school as an escape, a safe space and their freedom. In the most extreme circumstances, their challenging and deprived home lives mean their school is the only space where they are respected, listened to and cared for.

Many of us know the feeling of longing for the summer holidays, but for some, it fills them with dread. As Nuamah explains, no one can choose their own realities, but the circumstances they are given will undoubtedly affect their chances in life. For children of low socio-economic background, ethnic minority, female, disabled and LGBTQ+, their life trajectory will most likely be disadvantaged.

No institution stands a better chance of improving these self and social journeys than schools, according to Nuamah. Whilst families can provide children with the skills for primary socialisation, schools play a vital role in secondary socialisation. When we talk about socialisation, this refers to how we learn to become members of the society we live in. School education helps children to develop their behaviours, understand social norms, and form their own values and social skills in preparation for their roles within mainstream society.

However, discriminatory attitudes and the oppression of minority groups within schools indicate a failure in their ability to act as adequate socialisation agents. They not only perpetuate the inequalities faced by children of minority groups but also neglect their potential to teach and foster inclusivity and diversity for all children. Indeed, schools are a microcosm of the real world and they reflect the current climate. If our schools become a place of equality, this will transform the society we live in for the better.

## meet our writer

Phoebe is a recent Masters graduate from King's College London, and is growing her writing experience. She currently works in a graduate role in a secondary school, supporting children with SEND. Phoebe is passionate about arts education and is working towards a career that promotes diversity and inclusion within the arts sector.

To understand the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ students, we don't have to go back too far to uncover the roots of the oppression felt within the community today. Section 28, a law passed by the Conservative government in 1987, prohibited the promotion of homosexuality in schools. In fear of losing government funding, teachers and educational staff became apprehensive of discussing LGBTQ+ relationships in schools. Teachers were not allowed to portray same-sex relationships as 'normal', and as a result, this meant teachers felt unable to provide support for LGBTQ+ pupils or challenge bullying or discriminatory behaviour.

While nobody was prosecuted under the act, as it was not a criminal offence, LGBTQ+ support groups either closed or limited their activities. This was the very opposite of the refuge they were entitled to during a devastating time for the LGBTQ+ community. The spread of AIDS brought widespread fear towards gay and bisexual people, which was further perpetuated by hostile attitudes in the media. In turn, Section 28 saw major support from a range of religious organisations, such as the Christian Institute and the Muslim Council of Britain, in addition to a campaign in the House of Lords led by Baroness Young. >>



An illustration of three diverse students. On the left, a young woman with long dark hair, wearing a yellow cardigan over a blue and white striped shirt and a dark blue skirt, holds a large purple sign that reads 'STUDYING NOT SUPPRESSION'. In the center, a young woman with dark skin and curly hair, wearing a light pink shirt and a striped tie, holds a large orange sign that reads 'END LGBTQ+ BULLYING'. On the right, a young man with dark skin and short hair, wearing a pink shirt and dark blue trousers, sits on the ground holding a light blue sign that reads 'TEACH ME THAT I AM ENOUGH'.

STUDYING  
NOT  
SUPPRESSION

>> A major opposition was formed against Section 28, including advocates such as [Stonewall](#), [OutRage!](#), [The Pink Paper](#) and [The Gay Times](#), as well as support from individuals such as Sir Ian McKellen, Helen Mirren and Michael Mansfield. The first attempt to repeal the act was in February 2000 but was defeated by Baroness Young's campaign. It wasn't until September 2003 that the Government passed legislation to repeal Section 28 as part of the Local Government Act by a vote of MPs. Research has suggested that there are both long-lasting effects of Section 28. The law contributed to a feeling of fear of the LGBTQ+ community, which resulted in the marginalisation, discrimination and oppression of students and teachers who did not identify as heterosexual or cisgender.

Over 30 years since the implementation of Section 28, there are concerning statistics regarding the experience of LGBTQ+ students in schools. Research suggests that heteronormative discourses within schools continue to marginalise LGBTQ+ students. In a 2020 report by [Diversity Role Models \(DRM\)](#), surveyed schools were not consistently described as a safe environment for LGBTQ+ individuals or those with LGBTQ+ families. Only 27% of students regarded their school as safe if they came out as LGBTQ+.

This data was a result of attitudes within the school community itself, such as discriminatory language. Moreover, 42% of year 5 and 6 primary school pupils and 54% of secondary school students reported Homophobic, Biphobic and Transphobic (HBT) language to be commonplace in their school. Similarly, a 2017 report by [Stonewall](#) revealed that fewer than a third of LGBTQ+ pupils who experienced bullying said that teachers intervened when they had witnessed incidents taking place. Also, seven in every 10 students reported that staff only 'sometimes' or 'never' challenged HBT language. >>

>> In addition to prejudicial attitudes, there is also evidence of a lack of education surrounding LGBTQ+ issues. Stonewall reported that a concerning number of students were never taught about LGBTQ+ issues at school. Four in five were never informed about safe sex in same-sex relationships, and three in four have never learnt about bisexually or trans identity in school. The DRM report, mentioned above, discovered that only 20% of secondary school students learn about LGBTQ+ identities and HBT bullying at school. This is in spite of changes to government regulations a year before, in 2019, outlining that all secondary schools must cover gender identity and sexual orientation. In addition, different family types, including LGBTQ+, should be taught in primary schools.

Hanımoğlu (2019) highlighted the detrimental effects of bullying. [2] The author argued that abusive experiences of LGBTQ+ students led to physical and emotional stress correlated with poor performance, increased school dropout cases and even suicide. This is despite the right to education for all children being protected under law in the UK. In addition, Hanımoğlu found evidence of increased self-stigma likened to internalised homophobia, where LGBTQ+ students despise their sexual orientation. This often arises due to institutional homophobia found in schools and explains why LGBTQ+ students are more likely to commit suicide than non-LGBTQ+ students.

It's also important to recognise the different experiences of those that face intersectional challenges. Intersectionality considers how an individual's different social identities overlap to create multiple sources of discrimination. Furthermore, people of colour (POC), disabled people and those from low socio-economic backgrounds that also identify as LGBTQ+ face far more discrimination and marginalisation.

Research by the YMCA uncovered that 95% of young black people have heard or witnessed racist language in school, and individuals who took part in the study reported that racial stereotypes have negatively impacted their development and opportunities. Children with Special Education Needs (SEN) are twice as likely to experience regular bullying than children with no SEN. This is linked to internalised self-stigma, associated with psychological distress and lower life quality.

Finally, poverty has a significant impact on educational experiences. Poverty harms both physical and mental development and undermines a child's ability to learn. For example, children who have access to free school meals are 28% less likely to leave school with 5 A\*-C GCSEs. Students who identify as LGBTQ+, and also fall into other minority groups, face increased disadvantage and discrimination.

It's evident that the effects of Section 28, as well as the still predominant social forces that regard the LGBTQ+ community as less citizens, are still felt deeply by LGBTQ+ students across the country today. Such values have seen LGBTQ+ individuals struggle for equal opportunity and fair social treatment.

There's still a long way to go before schools are regarded as a refuge for LGBTQ+ pupils. Not only have the current institutional attitudes continued to marginalise LGBTQ+ students, but schools are also failing to act as adequate secondary socialisation agents for all children. Many pupils are leaving school with ingrained discriminatory attitudes that they carry into mainstream society.

After all, it's what we teach children and young people at this pivotal life stage that is the most important. Schools must become more inclusive, challenge discriminatory behaviour and incorporate LGBTQ+ issues into the curriculum. Indeed, society won't change until we make positive changes within our schools. ●

(1) Nuamah, S.A., 2019. *How girls achieve*. Harvard University Press.

(2) Hanımoğlu, E., 2019. Stigmatization and Suicide Vulnerability in LGBT Students: Inquiry and Recommendations. *Journal of Education and e-Learning Research*, 6(2), pp.45-51.

**For more information about LGBTQ+ history in the UK, go to page 20 to see our timeline**



# HER

What if who you are is a sin? What if it means losing your family? Arya grapples with the fear and anxieties around her sexuality, but finds the one person that allows her to truly be herself, and exist in a world that had sought to silence her for too long.

