Writing Characters from Under-Represented Communities
A perspective from an emerging young adult fiction writer

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Abstract

The category of young adult (YA) fiction encompasses a wide range of genres; but despite this generic diversity, it has so far failed to represent the full range of communities that make up contemporary British society. Discussions are ongoing between professionals in the publishing industry and campaigning individuals and organisations who are aiming to redress this imbalance. Writers making new work are in a position to help effect a change, but acknowledging and responding to the call for inclusion can be far from straightforward, with questions being raised such as: 'how far can a writer stray from their own lived experience?' and 'how can a writer avoid tokenism or cultural appropriation when writing for inclusion?'

This thesis consists of a new YA contemporary novel, *Sea Change*, and an accompanying critical essay, which reflects on the challenges I encountered while aiming to write for inclusion. Set in the Scottish Highlands, *Sea Change* is a contemporary YA crime novel, in which the world of the sixteen-year-old protagonist, Alex, is thrown into turmoil when he discovers a dead body next to his fishing boat. The decisions Alex makes following this discovery set in motion the plot of the story. The narrative, as it unfolds, facilitates the exploration of themes frequently associated with adolescence, such as friendship, risk-taking and the maturation into an adult identity, along with themes specifically linked to Alex's status as a member of marginalised communities because of his sexuality and social class, such as prejudice, acute stress brought on by economic pressure, and low self-esteem.

This thesis, then, reviews the opinions and recommendations being expressed by campaigners for greater diversity, and exposes the uncertainties and challenges a writer faces when aiming to write for inclusion.

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Author’s declaration

I declare that this thesis is the result of my own work. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is clearly attributed and the source is given.

Contents

Writing Characters from Under-Represented Communities
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Introduction

My primary goal when I began writing my young adult (YA) crime novel, *Sea Change*, was to create a well-written, enjoyable and gripping narrative. I also wanted my novel to raise pertinent questions and explore some of the current concerns for the targeted readership of mid-to-late teenagers.

YA fiction has become established in the United Kingdom (UK) as an age-related category for teenage readers, yet there is disquiet that the majority of characters currently represented in these novels are white, middle class, cisgender, straight and fully able.[1] In response to this situation, there has, of late, been a call for greater representation of characters from marginalised communities. A significant aspect of this call is a growing demand for the realistic portrayal of a cast of diverse individuals, a slice of real life as it were, providing the opportunity for *all* young people to see themselves reflected in what they read, as well as for readers in general to recognise in the text the multiplicity of their wider community. These concepts of 'seeing oneself' and 'seeing others' have acquired the terms 'mirrors' and 'windows' in conversations about inclusion.[2] As a writer, I wished to understand the opinions and recommendations being presented by professionals in the publishing industry along with those put forward by campaigning individuals and organisations with a view to gathering data for my creative project and to allow my informed involvement in these discussions.

Alongside recent criticism of the lack of representation of marginalised communities in YA fiction published in the UK, concerns have also been raised about the monoculture that prevails in the UK publishing industry, with a report commissioned by Spread the Word finding that the workforce is predominantly white and middle-class.[3] Initiatives are now being established which seek to address this imbalance and improve the diversity of personnel, including authors.[4] This move towards a more representative workforce in the industry also raises the expectation of the publication of a greater number of stories portraying characters from a wider range of minority and marginalised communities.

From a personal perspective, my own particular concern when starting out as a reader of YA fiction stemmed from the lack of representation of young people from working-class backgrounds, especially those who were struggling with the disadvantages

of belonging to what might be described as a social underclass. Coming from the North West of England, where both my parents were mill workers and where there were very few books in the house, I continue to find it disappointing to be forever presented with stories about middle-class characters in middle-class scenarios. My reaction is echoed by other children's and YA authors from working-class families. In an article for *The Guardian*, Natasha Carthew reflects on the situation in her childhood and adolescence:

> Growing up in a one parent family in a council house in rural Cornwall, the world I read about in books and saw on TV (when we could afford the 50 pence for the meter) could have defined another planet […] I was a ferocious reader but also a frustrated one, where were all the other poor working-class gay girls?[5]

Elen Caldecott, in another article in *The Guardian*, brings the observation up-to-date with her question about present-day publications: 'Where are the children's books that celebrate working-class values and voices?'[6] Caldecott's comment points to a problem regarding authenticity which I found required addressing when aiming to depict marginalised communities. Representation which resorts to stereotypes of working-class families will often focus on hardships and prejudice, issues which, while having their place, can, and I feel should, be balanced with the celebration of the values and voices of that community.

During my career as a teacher, I worked for over twenty years with disadvantaged young people throughout the UK and I am familiar with their stories. In Scotland, one in five children is currently living in poverty.[7] *Sea Change* is set in the Scottish West Highlands, and a child poverty map of Scotland published by the Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) in 2014 shows that even in the Highland Region, an area which is possibly less in the public eye regarding this issue compared to urban Scottish communities or those in southern Scotland, 19% of children live at or below the poverty line.[8] More recent reports do little to suggest there has been any significant improvement in Scotland or throughout the rest of the UK. [9] In *Sea Change*, I wanted to reflect how young people cope when faced with limited financial security and to portray how people from the lower socio-economic section of society demonstrate resilience as they tackle problems. However, given that there is so little YA fiction in which these conditions are addressed, I did experience qualms that there might be little appetite in the publishing industry for such a narrative, especially as I discovered that writers who are not part of the middle-class publishing scene often experience difficulties when trying to enter the industry. The value of working-class voices and the difficulties encountered by working-class writers have been noticed by news media. Coming from a working-class and mixed-race family herself,

YA author Kit de Waal presented a BBC Radio 4 (2017) programme *Where are all the Working Class Writers*, in which she looked at her own trajectory into publishing and took the listener on 'a journey around the country to find out what the barriers really are to working class representation in British literature today.'[10] When persevering with my project, despite the challenges it brought with it, my efforts were given legitimacy by such recognition of the absences in the industry to which I aimed to respond.

During the planning of the novel, I foresaw that along with social class, there were other aspects of representation I would need to address. In that I was intending to write a novel for older teenagers and that there would be relationships developing between characters, I was aware that sex would be a factor to consider when making creative decisions in the narrative. With authenticity in mind, the gender of the main characters became established as male mainly due to an early decision regarding the gender of the perpetrator of the crime. According to the Scottish Government, in Scotland, 'eighty-seven percent of youth crime is committed by males.'[11] Despite the confidence I felt about writing characters experiencing financial insecurity, I experienced a degree of uncertainty concerning writing about sex from a male point of view, and this was compounded when I decided that my main character, Alex, was also repressing his sexuality. I had homework to do if I was to take on the challenge.

My research included examining twenty-first century youth culture, including media made for and by young people, and their use of the internet. Teenagers face the perennial challenges of adolescence, and these have been exacerbated by a hypermobile communication environment, with its instant sharing of media by mobile phones and the internet. The investigative documentary *Webcam Boys* (2016) made for and transmitted by BBC Three, exposed one of these twenty-first century challenges, that of boys webcamming, or making money by providing online sexualised images and videos and performing sex acts.[12]

I found answers to some of my creative questions in such documentaries. For example, in *Sea Change*, sixteen-year-old Alex is led in to making choices that he later acknowledges as questionable as he seeks to support his mother and be financially productive. The case studies in the BBC Three documentary provided a twenty-first century answer as to how Alex could make money. The programme also provided a means by which I could raise and explore this specific sexual activity as a facet of contemporary youth culture. It was through Alex's motivations, and the decisions he makes when facing life-defining moments in the novel, as when he is confronted about his sexuality by a

potential boyfriend, that I planned to illuminate his position as a sexually repressed schoolboy fulfilling his role as a young carer in a financially compromised family.

Throughout the project I studied selected YA texts, ranging from Carnegie Medal winner *Junk* by Melvin Burgess, published in 1996, to the winner of the Older Fiction category in the Waterstone's Children's Book Awards and Carnegie nominated *Orangeboy* (2016) by Patrice Lawrence, along with secondary texts on children's literature and on writing. This research fed into my ongoing writing exercises and creative practice, and, in turn, both supported and challenged my creative decisions with regards to the novel. With reference to craft and storytelling, I needed to consider how I was to portray a marginalised teenage character. I was encouraged by the recommendations of authors who have been identified as 'diverse writers' to use my own lived experiences and observations as a starting point for my project. During the writing, I examined my experiences as a member of one community that is under-represented in fiction, that of the working-class community, and debated whether it would be possible for me to draw on my own understandings of, for example, the prejudice and low self-esteem I experienced, when attempting to portray a young man from a different marginalised community.

My intention to portray characters away from the mainstream was supported by those calling for greater diversity in YA fiction, as was my intention to keep my concern with inclusion 'low key' by not making the marginalised position of the characters the dominant issue of the story. Yet these same intentions were problematic when I considered arguments, for example, regarding tokenism. A subscriber to the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI) Facebook page made the comment: 'I was once asked to change a mixed-race character to white because it felt too "token" to describe her but the book not be about her race.'[13] Could my 'low-key' be construed as tokenism? I discovered that I was far from alone in my uncertainties when attempting to write for inclusion, and that similar reservations have been expressed by other authors. In a private group on Facebook, one writer says: 'I'm keen to include a diverse cast but I'm not sure of the best way to do so.' It was a comment which sparked a thread of recognition of the problem from other members of the group along with comments of support and advice.

To gain a wider understanding of the YA fiction category and of the readership of YA fiction, I engaged with relevant interested parties: I met with a small group of volunteer fourteen-years-plus teenagers and we talked about books and reading, I had one-to-one conversations with established British YA authors, most with significant awards to their name, a senior editor from a major publishing house, and a children's literary agent.

To strengthen my writing skills and to learn from those successful in the field, I attended creative writing workshops and short courses on writing for Young Adults given by prominent authors including Malorie Blackman, Melvin Burgess and Keith Gray.

With a view to monitoring the continuing discussions concerning diversity and inclusion in children's fiction, I maintained an ongoing review of reports in print media, on social media, blog posts and other media such as BBC Three and BBC Scotland's documentary 'The Social', and I read reports from relevant organisations such as the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI), the National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE), Writers of Colour, LGBT Youth Scotland and We Need Diverse Books.

In June 2016, I was invited to attend the conference *Youth Matters*, which related to research with and for young people.[14] In 2017, I was fortunate to be selected by Penguin Random House to participate in their WriteNow Live initiative, the purpose of which was to support under-represented writers and discover new authors with different stories to tell. Through this initiative, I had a one-to-one session with a senior children's Penguin editor who had read the manuscript of *Sea Change* and I was subsequently shortlisted for their mentoring scheme.

Being engaged in conversations and discussions about diversity and inclusion can help us gain a deeper understanding of other people and their situations, but there are claims that talking about diversity is being mistaken for *doing* something.[15] Writers are a significant cog in the publishing industry machine and it is their output that can stimulate and feed a change. This report, then, sets out to share with the writing community the hurdles I encountered, the research I undertook and the significant decisions I made whilst completing the novel.

Writing Fiction for a Young Adult Readership

What is YA fiction?

Any discussion regarding fiction marketed for a young adult readership generally begins by trying to identify 'what is YA fiction?'. Authors have contributed their opinions in blogs and interviews and it would seem from these debates that it is difficult to determine a consensus set of criteria for what makes a YA novel. When Philip Pullman was asked 'What makes young adult fiction different from regular adult fiction?' by *Slate* reporter Katy Waldman, his response brought into question whether a writer even needs to have a readership in mind:

> It's a very complicated question. I don't know whether [*The Golden Compass*] is a young adult book or children's book or adult book that somehow sneaked its way into a children's bookstore. I don't actually think about the audience. I don't think about my readers at all. I think about the story I'm writing and whether I'm writing it clearly enough to please me.[16]

Further emphasis was given to this problem of what is YA fiction by Meg Rosoff when she offered the following advice to writers in an article 'Writing for Teenagers' included in the *Children's Writers' & Artists' Yearbook 2013* (2012, pp. 142-145):

> There are no rules. There are books for teenagers with sex and drugs and unhappy endings. There are moral and immoral worldviews, books with no children in them, books that tackle the Spanish Inquisition, the holocaust, adultery, suicide, football. If you don't believe me about this lack of rules take note of how many panel discussions at literary festivals are devoted to the subject 'What Makes a Young Adult Novel?' The reason they continue to ask the question is nobody knows the answer.

Yet on a visit to a bookshop or library, readers will find a set of shelves devoted to teenage or YA fiction. An overview of these novels shows a variety of genres present, much as in adult fiction. Romance, action, historical, fantasy, sci-fi, crime, thrillers and contemporary realism all nestle under the YA fiction umbrella. Who has a say in which books belong in this category, however, is less clear. Is it determined by the choices of content or themes made by the author; by the agent placing the manuscript with a publishing house; by the publisher's acquisitions editor, publicists and marketers; the booksellers on the road; or the bookshop staff or librarians placing the book on a shelf for the reader to find?

In an article posted on his website, Melvin Burgess provides a succinct answer to 'what is teenage fiction?':

> Teen fiction is a hybrid beast, springing as it does from children's fiction yet addressing increasingly adult issues.[17]

For a writer embarking on a YA fiction project, this comment, while pinning down 'the hybrid beast' of the category, also presents a number of questions, not least those relating to the portrayal of 'adult issues' in an age-related category that has evolved from publishers' children's lists. My attempts to identify any significant or common features of the category in which I was planning to write included a critical close-read of different contemporary YA novels. YA Author Kathryn Evans describes her own perspective on this activity in a blogpost 'Why Writers Should See Reading as Research' for *Notes from the Slushpile*:

> Nowadays, I mostly read Young Adult fiction. So much of it, that I've absorbed its constructs without really having to think about it. I've still had to learn about structure […] but pace, technique, that feel for what makes a good YA novel - I've mostly absorbed by reading.[18]

An analytical reading of YA novels from a writer's perspective allows for the search for features that mark a piece of work as especially appropriate for, or appealing to a teenager readership. This method of study can incorporate an analysis of content, craft and style, features which might contribute to the author's 'voice', and an analysis of the themes addressed in the novels.

