

Cosmopolitan Manchester – Cathy Bolton notes

Manchester Publishing

The picture that Corinne portrays of Manchester being a centre for community and independent publishing is certainly a very familiar one.

It remains an ongoing battle for Manchester writers to build reputations outside the region. Writers tend to write predominantly about what they know (i.e. experience of living in or a round Manchester) – faced with a marketing dilemma as pointing out this unique aspect of the writer's work is often a turn-off for the national (i.e. London) press/ book industry.

But it's not just geography that's hampered the progression of Manchester writers. Many of the publications in the Moving Manchester archive came out of the **Creative Writing Movement** (of which Commonword & Gatehouse were a part). From the late 70's onwards this movement sought to provide a platform for marginalised voices (working class, women, gay, black and Asian people).

Much of this writing focused on identity and often had a political agenda connected with community empowerment – not surprisingly some of this work lacked the subtlety and polish of work being produced by the university literati and a 2 tier publishing world developed with so called "community" writing being ignored as some worthy, but low brow other – not real literature.

A few Manchester writers, e.g. Lemn Sissay & John Lyons, who were nurtured through the Creative Writing Movement have gone on to establish national literary credentials – but it has been problematic for many others to break through the glass ceiling into the world of "real" publishing – and the literary establishment have all too readily dismissed writers that have identified as say a "lesbian" or "black". Mainly for commercial reasons this has recently started to change as publishers have discovered that there is big money to be made out of the Sarah Waters and Zadie Smiths of this world.

A far higher percentage of women to men consume fiction and poetry and a growing percentage of this readership is black – so market forces are finally forcing the book industry to seek out writers that represent a multi-ethnic audience.

Contribution of migrant population on Manchester literature/literary culture

There is a long tradition of migrant writing in Manchester but it may take several generations for the experience of new communities to find its way into print as new migrants to the city usually have more pressing priorities than creative writing.

Corinne has already referred to some of the contributions of established migrant communities to Manchester's body of literary work. A few others to include here are **Howard Jacobson** (The Mighty Waltzer), **Sarfraz Manzoor** (Greetings from Bury Park), **Mike Gayle**, **Tariq Latif**, **Mike Duff** (Low Life, hat Check Boy) and **Jackie Kay**.

But the influence of migrant communities on our literary culture extends beyond publication. There are many enterprising individuals, e.g. Pete Kalu, Tariq Mehmood, Segun Lee French and Shirley May, who are not only talented writers in their own right, but have helped establish a dynamic international literary scene in Manchester through events and organisations such as Cultureword, Shorelines and Speakeasy.

The fact that Manchester has become such a Cosmopolitan city has provided the credibility to host a number of major international literature events in recent years. As part of the Commonwealth Games **Cultureshock** celebrations in 2002, Manchester hosted the **Literatures of the Commonwealth Festival** (MMU, Manchester Poetry Festival & Carcanet) and **Reading the Games** (Manchester Libraries) both featuring a wide spectrum of Commonwealth and diaspora writers, and Commonword **Mushaira Shake Up** tour – which sought to bring together traditional Musharia and English-speaking audiences to appreciate the work of contemporary Asian women poets including Shamshad Khan.

One of **MLF's core aims is to promote Manchester as an outward looking centre for cultural exchange** and we have been doing this by **programming writers from all over the world** – particularly keen to invite writers that have a strong connection with communities living in Manchester, e.g. last year we hosted literature in translation events featuring writers from **Somaliland** (attended by members of Arlaadi Somail Community Centre and students from Abraham Moss as well as regular poetry audience), **Pakistan, Poland, Spain** and the **Middle East**.

The universities and cultural institutes such as **Confucius**, **Cervantes** and the **Centre for the Advancement of the Arab World** have played an important role in actively supporting cultural activities in the city. Manchester based **Comma** press are also playing an important role in seeking out and publishing writers in translation from Europe and the Middle East.

I believe literature in translation activities are vital in helping to integrate Manchester communities both locally and internationally – a truly cosmopolitan city needs to be importing as well as exporting culture.

For writers to grow it's important that they be exposed to a variety of cultural expressions and literary aesthetics. Many of the writers I've encountered over the

years have been greatly influenced by the work of North American and Irish writers – with the increase in translation activities that search for literary influence will hopefully broaden.

Last week I read that my local primary school in Levenshulme has pupils from 20 different countries and they collectively speak 25 different languages. I think this cultural pluralism opens up very exciting opportunities for Manchester to integrate with the rest of the world, and will increasingly make it an attractive city for creative people to settle in.

We already have 2 very successful university writing schools in the city which attract both students and staff from many parts of the world – the high calibre work that is coming out of these Manchester Schools is helping to establish the city's international reputation as a centre of literary excellence.