Story by ASHA ASKOOLAM  
Illustration by LACUNNA

TW emotional abuse, homophobia, racism

The first time Arya knew she would always be othered was when she was eight years old. She was coming home from school with her dad. It was raining. Her hands were ice cold, even in her pockets. The sky above them was a dull grey. The clouds seemed as if they were frothing, spilling over from the heavens about to fall onto them.

She could see lightning in the distance, could smell the rain falling. Her breath puffed out in front of her; white puffs that seemed to break through the darkness brewing ahead of her, above her. Out of the gloomy distance, two men cycled up to Arya and her dad. There was a red fire in their eyes and a fit of violent, frightening anger splashed across their faces.

"Go back to where you came from Paki! You don't belong here!" they shouted, spitting at them before cycling off. Their vicious, cruel laughter followed Arya all the way home as she clung to her dad's hand, sobbing. It was the only time he ever held her hand.

She couldn't breathe.

Arya was 11 years old when she heard the voice, right in the centre of her heart, a song that spoke loudly. A beautiful thing, something innocent, something she wasn't ready to face. What if they did not accept who she was?

It made her heart heavy, knowing that the part of her that so desperately wanted to be free would change her life forever. It would not only make her a target but she would be seen as a sin by her father. In letting that part of her run free, she would lose something else entirely.

Her father was a difficult man. He had a violent temper, and while it had simmered over the years, it was still there, bubbling beneath the surface whenever he was angry. Her childhood was a constant battle, fighting against her father's expectations of what she should choose for her subjects at school, who she should be friends with and how long she could stay out for. His controlling nature dwindled as she grew up.

Arya was not a person that could be contained, and in many ways, she matched her father in her stubbornness, anger and resilience. By the time Arya was 16, she had her freedom to socialise, express herself in all ways, except one. So, for years, she stifled the inner companion that wanted to scream, dance and sing.

When Arya was a teenager, she watched the movie *Captain America: The First Avenger* and developed a crush on Bucky Barnes, questioning if she was really attracted to women. Still, she was fixated on how Peggy Carter did her makeup, the way her lips were always a deep red and the softness of her smile. Did it mean anything? Did she like both? If it did, she paid it no attention; not wanting to have another thing about her that was different. >>



>> For years, Arya had felt othered. At school, she had always been known as the kid who brought in curry for lunch. She was the only Gujarati and Mauritian person at her school. In fact, she had never met someone who had the same mixed heritage as her. What's more, she was one of the only Asian kids at her school.

The other children mocked her culture, religion and the way she looked. She had thick, bushy eyebrows, hair on her upper lip and golden-brown skin that she hadn't learnt to appreciate yet. If she let out this secret, it would only isolate her even more. It remained a secret until one evening.

Arya had taken her younger brother to watch the film *Love, Simon*. The cinema was dark. The only light strains were the beams coming from the large screen, the dim lights dotted above her and on the steps leading out of the room. She was 23 years old when she heard Jennifer Garner's words, "you get to exhale now, Simon, you get to be you, more than you have been in a very long time", and she burst into tears. She cried continuously, feeling relief and remorseful at the same time. A part of her felt sorry for all the years wasted, but she was glad to be seen.

"It's okay," a voice said to her left, "It's *okay*."

She could just about make out her brother's smile. He took her hand. The warmth in his eyes told her that he knew. He knew, and he didn't mind.

"I know," he whispered, "And it's all okay. I promise, Arya."

"Yeah?" she whispered back, unsure.

"Yeah," he replied and squeezed her hand. "There's nothing wrong with you."

For the first time in 23 years, Arya felt that she could breathe.

She hadn't thought telling her dad would be great. But for some reason, she hadn't expected it to be *this* bad. For half an hour, her dad had been screaming at her and saying, "log kya kahenge?"

She hated that phrase, "*what will people think?*" It was something many, if not all, South Asians hated to hear from their parents, who were too worried about their reputation, shame and guilt, rather than the happiness of their children. Her dad was no different.

"You are humiliating our family, ruining our name!" he shouted. The living room had never felt so small. "You will never find real love. Don't you realise what you are choosing for your life?"

### Choosing?

The tears that had been threatening to spill over, finally broke free. They trickled down her cheeks like the broken pieces of her heart shattering and falling into the pit of her stomach. All she had wanted was for her dad to love her. Nothing she had ever done in her life was good enough for him.

"I didn't choose this," she cried. She had thought he might've been supportive of something she had no control over.

"Why is nothing I do ever good enough?", she screamed. "Why do you care more about 'our reputation' than me?"

Her words were sharp, but her lips were trembling. She felt so angry, so hurt, and so unbelievably lost. Her entire body was shaking out of fear, anger, and remorse for the life she could've had. All she knew is that her heart was racing, her skin felt hot, and there was a feeling burning within her chest, under her skin, beneath her fingertips. A feeling that she'd never felt this strongly before. Pure rage.

"Because you never do anything good!" he shouted back. The lights above his head made him look like a monster, illuminating the anger flashing in his eyes. >>



>> "You are useless. You never listened to me. You studied English at university. You work in publishing. How long will that last? Where is that going to take you in this new life of yours? What will you become?" he snapped, each word cut her like a small paper cut, building and building. "You will be *nothing*."

Her chest felt tight, a horrible constricting feeling. She moved on autopilot. It didn't matter that she could hear her mother screaming at him or that her brothers' loud voices could be heard from down the street. None of it mattered because, despite their support, all she could feel was the weight of her father's fury. She was out of the front door before she knew it. For good.

It took three years for Arya to feel like she could breathe again.

She thought it would happen when she moved out of home, landed her dream job or rescued her dog. But it never came back. She always felt like she was on the edge of suffocating. A heavy press on her chest like a pile of bricks. A terrifying feeling of something crawling up her throat, cruel and vicious, with the only intention of making her suffer.

Constantly feeling on edge, three years of feeling like something terrible was right around the corner went by, until she met her.

She saw the light in her eyes. The way the dark brown, shrouded in flecks of hazel, would sparkle when the sunlight kissed her skin. She had come to appreciate the bump on her nose, the richness of her skin. Until she saw her in a beautiful lehenga for the first time in three years. The radiant purple lit up with glittering, embroidery against the deep tones of her brown skin.

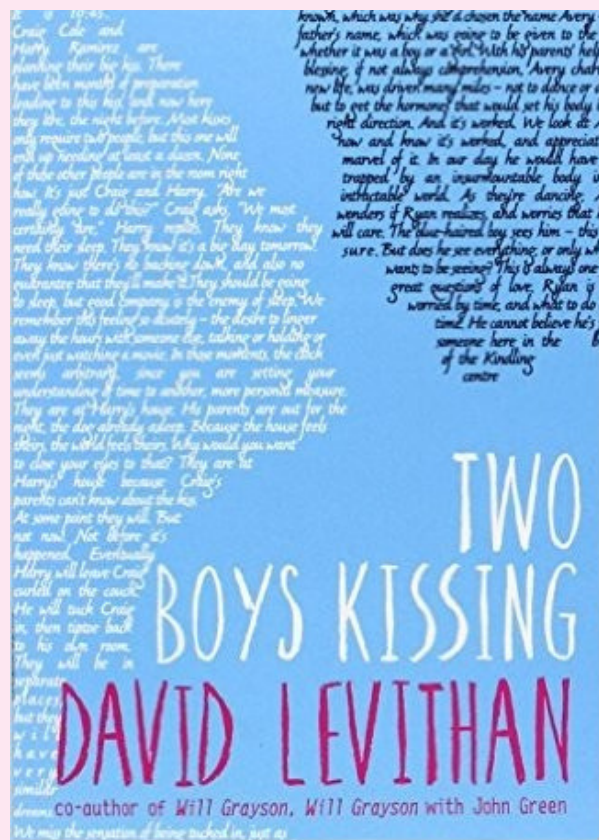
There was an entire history of people beneath her skin. She saw the echoes of her ancestors, their screams, their joys, and sorrows, buried in blood and pain. Until she lifted her eyes and saw herself properly for the first time in three years.