In addition to an understanding gained from this method of critical reading, there were further insights to be found concerning the current manifestation of YA fiction by an appraisal of other critical studies of YA literature. In that it is easy for a writer to slip in to cliché when writing teenage characters, such as the moody, or the self-absorbed, or the risk-taker, a review of studies examining the emotional, psychological and physiological changes which occur during adolescence can help underpin the choices made by a writer during the creation of characters and give a basis to the fictional portrayal of the seismic shifts which can occur in an adolescent's landscape. I undertook these main areas of study during the planning and the writing of *Sea Change*, which, when completed, I intended to submit to agents and/or publishers as a YA novel.

The evolution of the YA fiction category and a consideration of its significant features

Melvin Burgess is widely regarded as one of the ground breakers in teenage fiction and he has been publishing books throughout the evolution of the YA category. At the time his first book *The Cry of the Wolf* (1990) was published, he considered himself a children's writer, yet he was informed that he was writing teenage fiction. In an article 'Sympathy for the Devil', published on his website, he comments:

> I was told I was writing for teenagers. I was surprised; as far as I was concerned, Wolf was a children's book, but who was I to argue? [19]

His following few books were marketed as such, and in 'Sympathy for the Devil' he comments that:

> This was a period when books for young readers were changing. Modern concerns – I say modern even though these areas had been issues for decades – such as sexuality, drugs culture, family break-down and other social issues were being more honestly portrayed, and people were discovering that young people were far more sophisticated than the material previously written for them would suggest. Publishers dealt with this trend by calling books with a content some parents might object to, teenage fiction.

Here, Burgess refers to content, themes and the style of his books which mark them out as relevant to readers who are leaving childhood behind and taking steps towards an adult world. Unlike Pullman, Burgess writes with a teenage readership in mind, and the comments in his articles suggest that he is seeking ways to make a direct connection with their day-to-day concerns, even to the extent of providing honest portrayals of the darker sides of the move towards independence and more adult pursuits. When writing about his Carnegie Medal winning novel *Junk* (1996) Burgess states in 'Sympathy for the Devil' the importance for him of authenticity:

> Above all, I wanted it to be authentic. Authenticity had a number of attractions – partly because it is by its nature honest, but also because this book was going to have a rough ride, and I didn't want to be accused of making anything up.

Is it this quest to show life as it really is for young people rather than 'making anything up' that is the cause of objections? Can these references by Burgess to the objections to the content of fiction aimed at a teenage readership be interpreted as an example of the adult moral panic that can occur when the 'increasingly adult issues' are expressed in a manner

that is considered inappropriate for this age group, be they to do with sex and sexuality or drugs or promiscuous behaviour? The consequences of such objections might be a matter for consideration by a writer of YA fiction. The creative decisions of an emerging YA writer, without the sponsorship or support of a publisher, might, to some extent, be weighed against this potentially limiting factor.

However, hard hitting and explicit novels are perceived as popular with the target readership. In 'Sympathy for the Devil', Melvin Burgess writes of his novel *Junk*:

> 'For starters, it exploded the myth about teenagers not reading – they read this one in droves. It convinced me that it was the material that was faulty – not the readership.'

Seeing the potential for sales from books that have content which attracts teenagers to them, some literary agents profess to be on the lookout for such manuscripts. US children's book agent John Cusick writes the following request on his wish list:

> Send me the books kids will sneak / steal / borrow in secret. Those personal, dangerous, life-saving stories. I'm looking for boundary pushers, a pitch that makes (certain) people say, "You can't write a YA /MG about THAT!!"[20]

Recent books that have fulfilled this call for fiction to address such personal and potentially 'dangerous' and/or 'life-saving' issues include *Asking for It* by Louise O'Neill (2015), which deals with the impact of sexual assault, rape and how victims are treated; *Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda* by Becky Albertalli (2015) and *Margot and Me* (2017) by Queen of Teen, Juno Dawson, which, among other things, are about coming out; and *Am I Normal Yet* by Holly Bourne (2015), which deals with mental health issues.

These novels, usually shelved under the contemporary realism genre of YA fiction, build on the work of Burgess along with other Carnegie winning novelists published prior to and at the turn of the twenty-first century, including Aidan Chambers, whose work was an early influence on my own YA writing. Discussing Chambers' set of novels 'The Dance Sequence' in *Coming of Age in Children's Literature* (2003, pp. 37-40) Margaret Meek comments:

> Breaktime, by Aidan Chambers, was published in 1978, the first of a group of five novels, each focusing primarily on one aspect of adolescence in contemporary Britain. It was a controversial novel, breaking new ground both in its explicit treatment of young male sexuality and also in the playfully post-modern ways in which it involves the reader in puzzles and games.

A final novel was added to the initial set of five: *This is All: The Pillow Book of Cordelia Kenn* (2005). Chambers writes of them on his website:

> They are like members of a family. Each one is an individual and has its own separate personality, standing on its own feet, so to speak; but each is genetically related to the others. They share much in common while also seeing the world through their own eyes. […] Each is especially concerned with particular kinds of experience. [21]

Chambers describes how, through the novels, he explores teenage preoccupations such as their 'personal obsessions', 'the dramatic clash of belief and rational thought' and the 'friendship of platonic love which young people often call soul mates'.

Chambers achieves in his fiction a sensitive portrayal of complex teenage characters navigating the intellectual and emotional challenges they face in their everyday encounters and relationships. Within these stories, the evident solicitude for characters caught up in dilemmas and difficult new experiences provides young adult readers with a 'safe' place for a vicarious exploration of thorny issues. Chambers' use of language on the page brings their 'teenage preoccupations' to life. For me, this set of novels, and Chambers' meticulous prose, provide a touchstone to which I frequently return when writing my own YA fiction.

As adults, we have all experienced our own unique transition from childhood to adulthood, probably with varying degrees of pain, embarrassment and enjoyment. However, as a writer wishing to portray a range of complex characters with their own set of experiences relating to this process of maturation, I considered it useful for me to acquire a greater understanding of the psychological, physiological and emotional factors at play during this stage of life and from it, a more secure basis for the choice of content, tone and themes explored in my YA fiction.

Children's and YA author Nicola Morgan has made a study into the research of the teenage brain and has produced a book specifically for teenagers: *Blame My Brain: The Amazing Teenage Brain Revealed* (2013). In the text, she relates how changes in the brain during adolescence can account for an improvement in the ability to 'read emotions in other people's faces' along with a changing attitude to risk taking. She also relates how brain changes can influence issues concerning the 'dark side' such as depression and addiction. A specific theme I wished to incorporate in the narrative of *Sea Change* was risk taking. A recent report in the journal *Current Biology*, 'Imbalanced Activity in the Orbitofrontal Cortex and Nucleus Accumbens Impairs Behavioral Inhibition', states:

> Adolescents, both among humans and non-human animals, are more inclined to engage in heightened risk-taking behaviour, exploration and novelty seeking.
>
> Although these attributes provide adaptive value in enabling individuals to gain importance in the world, including independence from parents, if taken too far, this tendency could lead to potentially dangerous behaviour, including drug use, harmful drinking, addiction, unsafe sex, and risky driving, which may result in unintended injuries, violence and/or even premature death.[22]

Risk taking, then, can be readily identified as a feature of adolescent behaviour, and in *Sea Change* I aimed to portray the need for adolescents to seek out new adventures as a legitimate movement towards independence, despite the potential dangers. Another recent study into adolescence, *Depression and Violence in Adolescence and Young Adults: Findings From Three Longitudinal Cohorts* (2017) has shown a correlation between depression during adolescence and a raised risk of violence. Depression and violence, whilst present as concepts in *Sea Change*, are not overtly portrayed, yet the correlation outlined in this study was useful for me to hold in mind when considering the justification for the actions and the back stories of my troubled teenage characters.

The concept of growth as a feature of fiction has been the subject of critical studies. In *Literary conceptualizations of growth: metaphors and cognition in adolescent literature* (2014, pp. 5-8) Seelinger Trites refers to the two main aims of her study:

> this study then, has two interrelated goals; to examine how concepts of growth manifest themselves in adolescent literature and to interrogate how growth serves as a cognitive concept that structures our ability to think about adolescence as literary critics.

She adds:

> How we think about growth influences how we experience growth – and what we tell adolescence about their own growth, in turn, has significant ramifications for their own conceptualizations of maturation.

The aspect of the discourse which holds particular relevance for my own project is the section headed ‘Brain science’, in which Seelinger Trites reveals how significant changes in the brain during adolescence affects emotions and behaviour. She explains how, during adolescence, changes in ‘frontal lobe activities increase our ability to understand perspective complexly’; that is the ability to take another’s perspective, which is considered ‘crucial for humans to understand narrative’. She makes reference to Lauren

Steinberg (2005) who argues that it is essential that we understand adolescence as a stage of life that is vulnerable: 'specifically because of gaps between emotion, cognition and behaviour'. As a writer, this raises questions not only about how I might wish to portray the motivations, behaviours and the developing relationships between the main characters in my novel but also about how an adolescent reader who may be experiencing these 'gaps' might interpret elements of the narrative.

The search for, or the shift into, an identity more of the adult world than of childhood is frequently seen as a theme or thread in YA novels. In the chapter 'Cross Dressing and Performativity' in *Contemporary Adolescent Literature and Culture* (2012, p. 77) Brugger-Dethmers recognises that the problems teenagers mostly face are in the transition to a unique identity:

> Teenagers occupy the stage of life when one moves from the comfortable familiarity of childhood friends and family to the unfamiliar differentness of the Other: other genders, races, religions, sexual orientations, abilities, and so on, as well as the expectations of society at large. Ultimately, this transition necessitates a re-evaluation of selfhood. The discovery of a unique identity amidst personal uncertainty and during the testing of socially established mores is a difficult yet important task faced by all teenagers. This journey is reflected in Young Adult literature in characters who cross a variety of categorical boundaries and grapple with the resulting physical, mental and social issues.

Overcoming the difficulties linked to 'personal uncertainty' and the 're-evaluation of selfhood' are significant themes in *Sea Change*. Indeed, the title was chosen to reflect Alex's turbulent journey as he grapples with his uncertainties and makes the major shift from the repression of his sexuality to his eventual acceptance.

It is interesting to view how uncertainty and vulnerability, concomitant with the period of adolescence, is handled by contemporary YA authors. Whilst the readers might not be patronised by a sugar-coated narrative, and the content in some texts – often accompanied by a warning that they are only appropriate for the older teenage reader – may be quite explicit, there is often a level of optimism, at least a glimmer of hope, in the telling. Writing in *The Guardian*, Danuta Kean reported on this prevalence of optimism in the shortlisted entries for Waterstone's Children's Prize 2017. Patrice Lawrence, whose YA novel *Orangeboy* (2016) was the winner of the Older Fiction category, is reported as commenting:

> that though her primary aim had been to promote hope in her story of a teenager caught in gang violence, she wanted to reflect the real situation faced by many black teenagers in Britain. [23]

This comment highlights the author's intention to create an authentic portrayal of the world from a marginalised character's point of view along with the complexity of balancing any negative aspects of that world with an aim of promoting 'hope'.

That this optimism is to a great extent expected of children's and teenage fiction was brought into open discussion when Kevin Brooks' *Bunker Diary* (2013) won the Carnegie medal in 2014. Told in a diary form, which allows for a style of first-person narration without excluding the possibility of the death of the protagonist at the end of the story, the book is described by its publishers Penguin as '*Room* meets *Lord of the Flies'*. For an article in *The Guardian*, Alison Flood reported that:

> *The Bunker Diary*, which was turned down by publishers for years because of its bleak outlook, is told in the form of the diary of a kidnapped boy held hostage in a bunker. Awarding [Brooks] with the [Carnegie] medal, judges said he had created "an entirely credible world with a compelling narrative, believable characters and writing of outstanding literary merit".[24]

There was considerable opposition to the choice and Lorna Bradbury, in an article in *The Telegraph*, called it 'vile and dangerous' and a book which 'contains heroin addiction, attempted rape, torture and murder.[25] Brooks' response to the criticism was reported in *The Guardian* article:

> young people are wise enough, if they are watching or reading something they don't like, to stop doing it. They are not idiots. The Bunker Diary is a book about dark and disturbing subjects – it has to contain dark and disturbing things. And it is aimed at teenagers, who I know from personal experience are perfectly capable of dealing with that […] I disagree that it lacks redemption – yes it doesn't have a happy ending, but within the story there is genuine kindness and love and protection, and if that is not a positive look at how humans can behave in a desperate situation, I don't know what is […] Children – and teens in particular – don't need to be cosseted with artificial hope that there will always be a happy ending. They want to be immersed in all aspects of life, not just the easy stuff.

The deliberations of the author regarding disturbing themes and content is to the fore in this response along with the statement of the author's personal experience of teenagers, leading to his understanding of what teenagers can handle. Brian Conaghan's YA novel

When Mr Dog Bites (2014) which features a sixteen-year-old virgin Tourette's sufferer who (mis)hears that he has not long to live, also pushes at the boundaries of what might be considered acceptable content for a teenage readership as the protagonist compiles and works through his 'bucket list'. In an article 'Crossing Boundaries' published on the *Writers and Artists* website, Conaghan debates the issues an author has to consider when making these difficult creative decisions.

> We all have boundaries in life that we won't cross. There are certain viewpoints that our conscious simply won't allow to be verbalised. You know the ones I mean: those thoughts that swim around in the deep recesses of our mind. There's no way we will ever say them, there's no way we will allow ourselves to be classed as being intolerant, bigoted, racist, sexist, extremist etc. It's our internal mechanism of protection, I suppose. However, as writers we have the ability to tackle these traits head-on by shielding behind the voice(s) of the character(s) we create. But should writers have boundaries themselves? No-go areas? Or is creativity a blank canvas where everything and anything is fair game? These are questions that have been posed to me since the publication of my YA novel, *When Mr Dog Bites.* [26]

Conaghan's comments suggest that writers can examine their own viewpoints and possible prejudices and decide whether to present and explore these potentially no-go areas in fiction. Given this 'blank canvas' position, however, also brings with it the consideration of age and stage appropriateness, and the responsibility an author has in putting challenging work out for public consumption.