The mirror never lies. It captured everything about her. That tiny object was capable of reflecting her secrets, lies, and story. Absorbed with the lines of her face, and the weight in her shoulders, Arya realised the weight she had been carrying. It was all there. The mirror's honest reflection showed her the truth, no matter how painful.

Arya's truth was that she had blamed herself for far too long by hiding away in memories and pockets within her mind. Not only too afraid to face herself but to understand that the only person she ever needed to please was her. She was enough to herself, which was all that mattered.

"Ready to go, baby?" a voice asked behind her. Arya turned, smiling at the woman before her.

"Yeah, I'm ready to go," Arya replied; walking towards the one person whom she knew, in her heart of hearts, would always make sure she had enough air to breathe. **Her.** ●



## inspiring reading

**TITLE** Two Boys Kissing  
**AUTHOR** David Levithan  
**PUBLISHED BY** Egmont  
**YEAR** 2014  
**LANGUAGE** English  
**GENRE** Young Adult

## meet our writer

Asha is a writer with a Bachelor's degree in English Literature and Creative Writing and a Masters degree in Creative Writing. She has a background in content writing, having written for her campus' paper, *Smoke Magazine*, and edited the English Society's blog. She enjoys discovering new worlds and magical places for people to escape to. "Everyone has a story, and as long as you're willing to listen, you'll find the one meant for you".

# QUEER TEEN HEROES

Written by ALICE NUTTALL

Illustration by KAROLINA JONC BUCZEK

TW objectification, sexualisation

**Where are the LGBTQ+ superheroes? Alice Nuttall explores why queer characters are sidelined in the mainstream but flourish in young adult literature.**

Superhero stories are enjoying mainstream popularity. The Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) success, which has grossed \$22.6 billion total, has introduced a vast audience to characters that would previously have been unfamiliar to anyone except ardent comic book fans, such as Ant-Man, the Guardians of the Galaxy, Vision and Wanda Maximoff. DC Comics (DC) hasn't been far behind, with well-known favourites like Batman, Superman and Wonder Woman featured in reboots and team-ups.

However, both DC and Marvel have been criticised for their lack of diversity and their strong focus on the stories of straight, white men. This seems to have been a deliberate decision. In 2017, Marvel's VP of Sales blamed the fall in comic sales - a stark contrast to the success of the movies - on diversity, arguing '[readers] didn't want female characters out there'.

Marvel has only had two films starring characters who aren't white or male - *Black Panther* and *Captain Marvel*. While *Black Widow* and *Shang Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* are on their way, the MCU currently comprises 23 films, meaning that approximately 92% of their films focus on white men - and none on women of colour. DC's Justice League features their first on-screen Black character, Cyclops - however, actor Ray Fisher has spoken out about repeated instances of racism and abuse on-set, particularly from director Joss Whedon.



Mainstream superhero stories' portrayals of LGBTQ+ people are also sparse in comparison to stories about cisgender, heterosexual heroes. The MCU's much-hyped 'first on-screen openly gay character' in *Avengers: Endgame* drew criticism and disappointment from fans when said character turned out to be an unnamed man in a support group, with one line of dialogue, played by director Joe Russo.

Similarly, even though Valkyrie, who first appeared in *Thor: Ragnarok*, is canonically bisexual and the recurring character Loki is genderfluid and pansexual (meaning that Loki experiences attraction to people regardless of their gender), these aspects of the characters' identities did not make it to screen. At the time of this writing, it is unclear whether they ever will. LGBTQ+ comics characters do exist, but often do not make it to the mainstream alongside their cishet (cisgender and heterosexual) comrades.>>



>> Where film and TV adaptations of comics fall short, however, Young Adult Fiction (YA) literature fills the gap. In her article on queer YA fiction, Amanda Marcotte writes, 'same-sex romance ends in tragic death so often in pop culture, that the page at TV Tropes for 'Bury Your Gays' is extensive, with dozens of examples. And even if queer characters get to live, often the story is focused on the closet, with tension driven by the choice to stay in or get out'. Marcotte adds, 'but YA authors are conscious of those tropes and trying to tell different kinds of stories'.

For superhero fans who want stories about LGBTQ+ heroes fighting for justice and living joyfully as who they are, CB Lee's *Sidekick Squad* series creates a world with a team of young heroes who realise that their government, and the government-sanctioned superheroes who prop it up, are actually a dangerous, authoritarian regime. Lee's books stand out not only for her solid, believable worldbuilding and fun take on superheroes and superpowers, but also for the fact that her main characters are queer teens living their lives. Their LGBTQ+ identities are represented front and centre, as part of their characters, without the story focusing on these identities as a point of conflict or treating them as an "issues" narrative.

The series opens with *Not Your Sidekick*, the story of Jess Tran, a bisexual Chinese-Vietnamese-American girl who lives in the shadow of her superpowered older sister and her superhero parents.

Jess takes an internship at a tech company, which she soon realises is a front for a supervillain team. However, as she continues her work there, she realises that the situation may not be as clear-cut as she and the rest of the world have been led to believe. The famous superheroes and supervillains she has grown up with are playing roles dictated to them by an authoritarian and increasingly sinister government.

Alongside this high-stakes, save-the-world plot, there's the romance between Jess and her co-worker, classmate and long-term crush, Abby, who is a demisexual lesbian. Demisexuality is defined as 'a sexual orientation characterised by only experiencing sexual attraction after making a strong emotional connection with a specific person'. Abby's story is set to feature in the fourth and final instalment in the series, *Not Your Hero*, which is scheduled for publication in August 2021.

The story continues with *Not Your Villain*, which focuses on Bells, one of Jess's two best friends, who joins a government-sanctioned superhero training programme. Bells, a trans boy, has shapeshifting powers, which he uses to alleviate his dysphoria and as part of his superhero work. In the aftermath of Jess's discovery, Bells joins the movement to fight against the corrupt superheroes and government; the League of Heroes, the official body controlling superpowered people, publicly condemns him as a villain as a result.

*Not Your Backup* follows the third member of the team, Jess and Bells' other best friend Emma, as the three friends and their allies step up the resistance against their government. Emma, who has no superpowers but an excellent skill for planning and organising resistance activities, is the driving force behind attempts to expose the corruption at the heart of the government.

This story also follows Emma's journey as she grows to understand her own identity. While she has been in a romantic relationship with Bells for a short while, she slowly realises that she is asexual, experiencing little to no sexual attraction, and the pair decide to redefine their relationship as queerplatonic. A queerplatonic relationship is 'a relationship that bends the rules for telling apart romantic relationships from non-romantic relationships', 'in order to express that they break social norms for platonic relationships. It can be characterized by a strong bond, affect, and emotional commitment not regarded by those involved as something beyond a friendship'.

The *Sidekick Squad* series stands out because of its thoughtful exploration of different queer identities and relationships. More so, it steadfastly refuses to use trauma as a consequence of homophobia or transphobia to drive the plot. While explorations of bigotry and trauma have their place in fiction, LGBTQ+ readers also deserve fictional spaces that focus on queer joy. >>

## book information

**TITLES** Not Your Sidekick,  
Not your Villain, Not Your Backup  
**AUTHOR** C. B. Lee  
**YEARS** 2016, 2017, 2019  
**PUBLISHER** Duet Books  
**LANGUAGE** English  
**GENRE** Young Adult (YA)



# "Disney focuses on protecting its market in countries such as China, where representations of LGBTQ+ characters are at risk of censorship."

>> In her article on queer love stories, Camille Perri states, 'I came of age on the LGBTQ stories available to me, which arose in the form of books I could get from the library: The Well of Loneliness by Radclyffe Hall; Rubyfruit Jungle by Rita Mae Brown; Stone Butch Blues by Leslie Feinberg. All of these hold a special place in my heart, but all of them feature main characters who suffer phenomenally on account of their gender and sexuality.'

Apart from the Sidekick Squad series, it's worth mentioning other superhero-inspired YA portraying LGBTQ+ characters, such as April Daniels' *Dreadnought* and *Hero* by Perry Moore. The first is a novel about a trans girl who inherits the powers of her world's equivalent of Superman. The second follows the adventures of a gay teenage boy with healing powers.

Why do YA series such as these choose to feature characters with LGBTQ+ identities that are sidelined by the mainstream representations of superheroes? The answer could lie in the distributors and the target audience. The publishing industry is dominated by a small number of large publishing houses that primarily focus on promoting books that will sell well within the mainstream audience. In contrast, smaller independent publishers that exist and thrive can devote their time and attention to representing marginalised stories, characters and authors.

The MCU is currently owned by Disney, which is not only much larger than the most prominent publishing houses but notoriously conservative. Perhaps even more significantly, Disney focuses on protecting its market in countries such as China, where representations of LGBTQ+ characters in media are frequently at risk of censorship. Additionally, films like the *Avengers* and *Justice League* franchises are marketed at the broadest possible audience, whereas YA books and series, although frequently read by adults, are targeted at a much smaller, more specific audience of children and teens.

The need to have such a broad appeal gives YA authors the freedom to explore topics that might, in a large franchise, be considered "polarising". As SF Said notes, 'children's books [are] rarely considered for literary prizes such as the Man Booker and the Costa' and 'media coverage of children's books is vanishingly small'. Indeed, the fact that children's literature has traditionally been considered "less serious" than media aimed at adults means that it can avoid scrutiny from conservative or reactionary elements of society and represent LGBTQ+ characters with less risk of homophobic or transphobic backlash.

As Perri goes on to note, 'happy gay art or entertainment, or art and entertainment about happy gay people, may not be about politics—but the fact of its existence is political'. The *Sidekick Squad* series has its overtly political core in its story of resistance against an authoritarian regime and biased media. Still, its core team of happy queer and trans heroes makes the equally important point that knowing, exploring and living your identity should be possible and celebrated for young people, and beyond, both on and off the page. ●

## meet our writer

Alice Nuttall is a children's and webcomic writer who spends her free time reading, knitting and playing D&D, occasionally all at the same time. Her superpower is the ability to find a cup of coffee no matter where she is. She is a member of the *Our Streets Now* (OSN) team, and her work includes writing and proofreading for the OSN campaign.

# IN A CAGE

In the mundanity of a lonely lockdown, Laura had one thing that gave her joy, whenever she needed it.

Story by CELINA BELOTTI  
Illustrated by MOL UNDERWOOD  
TW mental health struggles, alcohol consumption

Laura's body was tired, but her mind was burning. The virtual pilates class earlier that evening hadn't been enough to drain the energy away. Lying in bed and staring at the ceiling, unanswered emails were cast on a nervous loop in the back of her head, and she longed for sleep that didn't want to come. Aching to be anywhere else, she allowed her imagination to meander.

Her mind took her back to university. A class had already started, but she wasn't worried, knowing that she could slip through the back and no one would ever notice. Her hand was already on the doorknob when a familiar voice called her from a distance.

"Laura, wait!"

Gravitating towards the sound like a compass, she found Stella's smile coming towards her. The butterflies in her stomach took flight in anticipation at the sight of the other girl's vibrant cornrows and dark eyes filled with mischief.

Stella was sunshine in the morning. She was candy floss by the sea and like a walk down the canal when the sky was blue. She was also the stronger one and easily pulled Laura towards her chest, keeping her from entering the class.

"Skip it", Stella said, holding her way too close for her to think.



*Soundtrack to the story*  
**Bon Iver Skinny Love**  
**Phosphorescent Song for Zula**  
**Harry Styles Cherry**

"I'm already late all the time. I can't just skip it."

"Let's go on an adventure!"

That thought was all it took for Laura's brain to finally settle into a calm and peaceful sleep as she drifted into dreams of kind smiles and intoxicated kisses behind the library.

The sound of the alarm woke her up to a gloomy London.

Laura hadn't chosen her morning routine. There was nothing in it that she was particularly fond of. She rushed to get out of bed and get dressed, only to be reminded by her boss that she was two minutes late in dialling into her team's morning stand-up call, then she spent most of the day working from her bed and counting the weeks for the lease to end so she could find another flatshare, one that at least had some sort of living room. >>



>> Yet, the warmth of Stella's smile stayed in her mind that day, and when bedtime came, she let herself be distracted again. That night she was transported to the bench hidden by the bushes at the old library where the two of them shared their deepest, most absurd and delirious secrets. Laura allowed herself to rest on Stella's chest, moulding her body to her lover's soft edges and breathing in her citrus perfume. The sound of her heartbeat confused with the melody of her laughter. Her dreams smelled like lemon when Stella was in them.

Friday arrived, and Human Resources hosted a virtual quiz. It was Easter, and everyone seemed excited – were they all ignoring the fact that their sales were down? All she wanted to do was close her laptop and get drunk with her flatmate. They didn't like each other that much, but they pretended. She knew that he'd been breaking their lockdown rules to sneak out with a guy from Grindr. Not really ideal, in her mind.

She was 28. At this age, anywhere else in the world, she'd be able to afford her own flat; not in London, though.

The world was spinning around her when she found herself ready for sleep. Her drunken mind floated with thoughts of the two of them, laying in bed, facing each other. Laura's bright blue eyes were looking deep into Stella's dark black ones.

"You're magic," Stella said.

Lockdown weekends could be busy. Between cleaning, going for a walk and joining a call with old friends that wanted to reconnect, Saturday went by in a flash. When Sunday came, she rewarded herself with a lie-in, enjoying the sun peeking through the window and travelling in the reverie of Stella's lemony kisses.

Laura finally got out of bed for lunch and spent the afternoon drowned in a reality show. When she emerged from it, bedtime was upon her again. Sunday nights were the worst, though; with Monday around the corner came the confinements of her new normal, so she indulged in Stella until her anxiety gave way to rest.



Days blurred into each other, the line chart from the World Health Organization trended downwards, painstakingly slowly. There was nothing to do but observe. She was a passenger in her own life, moving Jira tickets into the Done column like a machine and compliantly listening as her manager seemed to criticise every aspect of her soul. The only time she got to take control, she spent daydreaming with Stella. It was her act of rebellion.

It was still sunny outside one evening when Laura was called for some last-minute feedback.

"You can't possibly need three iterations to get me decent screenshots", her manager said.

They were in May, and she wanted to go out for a walk, but screenshots were apparently important, so she took them again.

That night, Stella told her she loved her. They shared giggles and cuddles until the daylight came.

A few more weeks passed, and she started noticing the sleepless nights, reflected at her in the camera. Ten people could be in the call, but all she saw were the dark pockets under her own eyes. >>

>> A hint of guilt popped in her stomach, wondering if her colleagues would notice that she hadn't been sleeping. Still, night after night, she indulged in Stella, who teased her for her dedication to a corporate career.

**From MUM:** Honey, are you ok? Can we speak tonight?

**From LAURA:** I'm ok mum, lots of work. Call me tomorrow? Going to bed at 9:30. Early meeting.

It wasn't exactly true, but that night, she had plans with Stella.

It was a few days before she finally called her mum. It had, indeed, been a while since they had last spoken.

"You know, today I went to the supermarket for the first time in such a long time. People wearing masks, sometimes you can barely recognise them, yeah?"

"It's hard, isn't it?" she replied, only half paying attention.

"I think I saw your friend, the... dark-skinned one from college. She doesn't have those hideous braids anymore. What was her name again?"

"Stella", Laura replied, the name echoing through the walls like a curse.

"Yes, that's the one. Nice girl, you were so close. What does she do now?"

"Haven't seen her in a while. She works at Facebook." She said, forcing her voice to sound as nonchalant as possible.

"That's a good company to work for, isn't it? Had a nice lad with her too."

Once again, she found herself in bed, staring at the ceiling and unable to sleep. Stella wasn't with her that night. Apparently, she'd been back in Manchester with a 'nice lad' at a supermarket. Her stomach churned, and anger boiled at the thought of Stella having any sort of life outside of the realms of the universe they shared.

They didn't fight often, but Stella tore everything apart when it happened and left Laura to wonder what remained of herself afterwards. Stella was raw and true and never held back. Her mother was a little racist, wasn't she? How come she still didn't admit that they'd been together all along?

For nights they argued, yelling at each other well into the early morning. Until one night, they didn't. There were no more arguments left in them, and the two women fit in each other's soft embrace once again, all forgotten.