Given this overview of books marketed in the UK, it is interesting to compare them with fiction that is written for teenagers in other countries along with the level of 'moral acceptance' by that particular society and the perspectives of the respective authors. In September 2015, Roy E. Ainge reported in *The Guardian* on the banning in New Zealand of the novel *Into the River* (2012) by Ted Dawe. The novel, which was the winner of the New Zealand Post Children's Book award in 2013 and is aimed at a teenage, mostly male audience, was banned following a complaint from the conservative lobby group Family First, which objected to 'sexually explicit content, drug use and the use of a slang term for female genitalia.' *The Guardian* reported Dawe's response:

> I have taught in secondary schools for the past forty years. Much of this time has been spent encouraging boys to read. Part of the challenge was to find books that 'spoke' to them. This meant books

> about issues that were relevant to them and written in a style that was authentic.
>
> There are many issues that young adults cannot take to other people. They want to do their own thinking about them. There is no better, no more private medium for this than the novel.
>
> In this relatively safe context the teenager can navigate through issues such as race, sexual orientation, body issues, class discrimination and bullying and harassment. They can test their responses against the main characters and calibrate the differences without the need to discuss.[27]

Yet in another *Guardian* article, Norwegian writer Ingelin Røssland reported a very different reaction to the content of literature for teenagers in the more liberal Scandinavian countries. In her article 'Why there are no taboos in Scandinavian children's books', Røssland commented on the 'Scandi children's and teen lit scene, where explorations of sexuality and explicit swearing escape censorship…':

> I believe in the liberty to write about anything for any audience young or old. That is something very special, to be able to sit down with the freedom to write exactly the story that is burning inside of you and get it published.
>
> In Scandinavia there are no taboos when it comes to writing, even for children and young people. Books for teens exploring sexuality with explicit language are not censored. It's so normal for us. There is nothing I can't cover as a teen writer and I know my publisher would stand by me no matter what.
>
> Here are a couple of examples to explain what I mean. The book Fittekvote by Axel Hellstenius and Morten Skårdal, about young girls in the military, won a literature prize in 2011. It would be called "Cunt Quota" if translated into English.
>
> Another book, Tjuven ("The Thief") by Rune Belsvik, is aimed at children around eight years old. In it, the main character, Jolver, learns how to masturbate from his friend Bob. The friend tells him how it's good to touch yourself while looking at naked women in a magazine. I can't quite see this happening in the UK… yet. [28]

The day-to-day life experiences of young people on the cusp of adulthood have found their place as subject matter in twenty-first century YA fiction. There are books that deal with troubling situations and have hope as a theme and books that do not end too well yet have a positive look at how 'humans can behave in a desperate situation'; there are books written for the author's own pleasure which are then marketed for a YA readership and there are

authors who have a good understanding of teenagers and write books according to their knowledge of that age group. There are boundaries which may or may not be crossed and varying views of the nature of adolescents and their capacity to 'deal' with difficult issues. The adults who are in the position to decide how these experiences and challenges are depicted to a teenage readership assume a gatekeeper role. The motivation behind censorship, whether it occurs during the initial creative stage, or during the editorial stage prior to publication or in the review of published books, can originate from a sense of protection for possibly vulnerable individuals, or from a moral standpoint. A drawback to censorship, however, must be the risks of patronising and of underestimating the capabilities of our young people, factors which are likely to alienate them. In my own uncertainty of the extent of censorship to employ in my work, I have discovered that I come firstly with a sense of responsibility for teenagers as other people with needs and vulnerabilities, but then try to question my prejudices and move forward without giving way to either my own, or others, 'adult moral outrage'. Summing up the evolution of teenage and YA fiction in the UK in an article posted on his website, 'Teenage Fiction Comes of Age' (first published in *The Bookseller* in 2000), Melvin Burgess states:

> Teenage fiction is an area that has developed out of recognition in recent years. I can't recall any books written specifically for me when I was that age. […] It is about young people reading books and recognizing themselves. I want people to be able to pick up one of my books and think – I know this stuff and I know these people; this is mine. [29]

That a YA novel is possibly one that a teenager can pick up and say, 'I know this stuff; this is mine', seems a reasonable assumption and a target to aim for.

Despite being amongst teenagers as a secondary teacher for most of the last three decades, I decided that what teenagers choose to read was worth exploring before I embarked on my new project. To gain insights into these choices, I set up a volunteer focus group of teenagers to meet with and to talk about books and reading. From my informal meetings with the focus group, I was struck by the extent that young people share their own writing online on sites such as Wattpad.[30] One participant said that she never read (print) books but did enjoy reading fan fiction online and would engage, also online, by adding comments on the submitted stories and by voting in the site-run competitions. Another participant read widely: print books, ebooks and fan fiction, and wanted to take time in the meetings to share her thoughts about their content and themes. She was also a contributor to fan fiction sites and had won fan fiction contests. On the whole, when

discussing particular novels, they had little concern with writing techniques, such as point of view and tense, and focused more on the satisfaction gained from a 'good story' and the challenges faced by characters. When I broached my own area of study, the participants spoke enthusiastically about stories that embraced and celebrated difference and they valued the portrayal of the acceptance of difference. However, one sixteen-year-old participant voiced his opinion that a good story should always be a priority over meeting a perceived agenda for diversity.

In her research, *Adolescents talk about reading: exploring resistance to and engagement with text* (2004, p. 12), Anne Reeves examines the reasons why teenagers read:

> As students engage in the work of growing up, they look for ways to negotiate the process of becoming a successful man or woman in their society. Their reading choices reflect their understanding of what manhood or womanhood consists of in their culture. Reading choices also reflect their individual desires and their conflicts with societal norms. They use fiction and nonfiction as sources of information, inspiration, comfort and challenge as they make their way through adolescence towards adulthood. They resist those texts that tell them something they do not want to hear, and they resist texts that take them away from the experiences they seek. Naturally enough, they also resist texts they do not understand.

An understanding of why teenagers choose to read certain texts and resist others can be informative to the YA fiction writer. Reflecting on my own reading as an adolescent, I came to choosing and reading novels for pleasure relatively late; I was definitely in my mid-teens by the time I began to do so. I was not unusual amongst my peers in our council estate primary school, in that I did not read books at home. There was never any talk of books amongst my friends. And even when I was selected to attend a very traditional girls' grammar school after sitting the 11+ examination, I was so out of place, being the only person from my primary school and the only working-class pupil in my form group, that wondering if the other girls read books at home would not even have raised itself as a question. As my adolescent years were during the early 1970s, there were very few novels written for teenagers and it was adult books from which I made my choice. I remember being struck by the voice created by D H Lawrence in *Sons and Lovers* (1965) when I studied it at 'O' Level. I had never before come across a writer who portrayed working class characters from the north and midlands of England. However, it was the interactions of characters from different social classes that resonated with my situation. Here was I,

brought up in a north of England working-class milieu, trying to assimilate myself in a middle-class educational environment, which was not being made any easier by the establishment in which I found myself. The portrayal of this theme in literature made me seek out more of his works. That *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1960) was my first choice is probably an accurate intimation of my teenage preoccupations. A study to establish the reading habits of young people provides a more recent perspective. A report by the National Literacy Trust published in December 2005, following a study of 8000 primary and secondary pupils in England, provides data showing that almost 40 percent of pupils receiving free school meals reported that they read outside school in the 'never or almost never' and 'once or twice a month' categories. It was also reported that pupils in this group 'were significantly more likely to agree that reading is more for girls than for boys, that reading is boring and hard, and that they cannot find books that interest them'. Over half of pupils receiving free school meals did not consider reading fiction as enjoyable, and even of those pupils who were not receiving free school meals, only around fifty per cent reported reading enjoyment in the 'quite a lot' or 'very much' categories. [31]

From my own experiences, I find I can empathise with young people who do not want to read texts to which they find it difficult to relate, or which are trying to tell them something they do not want to hear. It was not that I was a reluctant reader, as such. When I found something that did 'speak' to me and something that reflected my own experiences, I sought out more of the same. These first ventures into the world of books led, eventually, to a broadening in my choice of reading material. When I reflect on my own writing, it is perhaps unsurprising to find that I regularly draw on themes relating to social and economic class and the challenges brought about by the inequality of opportunity for people from the lower classes. Consequently, given the motivations required for teenagers to read, and my own drive to reflect a stratum of society currently under-represented in YA fiction, an objective in my creative work was to discover the germ in my project to which adolescents might relate and to experiment with storytelling techniques to hook and keep the attention of young readers.

Despite there apparently being 'no rules' for YA fiction, and in that some writers produce work that is subsequently categorised as YA although they write without a specific age category in mind, as my chosen genre for my new project was contemporary realism I felt I needed to portray teenagers' preoccupations in a manner that would not appear false or unbelievable, even if the scenario of the storyline was beyond most young people's everyday experiences. In that I *was* writing specifically for an adolescent

readership, and given the findings from research on psychological maturation and the physical changes during this period, including changes in the teenage brain, I also felt the need to consider the expectation for an element of hope or optimism in the narrative. In the planning stage, I had intended an outcome in which the bad guy would get caught and justice would prevail. Following on from my readings, I held to this position. However, I also wished to portray a teenager making moral decisions and I sought opportunities in the narrative where Alex's integrity would be tested. The text gives an account of the escalation of Alex's despair and the strain it puts on his moral code. Hope becomes a possibility for Alex when he responds to an outside influence that brings him back to his true moral position. The strain Alex endures from externally imposed ordeals is exacerbated by the repression of his sexuality. In my quest to write for inclusion, it was Alex's sexuality which initially gave me pause for thought as I considered writing a character experiencing a marginalised position of which I had no knowledge. It was research for this aspect of my writing practice that led me to the wide-ranging ongoing discussions regarding the representation in fiction of those belonging to marginalised communities.

The Call for Diversity and Inclusion in YA Fiction

The argument for a greater diversity of characters in YA fiction finds support from a wide range of interested parties. In a comment promoting the Penguin Random House WriteNow Live events, Malorie Blackman states:

> Books allow you to see the world through the eyes of others. Reading is an exercise in empathy; an exercise of walking in someone else's shoes for a while.[32]

As creators of fiction, writers pull together a semblance of imagined places, characters and events, fulfilling the human need for story and providing readers with an original view of the world. In a guest blog post for the journal *Scientific American* Jag Bhalla suggests that story is a cognitive function and that story patterns are a 'sort of meta-grammar' we use to help explain how the world works.

> It is in our nature to need stories. They are our earliest sciences, a kind of people-physics. Their logic is how we naturally think. […] Every culture bathes their children in stories to explain how the world works and to engage and educate their emotions. Perhaps story patterns could be considered another higher layer of language. A sort of meta-grammar shaped by and shaping conventions of character types, plots, and social-rule dilemmas prevalent in our culture.[33]

Bhalla suggests that we are 'sharply attentive to character and plot' and that stories 'configure contextual triggers and the expected emotional reactions of our culture—perhaps defining a sort of emotional grammar'. This function of story to provide a landscape in which a young reader can comprehend how other people feel by understanding how a fictional character thinks and feels and acts in a particular context is supported by the studies of Maria Nikolajeva, Professor of Education at the University of Cambridge. In an article in the *New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship*, she reports that:

> reading fiction provides an excellent training for young people in developing and practising empathy and theory of mind, that is, understanding of how other people feel and think.[34]

With this training, it is just a small step to take to comprehend those who see the world very differently from ourselves. BJ Epstein, Senior Lecturer in Literature and Public Engagement at the University of East Anglia, reflects on how books can serve as an introduction for young people to 'others':

> Research on prejudice shows that coming in contact with people who are different – so-called 'others' – helps to reduce stereotypes. This is because when we see people who initially seem different, we learn about them and get closer to them through their story. The "other" seems less far away and, well, less "otherly".
>
> But while it may be ideal for children to actually meet people from different backgrounds in person, if that isn't possible, books can serve as a first introduction to an outside world.[35]

In an article for *The Guardian,* SF Said, another children's author, reflects on this development of empathy in young people through reading fiction, and the subsequent potential this has in overcoming prejudice:

> I feel the idea of "us and them" lies at the root of many problems in the world. When a group of people see themselves as "us", and reject everyone else as "them", prejudice, exclusion and violence often follow […] I've worked in many fields: politics, academia, journalism. But I honestly believe that books for young readers have the deepest impact of all. They're the books that shape us and stay with us forever. Like ancient myths, they deal with the biggest questions: *Who are we? Where do we come from? Where do we belong? How should we live?*[36]

These various assertions regarding the development of empathy gained by experiencing different worldviews through fiction can be viewed as support for the call for the portrayal of a greater diversity of characters in YA fiction, a cause which has been taken up by various bodies. The organisation Inclusive Minds, for example, describes itself on its website as 'a collective for people who are passionate about inclusion, diversity, equality and accessibility in children's literature'. The collective works with 'writers, illustrators, publishers, library professionals, teachers, booksellers, charities, book organisations and – most importantly – children and parents' and its work includes developing and delivering 'innovative projects aimed at creating truly inclusive, diverse and accessible books'.[37] Another organisation concerned with children's reading, The Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE), is a charity working 'to improve literacy in primary schools'. Its aim is to raise the achievement of children by 'helping schools to teach literacy creatively and effectively'. A goal set for their 2017 conference was to investigate how literature:

> can be used to raise self-esteem, encourage empathy and develop social cohesion; creating a foundation upon which our pupils can grow to be resilient, articulate, confident and literate individuals.[38]

The arguments for the call for greater diversity in children's and YA fiction can be seen, then, as supporting both the means to ensure young people from all backgrounds are represented, providing a place whereby those from a marginalised community can see their personal perspective 'mirrored', and also the widening of a reader's worldview by encouraging empathy with the situation of others.

Along with this call from organisations and industry professionals, the paucity of diverse characters in YA literature is also reflected upon by young people who are themselves members of marginalised communities. Fourteen-year-old schoolboy Frankie, who was born with a disability, highlighted his concerns when he approached the publishing house Bloomsbury for an item on BBC *Newsround.*[39] He challenged a Bloomsbury editor about the lack of characters from different backgrounds in books and also made the point that quite often in children's fiction villains are portrayed with physical deformities. His feelings were also reported in *The Guardian*:

> I think if we involve disabled people in books, we can raise awareness and it will become the norm to people. They won't stare, they won't make comments, and life would get better, society would get better.[40]

Megan, a teenage book blogger, expressed similar frustrations:

> My name's Megan. I'm a teenager, a book blogger, a book addict, an aspiring author and a now-too-old member of this site (sad face). Oh, and I also happen to be in a wheelchair.
>
> Sorry for that little introduction, but I just wanted to point out how being in a wheelchair doesn't define me. And I want people like that in books too: I want normal characters in normal situations, who are either wheelchair-users or cane-users or whatever – I'm really not fussy.[41]

For a writer, a key aspect to take from these readers' statements is that these young people are not 'defined' by the characteristic that includes them in a marginalised group and that this should be reflected in books. Young people such as Megan consider it 'wrong' for some folk to feel left out or marginalised and it is important, as she puts it, to 'learn how to relate *with* those who aren't like you'. [Italics in original blogpost.]

In one of the conversations I conducted with established YA authors as background research for this project, Peter Kalu commented that for his own research he took a look at YA novels in a local bookshop and found that for non-white teenage readers there was very little reflection of their culture.[42] For a member of a minority community or social group in Britain, this particular reading experience of picking a book from the shelf and

seeing someone from your own community on the cover, a commonplace occurrence for the mainstream reader, is not the norm. In a similar vein, author Catherine Johnson commented in an online conversation with Bali Rai for the *BookTrust*, 'Of course you can find books that feature working class and non-white protagonists, but you are going to have to look for them.'[43]

Questions raised from these discussions might include: Is it desirable for *all* young people in the UK, mainstream or marginalised, to see currently under-represented communities reflected in literature? Do members of these communities have a right to see their particular community or situation mirrored? Ought there to be a wider range of writers bringing forward stories from their own communities? Again, Catherine Johnson comments:

> In an ideal world diversity would mean the availability of stories that reflect a wide range of British backgrounds and experiences including class and race, written by a wide range of people.

The debate about diversity in YA fiction, however, was opened wider when Meg Rosoff responded to a Facebook comment posted on Crazy Quilts Edi's page:

> There are not too few books for marginalised young people. There are hundreds of them, thousands of them. You don't have to read about a queer black boy to read a book about a marginalised child. The children's book world is getting far too literal about what "needs" to be represented. You don't read Crime and Punishment to find out about Russian criminals. Or Alice in Wonderland to know about rabbits. Good literature expands your mind. It doesn't have the "job" of being a mirror. [44]

Later, following lively responses on the same Facebook thread, she commented that, 'Books have one job and one job only, and that is to reflect the deepest thoughts of the writer'. She added, 'diversity is not an agenda. It is about writing with resonance and having that resonance connect with a reader.' The tapping into a universal understanding, whether through emotions or shared human experiences, and achieving this 'resonance' with a reader is an objective to which a writer might aspire. Yet the possibility of taking a reader to a new place with different characters can also be an aim. Author Joanne Harris contributes her own perspective on diversity in a blog post:

> So, let's hear it for diverse voices. But let's make it real diversity. Not just US diversity, or YA diversity, or LGBT diversity. For every mirror we seek out in books, let's also seek out a window into a place we've never been. Some of those places may not be easy to inhabit.

> Going there may be a challenge to our preconceptions. But that's the reason we should try – be that as readers or writers.[45]

This comment from Harris urges writers and readers alike to challenge their preconceptions and venture into new territories.

When I discussed with the focus group of young people at the local secondary school these varying positions regarding diversity in YA fiction, these teenagers commented that they preferred to see novels with a diverse cast for interest value as much as any socio-political ideal.[46] While the participants suggested that the inclusion of marginalised characters was only 'fair', they were also emphatic that it was important to witness the acceptance of difference in the narrative. The concept of fairness was put forward at an Inclusive Minds seminar at the London Book Fair in 2015 by a young boy and his mum. The boy related how on World Book Day he had difficulty finding a character to dress up as from his story books.[47]

> School had asked us to dress up as a book character for World Book Day but I couldn't think of anyone to be. I like books and read lots with my mum. She kept suggesting all these characters from stories we had read but none of them were right. I'd either have to have my face painted or wear a mask. None of them looked like me. She thought I was being fussy but when I told her why I was upset she understood and set out to find some stories with people like me in them.

His mum added:

> We are an average mum and son combo – we don't necessarily have the answers as to why there seems to be unequal representation of diversity in children's books. Is it lack of authors of colour? Probably not – we've met lots now. Reluctant publishers and book sellers? Maybe. We don't know. We just know that it's not fair and needs to change.

Another parent who values the opportunity for her sons to see *difference* in what they read is Katie Cunningham, an Assistant Professor at Manhattanville College in children's literature, who also brings attention to this importance of fiction providing both mirrors and windows for young adults.

> The characters my sons encounter are often mirrors and they find their life experiences reflected in the books they read. Children from dominant social groups have always found their mirrors in books […] My sons need more than mirror books […] My sons and all children need books that provide windows into other life experiences to

> understand the diverse world we live in and to build connections to all other humans.[48]

Does this responsibility to provide 'windows' and 'mirrors' for teenage readers lie with *all* YA authors? A writer cannot be so naïve to expect never to offend a reader from a marginalised community but they can take steps to mitigate for inadvertent inaccuracies. Many writers and editors now hire sensitivity readers who will provide feedback on areas the writer or editor feels unsure about.[49] The emergent writer can use workshops and beta readers. The safest position for a writer is not to try to stray from their own lived experience, but writing is rarely about being safe.

From my point of view as a reader, when I open the pages of a new novel, implicit in the act is a degree of trust. I trust that certain of my expectations have at least been considered by the author and if they cannot be honoured then I will be put right about this in the opening few pages, either explicitly or by the tone and style of the text. My primary expectation is that I will experience a 'here we go' moment, whether on an adventure or on a personal journey or an exploration of a mystery. On a different level, I also expect that through the fiction I experience, created as a joint venture between the writer's output and my reading of that output, there will be a communication on a person to person level, and that the communication may be forged around a personal or collective truth. I have an awareness that the communication I perceive, built upon my engagement with the text from my own life experiences, will be my unique reading and may well be very different to another reader's. Whether the germ of the fiction is whimsical or profound, I trust that the writer will have done the homework necessary to the project in hand. For example, if the communication relies on a certain body of knowledge, I trust that I will not be fed inaccuracies. Likewise, I expect a similar level of accuracy if the fiction is based in a recognisable culture or society or sector of society, holding true whether either myself or the writer is a member of that culture or society, or not.

The establishment of this trust allows a writer to bear witness to difficult truths and to take the reader to dark and dangerous places. Children's author Morris Gleitzman wanted to write about friendship. Gleitzman is not known for writing cosy children's fiction (*Two Weeks with the Queen* (1991) deals with AIDS) and in this project, which culminated in *Once* (2006), an award-winning first book of a series beginning during the Holocaust, he explains on his website that he wanted 'to investigate how friendship survives in tough times. To see if friendship can be tough too'. Gleitzman very much considers his readership and their needs as he takes them to these tough places:

> I knew that reading Felix's story would be a journey of discovery for most young readers and so I decided that the story should be a journey of discovery for Felix too, told in his own words. That way readers could experience the terrible and dismaying parts of the story through his eyes and his feelings, never far away from the joy and hope of his friendship with Zelda and the protection he receives from Barney. And so the story could be about the worst we are capable of as a species, and the best, side by side.[50]

Discussing the use of craft to emphasise his theme he comments:

> *Once* would also, I hoped, remind readers that history isn't the distant alien place it sometimes seems. It's the day to day lives of ordinary people, which is why each chapter in the book starts in the past tense, and then after a sentence or two shifts to the present tense. To the place where all history is made, by people just getting on with it, minute by minute.

Pertinent to my own uncertainties as a writer, he debates whether he had permission to write this novel:

> I thought long and hard about whether I had permission to write this story. In the years immediately after the Holocaust, as the world struggled to come to terms with what had happened, there was a strongly-held view that if you hadn't experienced it, you shouldn't try to write about it.
>
> But seventy years have passed. I knew from spending time with thousands of young people that this terrible and crucial part of our history was often not available to them and I believed it should be. So I set out to write a story that I hoped would point young readers towards the real voices of the Holocaust.

Gleitzman provides us with an example of a writer who knows he has something important to communicate to his readership and, although he debates his position on how to best write this content and whether he has permission to do so, with conscientious research, and with compassion for his fellow humans, he tackles subjects which are important to share.

When considering the importance of the pursuit of universal truth in literature, a writer might question whether it is important to consider the gender, or ethnic background, or level of ability, or sexuality of the characters they create. Yet evidence presented by campaigning individuals and organisations points to an equally compelling parallel pursuit, that of embracing diversity and being committed to writing for inclusion. Fiction written

with this intention can then include a wide range of characters to provide 'mirrors' for those readers outwith the mainstream, and 'windows' for all readers.

It would seem that proposals from campaigners are beginning to receive due attention, resulting in an increased diversity in current YA fiction. However, there appears to be some way to go before readers from marginalised communities can see inclusion in the way described by Kerry Mason of Letterbox Library when she attended the Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE) conference in 2017. Caroline Carpenter of *The Bookseller* reported Mason's suggestion that 'diversity in fiction is not about having books on issues, it is about having different types of people represented in books'.[51] Writers making new work are in a position to help effect a change, yet such an undertaking is far from straightforward, and when writers do rise to the challenge, problems can surface from various quarters. My position of writing from my own knowledge and background was relatively secure; it was the writing of a character from a marginalised position different from my own that required greater attention.

Writing Diversity as Inclusion

With my attempts to portray Alex belonging to a family experiencing financial difficulties, my writing stemmed from my own experiences. In my youth, I generally came home to an empty house after school as both my parents were mill workers. Coming home from primary school, I waited in the back yard for a parent to get home. By the time I started secondary school, I was considered responsible enough to be given a door key and I went into the house to start making tea, peeling potatoes for chips mostly. I was not aware of this being anything out of the ordinary until a friend I had made at secondary school came to my house after school one day and was (she reminded me years later) utterly surprised. She came from a dairy farming family where her mum cooked three meals a day and made delicious cakes.

Comments made by Crazy Maisie Moo, a site member of *The Guardian's* children's book teen opinion section, strengthened my resolve to portray Alex's experiences from a financially disadvantaged situation. In her article about the lack of working class characters in YA fiction, entitled 'Does YA fiction need to check its privilege', she reinforced the point about social class and YA fiction.

> Think about what contemporary YA fiction you've read recently: chances are, the characters have a nice house and a stable household income; parents who don't have to work weekends just to make ends meet and financial worries never cross their mind. This doesn't reflect the real world; a world where many children and teenagers grow up below the poverty line, and hardly see their parents because they work so hard just to put food on the table and to keep a roof over their head. [52]

This opinion of a teenage reader of YA fiction confirmed that, on this matter, my intention to 'reflect the real world' was pertinent. Yet a further comment in the article bothered me:

> I'm not blaming authors, because I know the age old myth of 'write what you know'; if you weren't brought up in a working class family, it can be difficult to write a credible character or setting without it coming across as though you are trivialising or appropriating it.

She then goes on to refer to contemporary YA novels which evidence the potential pitfalls for a non-working-class author writing about what they do not *know,* including examples of tokenism, stereotypes and the exaggerated portrayal of negative aspects of living in poverty.

This observation, then, accurately pinpointed my own insecurity when writing this novel, and my dilemma. Do I have the right to suggest my novel is appropriate to offer to a YA readership when I have included a character whose marginalised position I cannot possibly *know*? Or, if I have put in enough research and have checked my facts, and I have delved into the emotional soup that is made up of my *knowing* a different type of marginalised community, can I make a decent enough attempt to follow my aim of trying to be inclusive? From reading other writers' reflections, I do not think that I am alone in feeling that I somehow need to seek permission to write a marginalised character; that I am not the only writer who feels scared of being called out in some way. Children's author Candy Gourlay makes this point in an article for *Notes from the Slushpile*:

> So, let's be honest. We authors are terrified of diversity in children's books. Are we doing it right? Are we offending anyone by not including/including a character who is 'other' in our stories? Who is allowed to write about other cultures/races/sexual orientations? Who should be offended? Who should just keep their mouths shut?[53]

She continues by stating that although she is identified as a diverse writer, she questions what this means and explains: 'I just want to tell a good story and my character casting reflects the diversity that I experience on a daily basis.' Her clearly stated aim closely echoes my own aim for this project. In that the diversity I have experienced on a daily basis over decades has been working with teenagers from a range of backgrounds, including those experiencing life in the care system and those caught up in the criminal justice system and, inevitably, from the full spectrum of sexual orientations, is this a sufficient basis for me to write a novel reflecting this diversity in my aim to be inclusive? In her article, Candy Gourlay provides one answer:

> But if we focus on diversity as inclusion, does it simply mean that authors of whatever race or creed can feel free to write any character of any sensibility, race or culture into their books? I vote YES. Yes because, although I am writing heroes who are Filipino like me, my real world is not monocultural and I want to write not only *about* my world but *for* my world. Also, I would be a very sad author indeed if I could only write characters who came over to London from Cubao, Quezon City in the Philippines.

However, along with this positive, encouraging message, Gourlay adds a mitigating corollary:

> Ah, but someone will say, you're wrong to vote yes. The answer is more complicated than that because you might be contributing to the Problem.

Gourlay highlights aspects of the Problem with a quote from a blogpost written by a group of librarians in the US who have set up a website called Reading While White:

> Yes, you have the right to write about whatever you want, in the USA, at least. The constitution guarantees free speech (although, and this is key, it does not guarantee consequence-free speech). So, yeah--we White people can write pretty much whatever we want and nobody will send us to jail for it. But either or both of the following might be true:
> 1) You might drown out or overshadow (effectively silencing) marginalized people who justly want to tell their own stories.
>
> 2) You might get some stuff wrong and evoke criticism from people whom you misrepresent.
>
> And nothing you do can alter either of these truths. Not even asking permission from someone from the culture about which you're writing.

These are important considerations and are in step with the many conversations taking place in the UK concerning cultural appropriation, misrepresentation and own voice writing. Writing from a position that you *know* gives the narrative authenticity, yet the need to write outwith this knowledge is inevitable if an author is going to write characters from more than that one stated position, whether it be a different gender, age or from another cultural background. It is when an author sets out to write a character from a marginalised community that they might then be perceived to be 'contributing to the Problem' of the appropriation of another people's identity and cultural experiences. It is self-evident that an increase in the diversity in the pool of writers of YA fiction will provide for a greater diversity of stories. #ownvoices literature is authentic with a capital A. *The Hate U Give* (2017) by Angie Thomas, along with Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007), *Silent Striker* (2015) by Peter Kalu and *Release* (2017) by Patrick Ness are powerful because they pick up the questions which trouble the communities of which the authors are members.