Summer loomed closer, and Laura's friends were flocking to the parks. Soon, her boss expected her to go back to the office. The thought of stepping outside wasn't exactly soothing. She braced herself to adventure out in a hostile city that seemed like a minefield of COVID-19 hotspots.

After her first socially distant picnic, she rushed back home to find Stella curled in a ball, looking like a sad kitten. Leaving Stella behind as she went out into the world felt like a limb being torn off, so Laura invited her to join the next one.

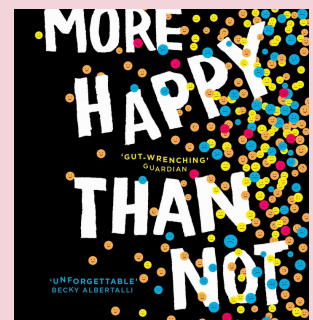
Both of them always wore masks, even when no one else did. ●

## meet our writer

Celina is a writer of many titles. Originally from Brazil, but currently living in London with her cat, she spends her days pretending to work with digital marketing, is addicted to reading queer fiction and can be found volunteering in FoodCycle Finsbury Park on the weekends or working on her book from her East London flat. Turn to [page 22](#) to read Celina's story.

## recommended read

**TITLE** More Happy Than Not  
**AUTHOR** Adam Silvera  
**PUBLISHED BY** Soho Teen  
**YEAR** 2016  
**LANGUAGE** English  
**GENRE** LGBTQ+ Fiction YA



# THE TIMELINE: LGBTQ+ rights

Written by HARRIET NORRIS

Illustrated by CARO WINDMULLER



**Need to get up to speed on the UK's LGBTQ+ history? Here's our concise overview.**

It's essential to understand the historical journey of LGBTQ+ rights in the UK, its significant battles fought for equality and the consequential legal changes.

Perhaps the most shocking revelation to emerge from the history of LGBTQ+ rights in the UK is been how recently some of the fundamental legislation was passed; in England and Wales, the Marriage (Same-Sex Couples) Act was only passed in 2013. It was only last year that Northern Ireland legalised same-sex marriage. It is terrifying to learn how recently these laws were passed. It also stresses how far there is still to go in ensuring members of the LGBTQ+ community are fully equal to straight, cis-gendered people in society. Here is a timeline of the events concerning the acquisition of rights for the LGBTQ+ community, leading up to 2013.

## EARLY ATTACKS ON HOMOSEXUALITY

During the reign of Henry VIII, male sexuality was targeted for persecution for the first time in Britain and the entire British empire.

**1533:** The Buggery Act altogether outlawed sodomy, making it an offence punishable by death.

**1861:** The passing of the Offences Against the Person Act was significant as it amended the previous legislation. A minimum of 10 years in prison replaced the death penalty for acts of sodomy.

**1885:** The Criminal Law Amendment sought to prosecute gay men further, making all-male same-sex acts illegal, meaning men could be punished even for acts committed in private.

**Until 1921,** Parliament did not discuss any legislation surrounding women's romantic and sexual involvement. Any attempts to implement legislation failed as the Commons and Lords feared it would draw attention to female same-sex exploration and relations.



## THE 50s AND 60s

Several events in the 1950s showed significant progression in the acquisition of rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans individuals.

**1951:** The first known British trans-gender woman, Roberta Cowell, went through reassignment surgery and lawfully changed her birth certificate.

**1957:** The Wolfenden Committee, formed in 1954, published a report that recommended 'homosexual behaviour between consenting adults in private' should cease to be a criminal offence. The government proceeded to reject the recommendations.

**1958:** The formation of The Homosexual Law Reform Society.

**1964:** The North-Western Homosexual Law Reform Committee was founded to promote social and legal equality for lesbians, gay men and bisexual people. It then became a UK-wide organisation and was renamed the Committee for Homosexual Equality.

**1967:** The Sexual Offences Act decriminalised sex between two men over the age of 21, provided it abided by three rules: the act taking place had to be consensual, it had to occur in private and could only involve people over the age of 21. However, this was exclusive to England and Wales and did not apply to the Merchant Navy or Armed Forces. In Scotland, Northern Ireland, the Channel Islands, and the Isle of Man, sex-same relations remained illegal.

## THE 70s, 80s, 90s AND BEYOND

The 1970s and the decades beyond were arguably transformative years that allowed the fight for LGBTQ+ rights to really gain momentum, with multiple crucial pieces of legislation being made into law in the UK.

**1971:** The Nullity of Marriage Act, banning same-sex marriages in England and Wales, was approved.

**1972:** The first Pride was held in London. It counted 2,000 participants.

**1973:** The Matrimonial Causes Act was passed, which returned to the principles of the Nullity of Marriage Act.

**1974:** The formation of a London-based information and support helpline named 'London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard'. This helpline helped people coming out in the wake of the 1967 Sexual Offences Act.

**1975:** The Liberal Democrats (then known as the Liberal Party) became the first UK political party to openly and publicly show support for LGBTQ+ rights.

**1980:** Decriminalisation of sex between two men, over the age of 21, in private.

**1981:** A landmark court case in Northern Ireland (Dudgeon v United Kingdom) found their criminalisation of same-sex acts to violate the European Convention on Human Rights.

**1982:** Legalisation of sex between two men over the age of 21 and in private, in Northern Ireland under the Homosexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order.

**1988:** Controversy arose around Margaret Thatcher's introduction of Section 28 of the Local Government Act. It stated that local authority would not intentionally 'promote' nor 'publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality'. In response, Ian McKellen appeared on BBC Radio to respond to Section 28. This held great cultural importance as McKellen was a famously outspoken and well-loved gay actor. 'The Arts Lobby' was also formed in early 1988 with the same intention of fighting back. A group of actors, gay and straight, highlighted the fact that the proposed bill was an unjust attack on arts and literature as well as LGBTQ+ individuals. As a form of protest, they presented a gala at Piccadilly Theatre, naming it 'Before the Act'. The programme consisting of materials written by gay men and lesbians, or content based on gay themes flouting the stereotypical and discriminatory views towards LGBTQ+ individuals, which was frowned upon by Section 28.

**1992:** Same-sex sexual attraction was declassified as a mental illness by the World Health Organisation.

**1999:** Sir Ian McKellen then met with Prime Minister John Major. It was the first time any sitting executive had met with an LGBTQ+ activist.

**2001:** The ban on gay men, lesbians and bisexual people serving in the armed forces was lifted by the UK Government.

**2002:** Equal rights were given to same-sex couples applying for adoption under the Adoption and Children Act and fully went into effect in 2005. Scotland embraced similar legislation in 2009, and Northern Ireland in 2013.

It was established the accommodation of needs of transgender people, by the UK Government, in the Goodwin v the United Kingdom case. The actions were issuing them new birth certificates and allowing marriage to the opposite gender.

**2003:** Section 28 was finally repealed. In 2009, David Cameron went on to publicly express his regret for the legislation.