Yet a push to encourage a greater diversity of writers into the publishing world to extend the current, narrow picture is separate to the issue of *any* writer, whether from a marginalised community or from the mainstream, creating a narrative which includes characters 'other' to the mainstream, and which is from a different perspective than the

writer's own background. Marcus Sedgwick is not a blind teenager girl, yet in *She is Not Invisible* (2013) he has written a compelling account of a blind teenage girl who decides to go to America to find her father who she suspects is in trouble, taking her younger brother with her. Among the reviews on Inclusive Minds Books, teenage reviewer Beth says:

> I really enjoyed *She Is Not Invisible* and thought that the portrayal of Laureth was realistic and will challenge the perceptions of what someone with a visual impairment can achieve independently. The research Marcus did really paid off, and it's so good to have a disabled protagonist, without turning the story into being an 'issue' book. I think some of the plot lines were perhaps a little unrealistic, but that's the same of any YA thriller, and this would probably more accepted if Laureth weren't blind.[54]

Another teenage reviewer added:

> Many books featuring disabled characters fall into the trap of feeling they have to somehow 'compensate' for the disability or turn the nature of the disability into a strength, and for me this verged on being a serious risk with the final climax of the book (where Laureth uses darkness to her advantage), however I think Marcus Sedgwick somehow just succeeded in side-stepping the potential pitfall and avoiding the clichés. Overall I feel that the book really raises the bar in terms of being both inclusive (in terms of its visually impaired character) and accessible, being published in different formats including daisy, large print, braille and audio.

This issue of writing marginalised characters from outside your own lived experience and risking the potential pitfalls of getting things wrong is not to be underestimated and can easily stray into the territory of cultural appropriation. It is one that has exercised children's fiction writers to such an extent that the UK branch of the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI) held a Pulse discussion group event to debate the situation.

> For Pulse's first event in 2017, we are going to tackle the hot potato of Cultural Appropriation, the subject of vociferous activism in the United States - that is possibly having an impact here in the UK as agents and editors hesitate to take on texts where there is an ethnicity mismatch between author and character.[55]

Prior to the event, Gourlay commented on the blogpost:

> There are so many questions! What is Cultural Appropriation and what is wrong with it? Can I write a character that is not the same

> ethnicity as me? When is it appropriation and when is it appreciation? Isn't all fiction cultural appropriation?

That the subject is of immediate concern for SCBWI members was shown in that tickets for the event were sold out within twenty-four hours of release. The focus at this event was a mismatch based on ethnicity, however similar discussion points are frequently raised with the mismatch of other aspects of difference, be they related to sexuality or gender issues or social class.

If in my writing I was going to avoid contributing to the problem by 'getting stuff wrong', my decision to write for inclusion brought along with it the necessity to 'get it right'. As a pragmatist, I seek solutions in concrete examples and so I explored cases where authors have adopted a similar aim and faced a similar challenge. In her *Notes from the Slushpile* article, Gourlay provides an example of when good intentions are not enough.

> Recently, picture book writer Clare Bell and illustrator Dave Grey worked together on The Unstoppable Maggie McGee, a book about children in hospital.
>
> I urge you all to read Clare's inspiring blog post on how spending time with ill and disabled children threw out all her plans for the book.
>
> It is an example of how, however well-intentioned, we all tend to approach a project with preconceived notions that only research and hard work can dispel.

An instance in which the need for in-depth research was recognised and discussed, concerns the portrayal of trans characters in YA fiction. Sarah Lennox, who writes under the name Richard Brassey and is the author and illustrator of around 40 books for children, made the following comments at the 2015 London Book Fair Inclusive Minds seminar: 'Including the Excluded: Diversity and Inclusion in Action':

> So here's my problem with most of the books which have contained supposed trans characters in the past.
>
> Only last year […] and sadly this is far from an isolated example […] a young adult novel came out purporting to be written in the first person by a transgender kid. I'm not going to name and shame the author but this is what the publicity blurb boasted:
>
> "The author is not transgender. She doesn't personally know anyone who is. There's no 'expertise' on her side. She wanted to write a story about a teenager trying to find their identity and the book just 'flowed' out of her."

> Imagine a white author saying this when writing about the specific issues facing a black kid in our society or a fully able author writing about the problems facing a character with a disability without even so much as second-hand knowledge of the realities. There's a lot of catching up to do.
>
> The [other] book I want to recommend is *The Art of Being Normal* by Lisa Williamson published by David Fickling this year in the UK.
>
> I'm so relieved and delighted by the way Lisa, who is not herself trans, has really done her homework. I'd defy any teenager not to empathise with her trans characters […] and we see the story through their eyes. The great thing is that their lives are mostly filled with the same kinds of concerns as those of all kids. What she's written is a terrific story full of tension and pathos which had me in tears at times.[56]

These examples highlight the problems for a writer of not questioning preconceptions, or of letting good intentions take the lead, or of missing out vital research.

Children's book writer Ross Montgomery writes about his experiences once he had made a decision that in his next book he would steer away from his cosy path of writing characters who were like himself, saying:

> For me, the default starting position is to make my characters white and able-bodied - like me, basically. It's something I do without thinking. [57]

Yet he admitted how difficult it was to write for inclusion and he described the extensive help he required:

> There was just one problem: I was terrible at it. When I first realised this, I was utterly mortified. I had run headfirst into my limitations as a writer. In my first draft, I didn't just have one lazily-written token female character: I had two. When I first wrote the characters with disabilities, I handled the issue mawkishly at best and offensively at worst. It was all well and good to say that I was going to write diverse characters, but what if I actually couldn't - what if I wasn't good enough?

The help Montgomery received was from his publishing team:

> My publisher, editor and agent all realised the importance of what I was trying to do: they pointed out where I was making mistakes, gave advice, made suggestions, and were above all very patient with me.

But for an unagented writer, preparing a manuscript for submission to the slush pile, where can the same level of help be unearthed?

I have found that the published authors I have met at workshops or conferences are extremely generous with their time and advice, but this type of support by networking can only really benefit writers on a one-to-one basis. Several authors publish their comments on their web or blog sites. Candy Gourlay is one such author and she regularly offers comments and reflections on the ongoing discussions surrounding diversity and inclusion in children's and YA fiction. During the writing of my manuscript I found much in her blogposts to support the positions I hold or I have adopted. In her *Notes from the Slushpile* post, Gourlay advocates three principles relevant to creating diverse stories. Her first is: 'Your character's Otherness doesn't have to be The Story.' This was a stance I had adopted from the start of my project. Alex's 'Story' is how he comes to acknowledge and overcome his repression of a core feature of his personality. His sexuality is not the 'Issue' of the novel, but is a part of Alex's character. Her second comment also relates to character: 'You can't go wrong if your characters are fully imagined.' As described in more detail in the following section, creating fully rounded main characters in *Sea Change* was a fundamental aspect of my working process and I considered characterisation a cornerstone to the whole project. Thirdly, Gourlay recommends: 'The best story, the one that will captivate readers, should be built on truth and not on agenda.' This comment chimes with my two stated objectives at the beginning of this project of wishing to create a well written and gripping story, which has relevance for a young adult readership, and to illuminate, with respect and authenticity, some of the difficult aspects of adolescence. Gourlay sums up the position for writers:

> Diversity is vexed and complex territory, and right now authors must pick their way carefully through the burning coals. How do we get beyond thinking of Diversity as a problem to seeing it as an opportunity?[58]

Setting the goal of diversity as an opportunity rather than a problem, as Gourlay suggests here, is a positive mandate for writers to hold on to as they explore new ways of writing for inclusion.

When writers pull together elements for their new world they have the option and opportunity to include any type of character. It has been suggested that the interactions between characters in stories can demonstrate a culture's 'emotional grammar', along with providing an important means by which young readers can develop empathy. Writers

therefore, if they so wish, can challenge their own preconceptions by venturing into new territories, thereby potentially challenging their readers' preconceptions and helping them to develop empathy as they are confronted with a wider canvas depicting different characters in different scenarios.

Young people, irrespective of their position of belonging to the mainstream or to some 'other' community, care about the content of fiction marketed for their age group. The current output from publishers, which is reported as being not really 'fair' to readers from under-represented communities, currently denies the opportunities for marginalised readers to engage with fiction on a personal level, and deprives all young readers of the opportunity to empathise with and appreciate other cultures. Through their practice, writers have the option and the opportunity to challenge the current situation of the over-representation of mainstream cultures in YA fiction. These twin pursuits, to incorporate universal truths and to embrace diversity as inclusion, can form for a writer the basis from which to plan a new project.

Beginning a New Project

Sea Change was to be my third major project writing for a young adult readership. My first YA manuscript, *Deleted*, won the Scottish Association of Writers TC Farries trophy, adjudicated by Keith Gray in 2010. Following on from that project, I made progress with the manuscript for my second novel, *Safe Ground*, whilst studying for an MLitt in Creative Writing at University of Glasgow. I received further encouragement in support of my writing endeavours following the completion of this manuscript in that it was the winner of the Constable Trophy at the Scottish Association of Writers, it was longlisted in the Mslexia children's novel competition 2012, and Glasgow University submitted the manuscript for the Sceptre Prize in 2012. It was also the sample of work I submitted to the Scottish Book Trust and I subsequently received a New Writers' Award for Children's Fiction in 2013-14.

In both these projects the main characters are from less privileged backgrounds. In *Deleted*, which I pitched as a YA romance with an edge, the son of a traveller becomes the love interest of a main character and experiences bigotry when he comes to work in a small rural community. In *Safe Ground*, the key player, Joe, is a 16-year-old boy leaving a care home with the intention to search for his father. Spending some time living on the streets, Joe meets other youngsters experiencing difficult times, helping them out and receiving help from them in return. As I had worked in a Social Services Assessment Centre, I felt comfortable in portraying disadvantaged characters and I felt compelled to give this sector of young people a voice.

In terms of craft, a similarity in these projects was that both manuscripts were quite short, both under fifty thousand words, and had relatively simple plots. I decided that to develop as a writer of longer fiction I needed to improve on structure and plotting skills. As well as reading YA fiction, I am a fan of crime novels. I knew writing a crime novel required a degree of plotting. I had read some enjoyable YA crime and thriller novels, including *The Glass Demon* (2010) written by fellow Scottish writer, Helen Grant. I made an early decision then to undertake a crime novel with a gripping plot for a YA readership.

I had discovered in my previous ventures that a major consideration at the beginning of a new project is the choice of point of view. My two earlier projects were both written from the point of view of a first-person narrator. This is a well-used technique in YA fiction and is one which provides an immediacy into the world of the protagonist and a direct view of their thoughts and opinions. Both Keith Gray and Meg Rosoff make

use of first person narration in their novels. This is the opening of *Ostrich Boys* (2008) by Keith Gray:

> Our best friend was ash in a jar. Ross was dead. Kenny, Sim and I were learning to live with it.[59]

Meg Rosoff is widely acknowledged for her ability to capture a YA 'voice'. In *How I Live Now* (2005) it is almost as if Daisy, the main character, is speaking directly, and candidly to the reader:

> When I go back over my writing now I can barely read it. The happiness is the worst. Some days I can't bring myself to remember. But I will not relinquish a single detail of the past.[60]

These extracts show how the author's choice of a protagonist first-person point of view can reveal an opinion of that character on a significant event that has recently taken place. Yet, I believe, the intimacy brought by the first-person point of view can be equally conveyed with a well-crafted third-person point of view. The opening sentences of Patrick Ness's *Release* (2017) take us immediately into the world of Adam, his relationship with his 'mom' and his plans for the evening which might be in jeopardy if he does not comply with her demands 'without complaint'. Equally, we can sense Adam's frustrations and his calculation that it is better to comply even if the request is unfair:

> Adam would have to get the flowers himself.
> His mum had enough to do, she said; she needed them this morning, pretty much *right now* if the day wasn't going to be a total loss; and in the end, Adam's attendance at this little "get-together" with his friends tonight may or may not hinge on his willingness/success in picking up the flowers and doing so without complaint.
> Adam argued – quite well, he thought, without showing any overt anger – that his brother, Marty, was the one who'd run over the *old* flowers[.][61]

We can hear Adam's mom's voice exactly as Adam hears it as she insists on needing the flowers '*right now'* and with her dismissal of Adam's little "get together". The narration of Adam's story of his day (as opposed to the supernatural sub-story), told through this limited third-person point of view, permits a differently nuanced perspective for the reader, yet loses nothing of the intimacy of the first-person narration.

For my new project, I considered different options for point of view, for example, multiple first-person narrators, or Alex in first person and the rest of the characters in third person. Contemporary Scottish crime writers including Val McDermid, Stuart MacBride

and Denise Mina are exponents of the close-third-person point of view. This style allows the reader to follow multiple characters, including scenes in which the main character is not present and I decided initially to experiment with this technique, getting as close as possible to the thoughts and actions of each of the three main narrating characters: Alex, Daniel and Caitlin.

Plot

I had already established a loose method of writing a novel, from initial ideas to completed second or third draft, in the previous manuscripts. I had also attended training for scriptwriting, including being mentored during the writing of a radio drama. For this project, I sought to utilise some of the features advocated for writing screenplays to assist my plotting decisions. In his book, *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting* (2005, p. 142), Syd Field comments:

> The hardest thing about writing is knowing what to write. […] the only way you can get through that intricate tangle of seemingly endless creative decisions, solutions and choices is by knowing what you're doing and where you're going. […] You need a story line.

Field suggests that the simplest structure a writer can begin with is a beginning, an end and two plot points which break the story into three separate sections or Acts. Author of children's and YA books, Malorie Blackman, in an Arvon Centre workshop I attended, also recommended the use of a story line, or a list of plot points, to provide a route through the action or turning points of the narrative. In *Save the Cat* (2005, pp. 67-96), Blake Snyder reflects on his own use of Syd Field's recommendations for plotting screenplays and how he then developed his own list of significant plot points, or plot 'islands' to which to anchor his scenes. He went on to establish the Blake Snyder Beat Sheet, which itemises fifteen different 'beats' of a plot, giving further classification to events in the different acts of the screenplay.[62] These beats include, for example: Opening Image, Set-up, Catalyst, All Is Lost and Dark Night of the Soul. Playing around with these sections, acts and 'beats', I sketched out a skeleton structure on which to build significant scenes of my proposed story. Once I started to write from this outline I was able to learn more about the characters, their motivations and their backstories. To meet the expectations of a YA novel, I planned that the perpetrator and victims of the crimes should all be teenagers and that the solving of the crime is attributable to the teenage cast. Chuck is slightly older than Alex and Daniel, but is still in his teens. A main investigator of Daniel's disappearance is

Daniel's new girlfriend, Caitlin, who with her analytical skills and perseverance aids Alex in the final rescue and the solving of the crime. It is the actions, reactions and motivations of these key players that form the narrative to create a YA crime novel. Any police procedures are only included in scenes where these teenage characters are directly involved.

The opening scene of *Sea Change* was written with the Snyder 'Opening Image' beat in mind. It presents a scenario involving the three main characters and provides a foretaste of their interrelationships: Sixteen-year-old Alex is the protagonist and the hero; Alex's best friend Daniel is the victim and Chuck is the perpetrator of the crimes. I chose the activity in which they are involved, walking across a floorboard suspended over a beach fire, as a means to depict essential characteristics and interactions of these main players. The novel opens with these paragraphs:

> Alex backed away from the spitting flames and watched Chuck wrench another rotten timber from the derelict cottage doorway, bringing with it an avalanche of plaster and brickwork.
>
> 'Give us a hand,' Chuck called.
>
> Alex sprinted the short distance to the Keeper's Cottage, his bare feet kicking up soft sand as he went, but Daniel stayed where he was, balancing on a floorboard they'd ripped from the cottage kitchen, its nails still poking through.

As the scene develops we see that Chuck, with his athleticism and fearlessness, is in control of proceedings. Alex is shown to be an apparently willing helper. Daniel, however, is ambivalent, symbolized by his balancing on the floorboard.

Thereon in, the narrative moves into establishing the characters, the conflicts and the development of the main story. Three days after the first scene, Alex discovers a body on the beach wearing one of his old jumpers. This scene was written as the 'Catalyst' beat as it is from this point the ensuing story unfolds. For example, because Alex has been pressured into committing underhand activities on behalf of Chuck – shoplifting is later referred to – and he fears that his mother will find out, Alex decides to leave the body for somebody else to find. In the text, this is revealed in dialogue between Alex and Daniel:

> 'You know I can't let my mum find out anything. We've got to keep quiet. Can I trust you to do that?'

It is shown a little later in the text that Alex's concern about being found out is not just him looking to save his own neck. His mum is suffering from grief following the death of Alex's dad and Alex wants to protect her from the truth of his wrongdoings with Chuck.

He accepts that he was stupid to get involved with Chuck but he needs to continue in his role of 'man of the house' and to keep providing cash towards the housekeeping. The climax of the first section, or Act One, is an argument between Alex and Daniel following Daniel's exasperation with always having Alex as a minder.

During the start of the next section, or Act Two, the action shifts gear with the two friends following their own secret pursuits. Daniel is in contact with his twin sister, who he has never met, and Alex resorts to webcamming sex acts for money. The mid-point of the novel is when Daniel is discovered missing from home. It is also in this second section that sub-plots of emerging romantic relationships for the two friends come in to play. Despite Daniel initially thinking Caitlin would be more interested in Alex, she makes overtures towards Daniel and they have a first date. Later in the section, after a compromising picture of Alex has been has been sent to Angus, Alex receives attention from Angus. Section two concludes with an 'All Is Lost' scene for Alex. With Daniel still missing and his mum's health declining, resulting in her moving out of the croft to live with his aunt, Alex fears he is losing everything.

> He seized the mug Stewart had left on the drainer and pitched it at the wall […] He was out of his depth. With nobody to go to for help.

In the final act, there is a gripping climax as Alex faces a confrontation with Chuck to save Daniel. During the rescue, he is forced to realise that he cannot solve everything alone. He has constantly underestimated how much other people have to offer. Providing a resolution to events is Alex's realisation that he does not have to protect everybody around him and that accepting help is not a weakness. He decides to put his trust in Angus and allows himself to accept his sexuality.

Setting

The fictional characters in *Sea Change* are members of a marginalised rural community in a geographically remote part of the Scottish Highlands. Cultural mores of such a community, while avoiding stereotypes, can be characterised by typical occupations, leisure activities, intergenerational relationships and that 'close-knit' atmosphere which is generated from individuals in the community having knowledge of each other's business. I have personal knowledge of these aspects as I have been a member of a similar community of around four hundred people and a teacher in the secondary school for about thirty years.

It was my intention in the text of *Sea Change* to interweave in the narrative issues relating to such a community, with particular reference to the impact a remote home life has on the lives of its young people. One factor, deriving in part from a geographical remoteness, is the limited opportunities for employment. In my own community, the main employers are local government services such as the schools, a care home and the medical services, along with rural industries such as forestry and fish farms and the tourist industry. Job opportunities for young people, either as employees or self-employed, are generally within these sectors. Of those youngsters who move away, for example to go to university or college, the chances are slim of there being employment relating to their studies should they wish to return. Other than teachers and medical staff, who generally move into the area to take up positions, there are very few jobs requiring higher education qualifications.

A significant proportion of the dwellings in and surrounding highland villages are crofts, assembled within townships which share common grazing. Crofting as an occupation usually requires a measure of diversification, generally with other self-employed activities, to make a living income. These other activities may be agriculturally based, for example keeping goats and making goat's cheese; craft related, for example making pottery for the tourist trade, or other occupations that bring in income in which members of the crofting family are skilled.

The ambitions and job prospects of the key players in *Sea Change* reflect this reality. Daniel has been adopted into a traditional middle-class family and his aspirations are to go to university. Alex, meanwhile, has grown up on a croft and the family has always sought additional means to earn income. When Alex's father's death leaves them with debts from buying diving equipment, Alex and his mum face financial insecurity. Alex's mum is shown early in the narrative to be making rag dolls to sell at craft fairs and Alex takes his boat out to catch seafood for the local hotel. This situation adds to the stress at home and is the source of conflict in the narrative.

The story begins at the start of a new school year and we see how Alex's mum wants him to stay on at school. Yet Alex cannot see the point of gaining a few extra meagre qualifications. His ambition is to buy an outboard engine to increase his catch. It is this motivation to contribute to the family finances that leads him into succumbing to the peer pressure from Chuck and engaging in the questionable activity of webcamming when he needs money urgently to pay a phone bill.

The setting of the narrative in a highland village also dictated many of the activities that Alex and Daniel will have grown up with and in which they now engage. In such

communities, youngsters often spend considerable amounts of time outdoors, especially in the summer months. In my own village, these include wide-ranging games such as Manhunt, a form of hide and seek played in the woods and hillside, which is re-enacted for real in the novel when Daniel goes missing; swimming in the river; illicit drinking of alcohol and making fires, along with sporting activities such as cycling, football and shinty.

Being in a rural setting allows young people to have a greater understanding of the local wildlife, if they are inclined to be interested in such things. As a fisherman, Alex has a reason to be aware of his natural surrounding and the text exploits this to accentuate aspects of his story. When Alex has just found Chuck's body, the terns are indicative of Alex's confusion:

> Above him, a pair of terns wheeled chaotically—white, black, white against the bleached blue sky. 'You know I can't let my mum find out anything.'

Later, when he visits Chuck's campsite, his companions from the natural world emphasise his contemplations:

> A money spider dropped onto the back of his hand and he let it run over his fingers before flicking it off. A pair of coupling butterflies whirligigged over the nearby sea campion.

When Alex is preparing for his webcam session, he swats away an annoying fly, giving the reader a sense of foreboding and an insight into how uncomfortable Alex feels about his decision:

> Pulling the hand towel off the rickety chair, he swatted at a lone bluebottle. It hit the windowsill and whizzed around on its back amidst the corpses of its smaller cousins.

Alex's empathy with the natural world is highlighted by the contrast with Chuck's actions and motivations. Chuck's position in most arenas is one of dominance, and this is reflected in his relationship with the outdoors. Despite being a townie – Alex recognises Chuck's accent as 'close to Glasgow' – he is expert in bush craft skills and has the necessary, expensive tools and equipment. Alex greatly admires Chuck's abilities and downplays his own skills, despite being more 'in tune' with the biodiversity of his surroundings and making the most of simple tools such as his pocket knife, adding to the sense of naivety we have of Alex.

Other occasions of 'man in the natural world' in the text help to establish how a rural setting contributes to the culture of the community, for example, the dependence on the sea and the land for a livelihood, and the occurrences of death and decay including the hunting of small prey for food. How these features impact on the daily lives of the main characters in *Sea Change* reinforces their differences from the majority of youngsters, and the majority of readers of YA fiction, growing up in urban environments.

Characterisation

Texts on writers' craft generally concur that character portrayal is key to effective storytelling. In the introduction to the section on characterisation in *The Creative Writing Coursebook*, (2001, p. 95) novelist and lecturer in creative writing Julia Bell states: 'Without character there is no story.' Sol Stein in *Solutions for Writers* (1995, p. 49) says: 'Characters make your story. If the people come alive, what they do becomes the story.'

These same texts, along with other similar books aimed at assisting a writer to progress in their storytelling skills, give extensive consideration to the craft of writing character. With the opening sentence of the section devoted to character in *How Fiction Works,* (2009, p. 75) James Wood does not underestimate the challenge this brings for a writer: 'There is nothing harder than the creation of fictional character.' Scarlett Thomas, in the chapter on characterisation in *Monkeys with Typewriters* (2012, pp. 257-297) adds: 'It is horribly easy to write stereotypes'. Later in the chapter, Thomas discusses how a writer can avoid resorting to stereotypes by stripping away labels from characters, the chav, the geek et cetera, and by finding meaningful motivations for the characters' actions.

If the screenwriter has a different end point in view compared to the novelist, there is still great importance attached to characterisation in the writing process. As an emerging writer of screenplays, Syd Field recognised the need to learn how to build character. In his guide to scriptwriting, *Screenplay* (Revised 2005, pp. 43-87) he comments: 'I wanted to enrich the characters in my screenplays so that they were fully formed and realized, multidimensional, real people in real situations.'

When I began writing *Sea Change*, my initial idea brought along three central characters. Over the next few days, these characters morphed – changed gender and age – and the relationships between them shifted until I had established my core cast. I thought about a convincing motive for the character perpetrating the crimes and conflicts for the main character – who was called Alex right from the beginning. At this scenario building stage, I referred to YA writers who discuss their various techniques of storytelling for

young adults. Carnegie Medal winner and YA writer Keith Gray is a provider of workshops for writers of YA fiction. In a recent workshop I attended, he commented that teenagers have a heightened sense of everything, with all the dials 'turned up to number 11' and he encourages YA writers to tune in to this way of being. He suggests that a writer stand 'shoulder to shoulder' with the characters, for example when experiencing those first-time moments: a first kiss, a first cigarette. A similar sentiment is put forward by Meg Rosoff where, in an article 'Writing for Teenagers' included in the *Children's Writers' & Artists' Yearbook 2013* (2012, pp. 142-145) she recommends: 'If you're not lucky enough to be immature, regress. Haul yourself back to the days when the world was opaque.' With an awareness of this need to be as close as possible to a teenage way of being and not wishing to fall into the trap of writing stereotypes, especially as I had an aim to represent a character from a marginalised position, I sought guidance on building character at this early stage.

'How to' texts suggest that a means of revealing character in the narrative is by describing what the character *does*. In *Monkeys with Typewriters* Scarlett Thomas writes:

> Characterisation is based on the choices people make in different situations […] Character isn't what someone thinks they should be, or hopes they are, or tries to be. We see character in what people actually do when given a certain amount of choice.

Sol Stein (1995) concurs:

> Don't ever stop your story to characterize. Avoid telling the reader what your character is like. Let your reader see your characters talking and doing things.

Syd Field makes further comments on how to keep the main character centre stage, as it were, and drive the action:

> the main character must be active; she must *cause things to happen*, not let things happen to her. It's okay if she reacts to incidents or events some of the time, but if she is always reacting, she becomes passive, weak, and that's when the character seems to disappear off the page.

Following recommendations and suggestions from these texts, I began to outline and make a first draft of the novel, beginning with opening scenes where Alex would exhibit aspects of his character through his actions. I was conscious that the tone of these scenes, with the introduction of the main characters, would set the tone of the novel and build expectations in the reader of what was to follow. As noted previously, the first two scenes of *Sea*

Change lay a foundation for the characters and their interrelationships, which are then further revealed throughout the narrative.

It was clear from this study of several writing guides that it is important for the reader to understand the characters' underlying motivations for their actions. In *Screenplay*, Field reflects on his own quest to understand how to write character:

> I started analyzing the characters in terms of their individual needs and wants […] I saw that every main, or major, character has a strong dramatic need. *Dramatic need* is defined as *what your main characters want to win, gain, get, or achieve during the course of your screenplay*. The *dramatic need* is what drives your characters through the story line. It is their purpose, their mission, their motivation, driving them through the narrative action of the storyline.

In a similar vein, Thomas refers to the work of drama guru Stanislavski when discussing how a writer can find 'his or her own unique way of presenting a rounded character rather than a flat stereotype':

> Stanislavski also teaches us to look for the motivation behind the action […] Because people act for a reason it is always plot that drives character forward.

It became apparent from these guides that character portrayal, character motivation – their needs, their wants and their mission – and plot are intrinsically bound together. Wants may be explicit, with the character openly pursuing a personal agenda, yet their needs may be less overt, and possibly not perceived or understood by the character. If the character's wants and needs are in conflict with their situation and their relationships with those around them, this can create conflict. How the character deals with the conflicts, and any obstacles thrown up by the story, provides the possibility and the circumstances for the character to change.

This possibility for change, or *transformation,* is seen by Fields as another core features of character portrayal. He states:

> Change, transformation, is a constant of life and if you can impel some kind of emotional change within your character, it creates an arc of behaviour and adds another dimensional to who he/she is.

During the outlining and writing of the first draft of *Sea Change,* I remained open to questions relating to the main characters' motivations and desires, and how these interwove with and determined the plot. As previously stated, each character in *Sea Change* has an assigned 'role' within the crime thriller form and the plot revolves around

certain parallel motives of these characters. Both Alex and Chuck have a disproportionate sense of filial duty towards their mothers, brought about by circumstances or events involving their fathers. Both perceive their mothers as vulnerable and in need of their protection. How these two young men respond and react to these circumstances reveals their characters and drives the plot.