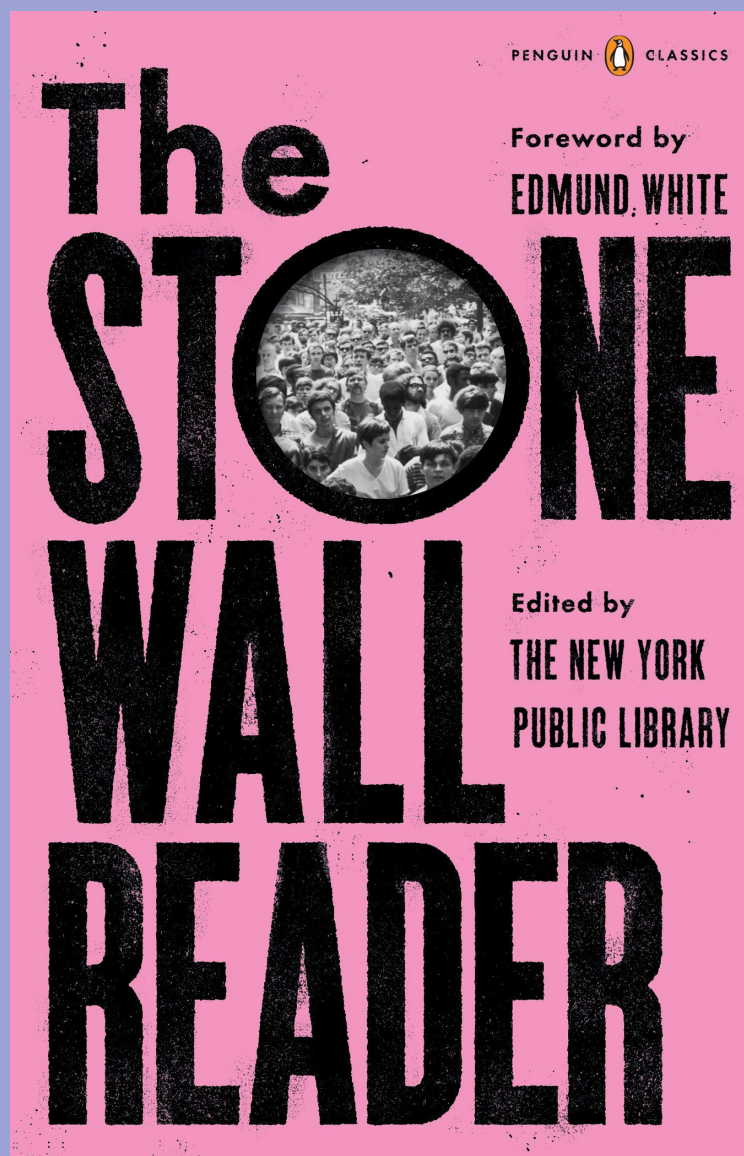
**2004:** The Gender Recognition Act was passed, allowing transgender people full legal recognition of their gender, even though the options were at that time still limited to male or female.

The Civil Partnership Act legalised Civil Partnerships and came into full force in 2005.

**2007:** The approval of The Equality Act (Sexual Orientation) Regulations. It legislated against discrimination based on sexual orientation in the provision of goods and services, education, access to public facilities and functions.

**2008:** The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act recognised same-sex couples as legal parents of children conceived through donated sperm, eggs or embryos.

**2013:** Coming into effect only in 2014, The Marriage (Same-sex Couples) Act was legally passed a year before, allowing same-sex marriage in England and Wales.



## meet our writer

Harriet is a student currently on a gap year, volunteering at her local primary school and writing in her spare time. She is hoping to study English Literature at university, and can usually be found lost in a book or listening to Billy Joel. She is a member of Our Streets Now, and helps as part of the Our Books Now social media team.

## further reading

**TITLE** The Stonewall Reader

**EDITED BY** Jason Baumann

**PUBLISHER** Penguin Classics

**YEAR** 2019

**LANGUAGE** English

**GENRE** History/Non-fiction classics

# WE MEET Giulianna Domingues

Interview by CELINA BELOTTI

## Celina Belotti interviews fantasy author Giulianna about creating fantastic universes without conventional themes



## book information

**AUTHOR** Giulianna Domingues

**ILLUSTRATOR** Taíssa Maia

**PUBLISHER** self-published

**YEAR** 2021

**LANGUAGE** Portuguese

**GENRE** Fantasy

In her own words, Giulianna Domingues is an anxious bisexual feminist from Brazil, and now also the writer of her self-published debut fantasy novel, *Luzes do Norte* - with no English title so far. In this interview, we discussed diversity and representation in the publishing industry and how to create fictional universes that account for queer representation and a decolonising agenda.

*Luzes do Norte* is a creative take on the werewolf tale with a queer twist, written in Portuguese. What compelling after hearing from editors and agents that there was no space for fantasy fiction in the Brazilian market - let alone queer fantasy fiction - Domingues decided to challenge them by using the knowledge she acquired after years working in marketing to self-publish the novel.

The book tells the story of Dimitria, a fierce hunter from Nurensalem: a village where the long and harsh winters are charmed with sightings of northern lights and the dangers of the forest rest side by side with magic and wonder. Dimitria and her brother, Igor, are orphans and lead a poor peasant reality until she starts working as a guard for Aurora, the daughter of a wealthy family. When strange murders occur, Dimitria is assigned to investigate them; a road that will lead her on a series of adventures and bring her and Aurora closer than ever before.

World building is at the core of every fantasy tale. In the words of Neil Gaiman: Through fiction, humans use lies to talk about something that is true. Fantasy worlds are built not only as a metaphor of our universe but also as the setting for a lesson that is to be transcended back to our own existences and social agreements. This is why assessing representation in fantasy writing is pressing, and so are discussions around how George R.R. Martin portrays misogyny in *Game of Thrones*, and about JK Rowling's transphobic comments.

When I read *Luzes do Norte*, I was immediately hooked. But it also got me wondering how Domingues, a debut queer author from South America, navigated the challenges of telling a love story that, at its core, is a disruptive tale about two complex and fierce women, without shying away from its political significance. Following is our interaction for this interview. >>



**CELINA: What is the appeal of fantasy for you?**

**GIULIANNA:** I've always been an avid fantasy reader. I am a very imaginative person, and the appeal of magic has always been strong for me, as well as the endless possibilities that a magical story can bring. This wonder and beauty come from admitting there are so many things we don't know about the world. There are a lot of authors, both Brazilian and otherwise, that inspire me to write fantasy, to name a few, Leigh Bardugo, Neil Gaiman, V.E. Schwab, Carol Chiovatto and Tomi Adeyemi. These are all authors that write with feeling and sensation. They also write with a lot of honesty, which is something that I feel like fantasy needs – even when we're telling a magical story, it needs to be grounded in truths.

**Do you have an opinion about the position of female fantasy writers in the publishing industry?**

I think that we've grown accustomed to only seeing male writers get the type of accolades reserved for fantasy writers, but as a young woman who grew up with several high-powered YA (young adult fiction) fantasy series, which were all written by women, my influence was mostly female. I believe the industry is starting to catch up – if we look at Nebula winners, we've been having more and more women – but it's important to take women who write fantasy seriously. That means categorising their work correctly and including it whenever we're talking about fantasy.

*The Nebula prize is an annual prize that recognises the work of fantasy and science fiction writers. Some noticeable female winners were Octavia Butler, Ursula Le Guin and N.K. Jemisin.*

**Do you think that there is a systemic miscategorisation of female writers?**

Yes, I do. It's acceptable for women to write romance and YA, which are seen as "softer" and less serious; a misogynistic view in itself, which comes from a perception that younger people and books about relationships are less valuable. When a woman writes other genres, science fiction, thriller or fantasy, it's very common for her work to be categorised in the genres mentioned before because of this perception. I think, especially in indie publications, we're seeing more diverse voices, but we still lack diversity in publishing as a whole, which white women and men dominate. As a white cis woman, I am very conscious of the lack of POC, people of different gender identities, nationalities and classes. Publishing is still a very elitist field.

**What are your thoughts on how gender and sexuality have been historically portrayed in the stories created within fantasy literature?**

I think it's important for writers to interrogate themselves about why we create the worlds we create. I find that male writers, in particular, will include graphic depictions of violence in the name of realism, while also choosing to exclude things like disease or armpit hair (which arguably would provide an ever more extreme veneer of realism).

So it's not really realism we're seeking here, but an exploration of certain types of violence; more often than not, against women and people of colour (POC) characters. I think writers are free to do anything, but we need to be aware of our intentionality, whether we recognise it or not. My goal is to normalise the inclusion of female, POC and minority characters simply because this produces stronger storytelling and reveals my view of the world. I have no interest in portraying violence against women, even though I know it can be a powerful storytelling tool in the right hands, especially if a woman is writing about it, like Margaret Atwood in *Handmaid's Tale*. It can become a very integral part of the story, whereas it's used for shock value in certain narratives.