Alex openly states that his primary purpose, his mission, is to take care of his mum. She has, for some time, been overcome with grief following the death of her husband in a diving accident and Alex has assumed a role as her carer. In dialogue with his cousin, Moth, he refers to how his mum wandered around the village after the accident, calling out for Alex's dad. This necessity to care for his mum and to protect her from further stress is the motivation behind many of his actions. It is also his reason for keeping secrets, for example, his contact with Chuck and, eventually, webcamming for cash. Yet that he *has* been enticed by the dubious Chuck, that he found him exciting, reflects a need that Alex dare not even consider, a need that is common to most adolescents, the need to become independent and break away from the parental home. The most he will admit to, when visiting Chuck's campsite following his discovery of the body in his cove, is:

> It was a great setup and, for a moment, Alex could see himself living there, away from the constant hassles of school and his lack of money.

The change or transformation that Alex experiences relates to this need to step back from his fixation of protecting those close to him and allow himself the freedom to be who he really is. For this to happen he needs to be open to the realities he faces and to what is on offer. Only when Alex realises how close he is to missing out on a respectful and sexually satisfying relationship with Angus, does he accept his sexuality. His previous poor decision to associate with the dubious Chuck is in contrast to his decision to form a relationship with Angus based on mutual attraction and trust.

Alex also needs to learn to accept the help and support provided by others. He does not rescue Daniel alone. Without Caitlin and Angus, events would have ended very differently. When in the water and fighting with Chuck, Alex acted on Angus's instructions, resulting in the saving of Chuck's life. This suggests a parallel with how Alex, earlier in the story, followed Chuck's directives, thereby unwittingly bringing Daniel into danger.

At the beginning of the story, it was as if Alex was acting a role as an adult – as the 'man about the house', not allowing others to help. He had put strategies in place to cope

with his situation: his plans for the future to support his mum; earning cash in the short term to pay household bills. This was his new normal since his dad died. Hope for anything different would be scary and not to be contemplated. As a result, he is unaware of how he is repressing his sexuality and his own grief about his dad. Only when he reaches his darkest moment, when his anger with his own incompetency in not being able to keep his mum at home and his not knowing what has happened to Daniel overtakes him, does a glimmer of his grief creep in.

> But the physical pain couldn't combat the echoes of darkness: the low keening as he helped shoulder Dad's coffin out of the church; the stifled sobs from Mum's bedroom he was never able to do anything about; and his own silent rage, trapped in his head in his struggle to *be brave*.

As an adolescent, Alex is establishing his position and his identity within his local culture and his family situation. Conflict arises with his perceived difficulties if he accepts that he is gay. Hints from the text suggest he is attracted to Angus and there is sexual tension between them from their first encounter. Yet Alex is supressing his feelings. When they finally get together, when Alex has begun to recognise Angus's great strengths, one of the first questions he asks Angus is: 'Do your parents know?' A subtext of this could be read as: is this another secret Alex will have to keep from his mum?

The scene in which Alex confirms by his actions that he is gay, with Angus there to support him, is key in the narrative in that it exposes the conflict caused by his repressed sexuality. It is his relationship with Angus that triggers the turning point. Before Alex permitted himself to own his sexuality, he engaged in the risky activities contrived by Chuck in a futile search for a 'journey into manhood'. However, with the acceptance of his sexuality, he takes a step into the adult world and towards being himself. This adult perspective is reflected as Alex begins to relinquish his protective nature. Alex was angry and incredulous when he became aware that Daniel had been looking out for him. However, when he reflects on the parts Angus and Caitlin played in the rescue, and how Angus's influence prevented him from killing Chuck, he recognises that he does not always have to be the one protecting others. Alex is ready to start putting his trust in others.

In the storyline of this novel, we are not party to how this changed Alex will reflect on his future ambitions. Early in the novel, Alex clearly states that his ambition is to be a fisherman and he is planning to buy an outboard motor for his boat when he can save for it.

He suggests he is not good at traditional school subjects, although he accepts he is good at English. From his upbringing in a family where self-employment is a primary means of income, he is less aware of what an academic future might hold for him, in contrast to Daniel who is planning to go to university. Alex is obviously capable in the workshop, not only with practical skills but also in computer aided design, but he never considers this as a career possibility. His mother is keen for Alex to stay on at school and gain some qualifications but there is never any discussion about the progression to further or higher education. To further exemplify this position, his cousin Moth, older than Alex by one year and having left school with a few qualifications, is still living at home with her mum and grown-up brother, Stewart. Their mum, Alex's Aunty Joan, is self-employed as a hairdresser, with Stewart not in any evident employment.

This was how I held Alex's story as I wrote and revised the narrative. For it to be effectively told, I needed to create Alex as a plausible teenage character and ensure that the shifts in his situation, including his emotional arc, were evident through the words on the page. It was time to reflect on my character writing skills and assess and analyse my writer's voice.

The process was, by necessity, multi-layered. For the purpose of this reflective account I have teased out the pertinent threads. During the writing and revising however, the research and reference to primary and secondary sources; the internal deliberations; the creative outcomes and the editorial decisions reached, all as described below, were played out in counterpoint.

I have received comments in critiques of my writing that I tend not to include many physical descriptions of characters. I questioned whether this was due to a weakness in my craft skills and therefore something that needed attention, or whether it was a matter of my own style – my author voice. As James Wood (2009) suggests:

> That reality-level differs from author to author, and our hunger for the particular depth or reality level of a character is tutored by each writer, and adapts to the internal convention of each book.

I reflected that my lack of attention to physical characteristics in my writing mirrors how I read. A passage may describe that the protagonist is blonde or show through incidents that he is overweight, for example, but I am generally not a reader who uses the text to build a mental image of a character. I will read descriptions but not necessarily internalise them. However, I am aware that is only my position and I considered means to include a level of physical descriptions in keeping with the genre, my writing style and the conventions I

sought for the narrative. As I had made the decision to write the narrative from a close third person point of view, I felt any descriptions should reflect the opinion of the character upon whose shoulder we are perched upon. At a workshop, Val McDermid explained how, when writing from a police officer as the point-of-view character, she introduces physical attributes as if in the officer's notebook entry. The following passage, taken from an early section of *A Darker Domain*, (2008) allows the reader to visualise the new character but also provides characterisation for the point-of-view-character, Karen Pirie, from her 'practised eye' to her opinions about the new character based on her observations.

> Her practised eye catalogued and classified the woman who emerged from the lift without a shred of diffidence visible. Jeans and fake-athletic hoodie from Gap. This season's cut and colours. The shoes were leather, clean and free from scuffs, the same colour as the bag that swung from her shoulder over one hip. Her mid-brown hair was well cut in a long bob just starting to get a bit ragged along the edges. Not a doleite then. Probably not a schemie. A nice, middle-class woman with something on her mind. Mid to late twenties, blue eyes with the pale sparkler Topaz. The barest skim of make-up. Either she wasn't trying or she already had a husband. The skin round her eyes tightened as she caught Karen's appraisal.[63]

Using the example from McDermid, I gave my investigative character, Caitlin, a similar approach to observing.

> Whether Daniel had had some clandestine plan for yesterday that involved him staying away, or whether he'd had an accident and was stuck somewhere, waiting for help to find him, Caitlin didn't know.
>
> And not knowing bothered her.
>
> She peered at his face in the photo, searching his features for a clue. He had a diffidence about him, making him appear uneasy in his surroundings. His brown eyes seemed wary. But the troublesome black hair, which he pushed across his forehead when he wanted to say something important, softened the cornered wild animal look.
>
> Caitlin closed her wallet with the unwelcome thought that yes, if Daniel wanted to keep a secret, then that is exactly what he would do.

While giving a description of Daniel, this description from Caitlin's point of view also provides the reader with a greater insight to her own character.

Writing a character from a marginalised community may have implications for the use of physical descriptions. An example of writing which omits the description of a

significant physical characteristic of the main character is referred to by Mary Hoffman in a review for *The Guardian* of Malorie Blackman's *Boys Don't Cry* (2010):

> It's only about seven-eighths of the way through that you realise, from a throwaway remark, that Dante and his brother are black. This is clever – as is the cover image, which gives nothing away – but for me raised questions the book couldn't answer. What about their parents? And Melanie? Society isn't colour-blind yet and it really would be an issue[.]

So, if society is not yet colour-blind, is there a requirement for a writer to reflect this? Or is *Boys Don't Cry* an example of an effective means of challenging perceptions and highlighting the issue of inclusion by undermining mainstream readers' assumptions? Possibly, a black teenage reader would visualise a black protagonist from other, subtle references, missed by the white reader. It also added to my questions about writing outside your own lived experience and, if and when you do make attempts to do so, about 'getting it right'.

This, almost sideways allusion to inclusion, is effective in raising questions about the text. It was this particular novel, which I read when it was first published in 2010, that influenced my approach to the characterisation of Alex as 'other' to the mainstream. The issue, or theme, of *Sea Change*, is not about Alex coming from a poor family or about him being gay, although these factors do impact on how he acts and responds to situations. Alex owning his sexuality allows him to develop in other ways as a character, but does not define him. It was because he was repressing this part of his identity, and because I was writing from a close third person point of view, that I chose not to have any overt reference to this aspect of Alex before it became of relevance as events unfolded. However, so that the reader should not feel manipulated or cheated, I included hints in the text, especially with Alex's interactions with his cousin Moth, when her playful teasing borders on flirtation:

> 'I like that t-shirt,' Moth said, perching on the gunwale and swinging her legs in the boat. 'It makes you look sexy.'
>
> Alex pushed the boat into the water.
>
> 'And the way you wear it—rolled up sleeves. Shows off your bulging biceps.'
>
> 'Leave it.'
>
> 'When did Mr Let's Have Fun turn into Mr Grumpy?'

A reader open to subtext might suspect Moth knows more about Alex than he does about himself in the earlier sections of the novel.

In an effort to gain a greater understanding of the social climate a gay teenage boy might face in rural Scotland, I sought information from support agencies. LGBT Youth Scotland is a charity with a mission to:

> empower lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender young people and the wider LGBT community so that they are embraced as full members of the Scottish family at home, school and in every community.

From research undertaken on behalf of the charity in 2012, a survey on Life in Scotland for LGBT young people, aged 13-25 found that:

> a significant percentage of young LGBT people do not feel included and accepted in the wider community or in their families, and see homophobia, biphobia and transphobia as problems in both their local areas and in Scotland as a whole. This impacts upon young people's confidence to be open about their sexual orientation and gender identity and feel that there are enough places where they can safely do so. This then has a negative impact on remaining in education, gaining employment, and feeing supported by services, and feeling accepted and included in their community. [64]

Elements from this research which relate specifically to the portrayal of Alex's character in *Sea Change* include that only a small minority of LGBT people living in rural areas consider their local area to be a good place for LGBT young people to live and that rural areas are less likely to provide opportunities for LGBT people to socialise. The report commented that:

> Opportunities to socially interact with peers are very important to the wellbeing of young people and an integral part of allowing young people to feel included and accepted. As a result of homophobia, biphobia or transphobia, LGBT young people may be socially isolated and fall behind in other areas. Our 2012 Education Report highlights the worryingly high figures of young people who face bullying in education as a result of their sexual orientation or gender identity, and the impact that this can have on their education and future opportunities.
>
> Our research has found that 67.7% of those living in urban areas consider their local area to be a good place for LGBT young people to live, compared to 49.5% of those living in suburban areas, and just 27.1% of those living in rural areas […]
>
> LGBT young people living in rural areas were the least likely (35.4%) to feel that there were enough socialisation opportunities

> where they could safely be open about their sexual orientation or gender identity.

It added that:

> Another important factor which emerges here is age. While 53.5% of those aged 18-25 felt that there are enough places to socialise and be open about their sexual orientation or gender identity, less than one-third (28.8%) of young people ages 13-17 agreed with this.

A further report published in February 2018, highlighted that while there have been some improvements since the 2012 study, little has changed for young people in rural communities.[65] Alex's circumstances as portrayed in *Sea Change*, as a sixteen-year-old living in a rural village setting, is in keeping with these findings. In the novel, homophobic comments and bullying are mostly directed at Daniel rather than Alex, as Alex is generally perceived by other youths as the stronger character of the two. It is Alex who suggests that Daniel join the shinty team as a means of raising his status and to deflect the bullies, hinting at Alex's own strategies.

I found the candid comments made by young people in the LGBT Youth Scotland survey, demonstrating their real-world struggles, supported my decision to include Alex's difficulty in coming out to himself. A question in the survey, 'what makes or could make it easier to come out?' provided the following answers:

> "More education on the diversity of human attraction and gender. Letting kids know early that LGBT people not only exist, but that they could be LGBT too. It would make it easier for young people to come out to themselves."

and:

> "Less assumption on other people's part [...] as everyone assumes I'm straight, it means I have to find a way to put it, and I haven't had the courage to do it yet."

Diversity and inclusion in YA literature was not mentioned specifically in the report; however, the following comment on the young people's responses suggests visibility and representation are important means to make it easier for LGBT young people to come out.

> Responses frequently mentioned LGBT-inclusive education from a young age, visibility and representation, role models, eliminating the necessity to 'come out' through a removal of assumptions about sexual orientation and gender identity, and a full acceptance of all identities.

An alternative title, or sub-title for *Sea Change* could be *Secrets and Lies.* A comment from Richard Pike, the judge of Caledonia Novel Award 2017, for which *Sea Change* was shortlisted, hinted at this aspect of the novel: 'This is a novel in which every character has hidden depths and no one is quite who they seem.'

The challenge of discovering and portraying those 'hidden depths' was a matter of coaxing out individual personality features and identifying the 'whys' for their secrets and lies. Scarlett Thomas (2012) again refers to the work of Stanislavski to assist with this aim of portraying characters in greater depth and suggests if we ask enough 'whys' behind the surface reason for an action we can find the essence of the character:

> And the essence of your character is something like a superobjective: a big wish, an ultimate wish, the thing you desire *more than anything else.*

Alex keeps secrets from his mum and from Daniel. He even tells lies to his mum, although he experiences contrition for doing so, justifying his deceits with his concerns for her wellbeing. Daniel is keeping the recent contact from his twin sister a secret from his father and from Alex. Exploring their 'whys' during the writing process provided the fuel for the engine of the plot.

To effectively translate a character's superobjective on to the page, Thomas advocates that authors can get to know their characters in greater depth by engaging in Stanislavski acting methods: 'to locate the truth of a role inside themselves' in order to 'present authentic, psychologically accurate characters …'

She goes on to suggest that authors need to analyse their own truths:

> The first thing we need to do to get it right is to look at ourselves enough so that we can see our true motivations for things […] Writing means looking deeply into ourselves and being very, very honest about why we do things, in order that we can create honest and authentic characters.