**The story you are telling in *Luzes do Norte* is, above all, a queer love story. Still, it does not cling to the traditional tropes in how queer stories are often told. We still see that in mainstream media, most queer stories are often reduced to coming out stories involving prejudice or abuse. What do you think are the most significant aspects of Dimitria and Aurora's love story?**

I like to joke that I never came out of the closet; I simply opened the door and waved. Of course, this is a joke, but it's also an integral part of my identity as a bisexual person. I never went through the very real issues with coming out and being out, and so depicting those experiences in my book never felt authentic to me. Not to say these aren't important stories; they're just not mine. My life, however, is filled with attraction to other women, and so that's what I wanted to depict. The very real and human (and arguably, very universal) feeling of being in lust and in love. In addition, I wanted to explore the walls we lift when we're afraid of love and why we deem ourselves unworthy. Those are themes that come up again and again in my book.

**I found it interesting that your book is not only filled with magical rules, and a very particular magical logic, but also very specific politics. Namely, it's a world where Dimitria's bi-sexuality is all but normalised. How did you create the social and political rules of the world you built?**

I didn't think too much about the system, to be quite honest, because my goal was always the story. Whatever served the story got fleshed out, and whatever didn't was not a priority. So while having a bisexual character was important, exploring her sexuality and the politics of that didn't serve my overall story.

**At the same time that this society seems to accept Dimitria's bisexuality as a non-issue, there is a very clear plotline around the fact that Aurora is predestined to get married and have kids. Did you consider either building a universe in which sexuality was completely normalised?**

I do think that the universe was one where sexuality was a non-issue, but the realities of Aurora, a cis woman, were not ignored. I was not interested in the writing of prejudices on sexuality because this is not my experience of it. There are other authors who do that so much better, and I had another story to tell.

**What was the most challenging part of creating a magical universe like that?**

Two things were hard: making sense while still creating a magical atmosphere that drew people in and not reproducing prejudices and issues from the real world just because. I didn't want my book to have homophobia, for example, because it didn't serve the story. I think sometimes we include violence in the name of realism in fantasy when realism, in my opinion, is overrated. I would rather have verisimilitude over that.

**Can something be realistic if it's meant to be fictional? How do you think that this plays out?**

Of course! A story that abides by the rules it's created and is grounded in human truths and feelings is realistic, no matter the magic. There are so many good examples of this, but I'll mention *Coraline*: it's a book about a girl who faces monsters, but it's also a story about fear and abandonment and courage. This is very true and very human.

**Just like myself, you are a Brazilian author living abroad. You chose to write in Portuguese, but your story is set somewhere that is very much not Brazil. Yet, I see little elements of 'brazilianness' in it, such as your characters' names and the reference to an old folk song.**

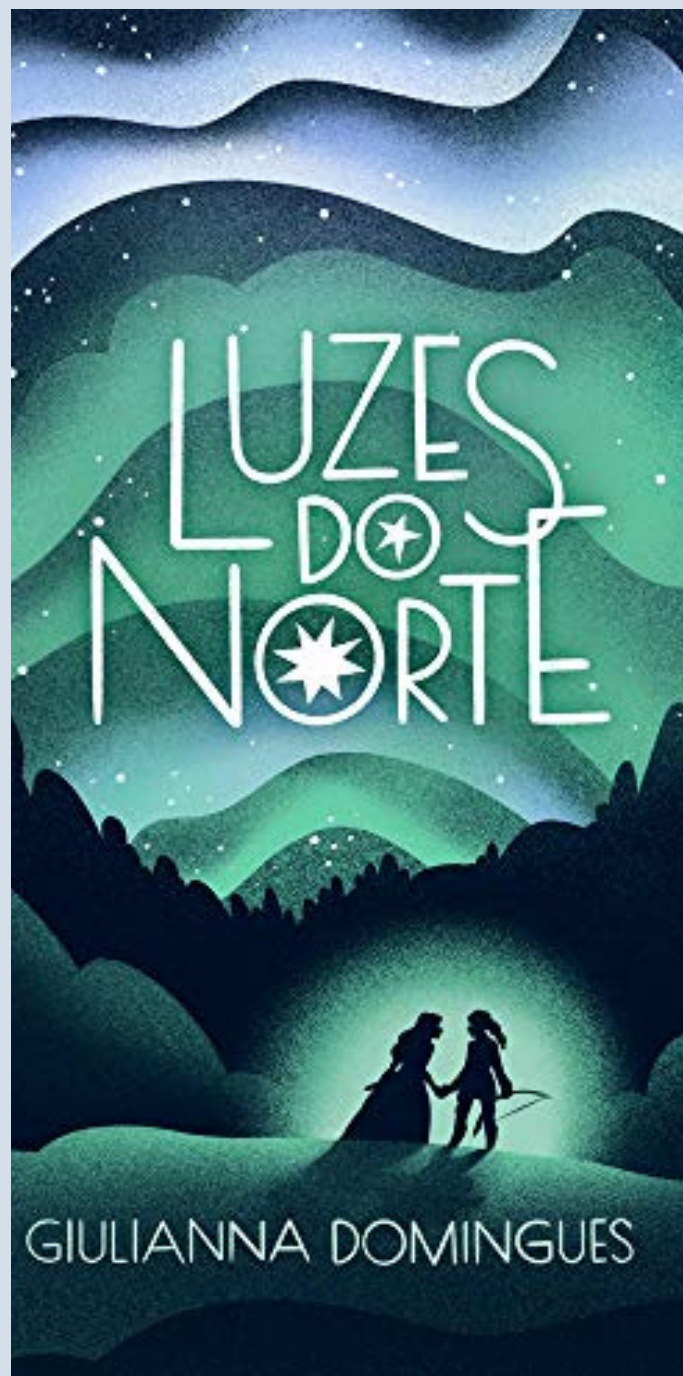
To be honest, my identity as a Brazilian is very much undefined. Yes, I am Brazilian and have grown up there all my life, but I have also been living in the US, and I am very much American-passing. I've always felt myself in the middle of cultures, which shaped my identity, and I guess that comes out in the stories I tell as well. My references, my voice, is Brazilian no matter what I do or which stories I tell; simply for the very fact that I am a Brazilian person.

**Do you have plans of writing something in English?**

Yes, and I'm translating *Luzes do Norte* right now! More and more, I feel like I need to embrace this split identity instead of trying to "pick a side". You'll notice that's also true of my sexuality, being bisexual and all. My story is Brazilian no matter what because I am Brazilian, and I think it's a story about love and hope, and we all need that. Most of all queer people.

**Are you thinking about your next writing project already?**

Yes, I am already writing my next book, set in Brazil this time and explores local mythology. While I don't have a specific aspect I want to explore, all my stories are about imperfect women and how they deal with the world. It's what I am, after all, and what I love to write about. ●



# *Am I bisexual or do I crave male validation?*

**Our writer Naomi explores how the concept of the 'male gaze' ties into her experiences as a bi woman**

Written by NAOMI GRACE WILKINSON  
Illustrated by SOPHIE KATHLEEN

**TW** sexualisation, Public Sexual Harassment

The term 'male gaze' was coined by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey, and by definition, it's 'the perspective of a notionally typical heterosexual man considered as embodied in the audience or intended audience for films and other visual media, characterised by a tendency to objectify or sexualise women.' In turn, this male gaze is so ingrained that we can begin to view others and ourselves through it.

One example of how the male gaze affects everyday life is the assumption that the way a woman chooses to look, based on her clothes and makeup, is done for men. When I get changed in the morning, this is in the back of my mind, wondering if what I'm wearing will be 'too skimpy' and therefore giving men entitlement to my body. This entitlement can often show up in acts of Public Sexual Harassment (PSH), such as being touched inappropriately or beeping from cars and screaming things out the window - this happens all too much, especially in the summer.

Being bisexual, the male gaze can stop you from allowing yourself to comfortably explore who you are. When my sister came out to me, she told me how people - predominantly middle-aged men - look at her and her girlfriend when they're out together. I thought the kind of look she was talking about was homophobic disgust, but actually, it was a look of arousal. This sickened me to my stomach, and now when I'm on dates with women, I'm aware of men watching.

Women are hyper-sexualised, which is reflected in the media, and it's still normalised for men to have a feeling of entitlement and ownership over women's bodies. The male gaze creates the fetishisation of women loving women; it's seen as a performance for men. I remember being younger and going to parties where the girls would kiss each other to get the attention of boys. Then, as I came to discover that I was romantically interested in girls, I began to second-guess myself - I had internalised that the only reason I would want to pursue a girl would be in an attempt to appeal to men. >>





"The male gaze creates the fetishisation of women loving women; it's seen as a performance for men."

>> This is also the reason that a relationship between two women is not held to the same standard of validity as a relationship between a woman and a man. Men want to be a 'part of the action'. 'Fetishising someone's queerness is not even remotely the same as respecting or accepting them', as Matt Bernstein would say. 'Our worth is tied to our ability to be sexy and desirable,' but when women harness that power for themselves, they are often shamed and invalidated – there are so many instances of this in the media.

If you're a bisexual woman, like me, you will know that as soon as you start dating other women, it is the most thrilling and amazing experience ever. The dates I have had with women have been out of this world: so much effort, care, respect, fun, and no sexual pressures in return. This kind of standard made me evaluate what I was letting some men get away with, and I was letting them get away with a lot. I started not to enjoy the time I was spending with men I was interested in, yet I would still find myself seeing them time and time again.

This created a real conflict in my head about whether I liked men or not. But if I didn't, then why was I so adamant about seeing them?

We live in a very heteronormative culture and its all-encompassing power to make people homophobic – even those of us that identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community. In Australian entertainer Hannah Gadsby's words, '70 per cent of the people who raised me, who loved me, who I trusted, believed that homosexuality was a sin, that homosexuals were heinous, subhuman, pedophiles. 70 per cent! And by the time I identified as being gay, it was too late, I was already homophobic. And you don't get to just flip a switch on that.' This innate feeling that who you are romantically attracted to is wrong, can hinder you from growing to be your true self and hurt those around you. I had never allowed myself to even consider if I liked anyone other than men until a girl approached me at a party. I told her that I didn't "swing that way" out of instinct, but afterwards, I could *not* stop thinking about her, or what I had said. >>

>> Once I became comfortable calling myself bisexual, and I went on dates with women, I then began to question my true intent with dating men. I think I find it difficult to connect with men emotionally. Due to toxic masculinity, I've found that men can often believe a person is weak if they're emotional. I think this has stopped me from making connections with men in the past. I seem to have an innate fear that if I'm not interested in men, that they won't validate or try to pursue me.

Exactly as the title warned me in Florence Given's book, *Women Don't Owe You Pretty*, feminism has ruined my life in the "best way possible". Our self worth should not be tied to men's sexual desires, and as the chapter states, 'you are the love of your own life,' and 'one of the most radical acts under capitalism is to simply love yourself. Especially if the love you have cultivated for yourself is enough to fill you, without the need for romantic love to feel validated'.<sup>[1]</sup>

My new-found knowledge of the male gaze through research and Given's book has helped me analyse my behaviour. I've learned that it's okay to question: could I see myself with a man in a relationship that I feel the most comfortable in? Or, am I just imagining myself with a man because it's how we are culturally driven to see ourselves in romantic relationships? Am I dating men because it makes me feel electric? Or, am I dating men in the hopes that they find me electric to be around? Life is not a performance, so I'm going to carry on questioning my behaviour and altering it to please myself the most. ●

(1) F.Given, *Women Don't Owe You Pretty* (London,2020), p. 22, 40, 155



## meet our author

Naomi Wilkinson is an 18-year-old bisexual woman, trying to understand the world and herself through education, writing and a whole load of mistakes. In her own words, she is open-minded, open-mouthed and a *raging* feminist.

## read the book

**TITLE** Women Don't Owe You Pretty  
**AUTHOR** Florence Given  
**PUBLISHER** Octopus Publishing Group  
**YEAR** 2020  
**LANGUAGE** English  
**GENRE** Self-Help

## Lacunna

Anna or Lacunna is a designer and photographer born in a small town in Poland, currently based in Italy. The curiosity of the world always pushes her to go ahead. She enhances her energy with a sense of humour and good coffee. Sensitive logic supporter. Traveller following loved ones. A person with many interests, who recently discovered the right term to describe it - multipotential. Her work combines architecture, photography and art (watercolors and digital).

## Sophie Kathleen

Sophie is a queer Illustrator/Artist currently based in Surrey, UK. Her vibrant and often political work focuses on her passion for feminism, LGBTQIA+ empowerment and climate justice. Sophie takes inspiration from nature and her travels around the world, as well as her interest and studies into holistic health, exploring the human body and taboo tackling subjects. When she's not making art you can find Sophie dancing with a hula hoop or running her Etsy shop selling her work.

# meet the illustrators

## Sophie Hinley

Sophie Hinley is a freelance illustrator based in Warwickshire, working with traditional mediums such as pastels and pencils, creating a soft and romantic dimension to her work. Documentation from nature is the source of many of her works.

## Jennifer McDonald

Jennifer McDonald is an illustrator and designer based in Paisley, Scotland. After graduating in Design for Textiles from Heriot Watt University in 2020, Jennifer launched 'Pure Barkin', an illustration and textile design project titled after her graduate collection. Pure Barkin started as an offbeat, clashing, and loud printed textile project, but since winning an Emerging Artist's Award in February 2021 for illustration, Pure Barkin has evolved into an illustrated visual diary, exploring everyday life and mental health.



## Karolina Jonc Buczek

Karolina Jonc Buczek is a Polish illustrator and graphic designer based in Streatham, South London. In her practice, she mostly works with themes of body positivity, mental health and Polish culture. She is passionate about promoting different body types, women empowerment and feminist agenda, and raising awareness of mental health issues through her personal experiences. Whilst tackling serious subjects, she works with bright colours and often uses humour in her illustrations. Karolina's aesthetic is inspired by 90's/00's cartoons and mainstream fantasy.

## Caro Windmuller

Caro is an Argentinean Illustrator and Print Designer based in London. She loves Illustrating in many different styles both traditional and digital. Her work is influenced by her background in fashion and her Latin American roots. She studied Fashion Design in Buenos Aires and worked as a Fashion Designer until 2018 when she decided to move to London following her dreams and pursue a career in Illustration, her true passion. Since then she has been working for Print Studios in London and as a Freelance Illustrator. She loves collaborating and meeting new people. Her work is bold, adventurous and contemporary.

## Mol Underwood

Mol Underwood is a Sheffield-based Illustrator working with all things bright and beautiful, inspired by life's everyday experiences and promoting mental health awareness. Exploring themes of body positivity, tropics and floral pattern designs. When I'm not making art, you can find me renovating my house and playing interior designer.

## Kriziabel Alqueza

Kriziabel is a Filipino-Greek graphic designer and illustrator currently based in Greece. Her illustration style is inspired by pop art and cartoons with retro and neon colour palettes. She usually illustrates cute girls with a lot of sparkles. With her illustrations, she wants to bring a smile to people's faces. She loves everything pink and kawaii, and is a huge panda lover. When she doesn't illustrate, you can find her watching mukbangs, studio vlogs and true crime stories on Youtube.



# about us

## Calling all writers!

We're looking for new voices. If you've got something to say and want your work to be featured, send a short pitch about the piece(s) you want to write to our email. Don't forget to include:

- ★ A few lines explaining what your piece is about and why you want to write it.
- ★ Your chosen format: book review, article (based on a topic in a book), chronicle or poetry
- ★ Examples of your work and CV (if any, not essential)

Our Books Now is the Our Streets Now (OSN) campaign's very own book club. It's an opportunity for the OSN community to engage with one another.

Our Books Now's primary aim is collective learning. It appreciates its members' experiences, knowledge and interests.

Our Books Now suggests one book every month for members to read on feminism, mental health, VAWG, human rights, and social structures.

To decolonise knowledge production and knowledge-sharing, we aim to celebrate non-English authors and stories and promote books written in other languages.

## past events



\*saved as an Instagram IGTV

## coming up

### Our Books Now talks to Barbara Schenkel

Live talk on positionality as a researcher, the other and the field.

Barbara is a PhD candidate in Gender Studies (SOAS, University of London)

WHERE Instagram live -  
@ourbooksnow  
DATE 11th June 2021  
TIME 5pm (UK Time)

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