For me, then, I ventured back to my teenage years and recalled secrets I had kept from my parents and from my friends. When I was honest with myself, it did not take me long to recognise that, although I might provide valid reasons for the secrets, ultimately, the motivation for them was to save myself from the embarrassment of not being as good a person as I liked to pretend.

As much as I found the exercise of using method acting techniques to be of value as a means of searching for an honest response to gain an authentic position, an especially

pertinent suggestion in Thomas's section on characterisation was the suggestion of using the technique to write characters unlike ourselves:

> Although it is difficult to write old age when you are young (and poverty when you are rich and so on), we do nevertheless frequently have to write outside our experience. I may want to describe my protagonist's grandmother walking across the room, for example, and so I need to know something of old age […] If I do decide to portray the old woman, I can learn from Stanislavski not to exaggerate, belittle, condemn or patronise. Instead, I will know that I should consider deeply what it means to be 'old'. I have to find the role inside myself.

Finding Alex's role inside myself was a challenging pathway in my endeavour to create an authentic character but I could embrace the recommendation to not 'exaggerate, belittle, condemn or patronise.'

Along with paying attention to physical attributes; to actions based on needs, wants, missions, motivations and superobjectives; and to my characters' emotional landscapes, I wanted to further explore my main characters' particular personality traits. I used a variety of ideas ranging from looking at astrological profiles, experimenting with the Myers-Briggs assessment tool which describes personality types, and using character profile questionnaires in 'how to write fiction' blogs.[66]

When researching further into personality traits, I found a self-assessment questionnaire provided by researchers in positive psychology, a movement which gives focus to and fosters the development of positive personality characteristics relating to strength of character, wellbeing and future-mindedness.[67] Reports from research with young people suggest that characteristics relating to 'strengths of the heart' are more robustly associated with young people's life satisfaction than cerebral strengths.[68] In that Alex is repressing aspects of his character, thereby affecting his current happiness levels and his future-mindedness, and I was looking for a way to portray Alex moving towards a more positive frame of mind, I considered how I might use this research. I decided to adapt the Value in Action survey, with its succinct list of significant characteristics, which was used by researchers with teenagers in Australia and I responded to the questionnaire assuming the role of each of my main characters as they view themselves at the beginning of the story.[69] It made for interesting insights into my characters and my better understanding of their sense of wellbeing influenced how I developed their characters on the page.

The purpose for this extensive quest by a writer to relate character in fiction is summed up by Thomas in her discussion on superobjectives in the chapter on characterisation:

> It should go without saying that we are always aiming for universal significance in our work. That doesn't mean that nothing will happen on a personal or individual level, but that these personal, individual events will have resonance for all of us[.]

This comment, which chimes to a degree with the comments made by Meg Rosoff on diversity, suggests that an aim to portray authentic, well-rounded characters, with whom readers can relate or empathise, allows the writer a means with which to tap into the universal, into what it means to be human. In line with this suggestion, children's author Candy Gourlay reflects in one of her blogsite posts on the best piece of advice given to her by an agent before she became a published author, which was: 'Don't write what you know. Write who you are.'[70]

It was pursuing this further step into self-reflection that allowed me to explore the circumstances which make me identify with a marginalised community, the emotions that stem from these and the driving forces behind the themes I instinctively veer towards in my writing. In her book *Respectable*, (2017) Lynsey Hanley describes her experiences of crossing the class divides from a growing up in a 'respectable' working class family in order to join the university-educated middle class, and the limits of social mobility. She makes the comment that: 'The effects of class are the hardest of all social evils to slay because they are given to mutation.' She adds:

> We carry and clothe ourselves according to our class; we are educated broadly according to our class; we eat and drink increasingly according to our class; and we make use of the physical and cultural resources around us according to our class. We use them, whether consciously or otherwise as signs that show to ourselves and others where we belong.

I grew up saying 'me' for 'my'. 'I've got me umbrella,' for example. Amongst my own folk, this was an accepted speech pattern. However, when I left home to go to teacher training college and I extended my group of acquaintances, this was one of the first aspects of my speech that marked me out as different. I had been aware of my northern accent and of certain dialect words I would use, such as 'nesh' for somebody feeling the cold, but this speech pattern was a different type of difference. This was not being different and being quaint or exotic or street, this was just one example where my speech grammar was

different and wrong. It was not the first time I had been embarrassed because of speaking differently. When I was about seven or eight, a new girl joined our dancing class and for some reason she asked me what was my last name. But she did not say last. To me it sounded like 'lost'. I had no idea what she was talking about and I, already embarrassed because of my confusion, replied that I didn't have a lost name, which she found hilarious.

I may have learned strategies which enabled me to talk with those who have been better educated or have received a more privileged upbringing when I am socialising, but if I have something of value, of importance to share, I still feel that my speech grammar will let me down. I feel that in having a less accurate means of speaking, my contribution is lessened. I may be oversensitive or wrong in these assumptions, but they have become established in me as a consequence of my experiences when talking with middle-class people and their 'correct' speech grammar. Hanley comments on the implications of having to acquire, or adapt to using a different language code:

> We learn to speak using the language of the people around us, using the same accent, the same turns of phrase and the same points of reference, in order to get along in that society. To learn the new language, perhaps even to be aware that one exists, you have to leave that family and community – literally, psychologically or both.

It was this sense of insecurity, and the attendant feeling of inferiority, that gave me the chip on my shoulder. Being a member of a marginalised community brings inequalities. But, for me, it is the chip on the shoulder that makes you question if you are being patronised or ridiculed or being used for somebody else's agenda. However, the weight of my own chippiness allowed me to recognise that folk who feel 'other' to the mainstream are probably shouldering their own chips. It was this insight, this suggestion that maybe through this common understanding of repression or exploitation I might consider the possibility of writing an aspect of a character that made them 'other' in a way that I was not. Was it possible, perhaps, to transfer an understanding from one marginalised position to another, for example, the understanding of how those who are in some way 'other' try to hide part of their identity, or are ashamed of it, or put on cloaks of a different identity to help them fit in?

Greater representation and visibility of marginalised people in daily life can be empowering. I felt empowered by seeing a person speaking eloquently and authoritatively on a television news report when he used 'me' instead of 'my' in his sentences. I realised working-class identity was to be celebrated when I watched the plays of Willy Russell,

created with respect and humour. This celebration in fiction of the core features of an identity, especially those which mark the owner out as different to the mainstream might, consequently, be empowering for readers from marginalised communities.

I came to my project with an openness to inclusion and with a decision to push at my own writing boundaries but with an understanding of the complexity of the challenge and a fear of failure which I considered wholly reasonable, given the ongoing discussions. Working through various drafts of the novel, I frequently requested feedback from various readers and writers on the effectiveness of the writing. I focused my attention on different aspects of the writer's craft and sought advice from established authors on how to write pertinent stories. In order to 'get things right' in terms of inclusion, I pursued, in particular, ways in which to avoid creating stereotypes. Methods suggested to help build fully rounded characters included examining the characters' actions, their motives and their relationships with each other and I layered these elements amongst the events faced and the ride of emotions each character experiences through the storyline. With these attempts to portray a diverse cast of realistic characters, it is my hope that the completed manuscript, when published, will join the evolving canon of 'inclusive' YA fiction.

Diversity and the Publishing Industry in the United Kingdom

There are claims that the UK traditional print publishing industry is a predominantly white, middle-class monoculture and, in a nation comprised of diverse communities, it can be viewed as culturally irrelevant. With businesses primarily following commercial agendas, is there a genuine appetite for change or, especially in challenging economic times, is there a perceived greater safety in the familiar? As an unpublished writer seeking representation and publication, it is useful to examine the UK publishing landscape, including its various component enterprises of publishing houses and literary agencies, with respect to current practice and procedures. From this examination, the wide-ranging discussions regarding the output of inclusive fiction can be viewed alongside the challenges being brought to the industry by the call for greater diversity in its workforce, bringing with it insights for writers seeking a pathway into the industry.

Candy Gourlay in a blogpost for *Notes from the Slushpile* notes how the UK publishing industry has sustained scrutiny in recent years with respect to its record on the diversity of its workforce, and has been found wanting.[71] In the same article, Gourlay goes on to voice her concern about a 'tick-box' approach employed by publishers to address the need for a more diverse output:

> It troubles me that Diversity is creating tick-boxes. Here let's put a disabled character. How about a trans book to balance this publishing list? Have we covered Asian-paraplegic-autistic savant yet?

This observation identifies an industry which is largely run by personnel from the mainstream white middle-class attempting to make changes that are being construed at best as tokenism and at worst as offensive.

Dan Keiran, the CEO of Unbound publishers, gives an honest appraisal of the lack of diversity in his own company in an article for *i Books* in January 2018. He comments:

> I was embarrassed to be in an industry stuck in the 1950s that may as well have "whites only" signs outside each of the main office buildings. In publishing as a whole, around 90 per cent of workers consider themselves "white British".[72]

These observations are backed up by an extensive piece of research on diversity within the publishing industry which was commissioned by the London based writer development agency, Spread the Word. The resulting report, 'Writing the Future: Black and Asian Writers and Publishers in the UK Marketplace*'*, edited by writer Danuta Kean, was published in April 2015 and was launched at the London Book Fair. [73] It was reported that

of the publishers and literary agents who were ‘surveyed to determine whether progress was being made on cultural diversity’, over seventy-four percent of those employed by large publishing houses, and ‘an alarming 97 per cent of agents’, believed the industry was only ‘a little diverse’ or ‘not diverse at all’.

One result of this monoculture establishment is that members of under-represented communities experience difficulties in having their voices heard. Findings from the report relate how black, Asian or minority ethnic (BAME) authors can feel pigeonholed or manipulated by editors to deliver books which ‘conformed to a White trade's perception of what was “authentically” Black or Asian’. The lack of minority voices at all levels in the industry, including authors, agents and editors, led to a conclusion in the report that ‘the publishing industry's poor commitment to diversity is putting it at risk of becoming culturally irrelevant’.

Following the launch of the report, *The Guardian* published an article by Alison Flood, which discussed some of the main issues raised.[74] The article included the following comments from novelist Bernadine Evaristo who ‘was scathing in her indictment of the British books world’:

> Three decades ago, few novels were published by Britain’s Black and Asian novelists, while 20 years ago, a breakthrough occurred that became a short-lived trend. [But]for the past few years, we have seen a return to the literary invisibility of the past, concealed by a deceptive tokenism.

We can see reflected in this comment some of the issues broached earlier in this essay, in particular, the ‘literary invisibility’ of members of under-represented communities and the problems associated with tick-box ‘tokenism’.

How to tackle the issues raised by the Spread the Word commissioned survey was given due attention throughout the report and recommendations were made. They included, amongst others, a move towards equality in recruitment along with the banning of unpaid internships; the sharing of good practice with other creative media industries for example with television’s Channel 4; and the adoption of diversity policy audits with a view to ensuring that:

> in 10 years we will look back on this report as a game changer and not, as has happened in the past, yet another initiative that died of good intention without serious management buy-in.

More recently, a snapshot of the scene at the London Book Fair in 2017, which highlights the prevailing, mostly white, monoculture, was captured by Tariq Mehmood. In a blogpost following his visit to the Book Fair with Peter Kalu he comments:

> Apart from the cleaners and other staff, we were the only two non-white faces. When we pointed this out to Susan-Dolorous Smithfield, [an alias provided by Mehmood for a literary agent] she said, 'I never thought of that,' and then asked, 'do you always notice this?'
>
> Not keen on engaging in this line of discussion, I thank her, and while Peter talked to her about getting a seven digit advance for his next sure to god best best seller, I ran off for a quick recky.
>
> There were loads of parties; there was one in a music specialist book store – not a single cover had a black face on it, and there were no black faces among the suits; There was a huge party in the centre, not a single black face on any book cover, but there was a black face in the crowd.[75]

This anecdotal reflection regarding the lack of authors of colour in the UK is supported by evidence from book sales. Reporting in *The Guardian* in Nov 2016, Alison Flood noted that:

> A writer has more chance of making it into the bestseller charts if their name is David than if they are from an ethnic minority, according to new analysis from *The Bookseller* magazine which found a "shockingly low" number of books by British BAME (black, Asian and minority ethnic) authors in the top 500 titles of the year to date.[76]

While the focus of the Spread the Word commissioned research was primarily to highlight the under-representation of people of colour or from ethnic minorities in UK publishing, the middle-class nature of the industry is also frequently referred to in media reports. For example, the heading of a *Publishing Perspectives* article in May 2013 was 'Is UK Publishing Too "White, Middle-Class" to be Truly Global?' and in December 2015 *The Guardian* discussed 'How do we stop UK publishing being so posh and white?' emphasising that there is much work that needs to be done to improve the inclusion of people in the publishing industry from all social and economic groups.[77] Sarah Shaffi for *The Bookseller* added a clarification to this situation in the article: 'Publishing seeks to address industry's lack of diversity', in November 2016:

> BAME is defined by Oxford Dictionaries as "black, Asian and minority ethnic (used to refer to members of non-white communities in the UK)". It is important to note this definition does not include

> white minority groups, who may also be under-represented when it comes to books published in the UK.[78]

From studies and reports available, it would seem that much of the discussions concerning diversity in the industry relates to improving access to the trade for BAME authors and potential industry workers. However, are agents and acquiring editors underestimating the scope of inclusivity to the detriment of those from other minority and/or under-represented communities? It would be interesting to discover how many people in the industry grew up in the UK care system, for example.

In the few years since the launch of the report, evidence of movement towards the 'game changing' goal has been observed with discussions, projects and initiatives to improve diversity in the trade emerging from a variety of wellsprings.[79] Panel discussions regarding diversity and inclusion in the industry have become a familiar feature at literary events such as book festivals. A journalist from the Bath Chronicle attended the Bath Children's Literature Festival 2015 where members of a panel, including author Bali Rai and publishing industry personnel, were discussing diversity in children's fiction. [80] The report included the comment that: 'Shannon Cullen, a publisher at Penguin Random House (PRH) UK, said the publishing industry was changing, but that it would take time to make changes.'

A panel discussion at the Stoke Newington Literary Festival entitled 'The Diversity Manifesto' looked at children's publishing and had an aim to come up with practical ideas to help increase diversity. In an article for *The Bookseller,* Sarah Shaffi included Catherine Johnson's references to her own experiences:

> Author Catherine Johnson said in her 20 years of being a published writer she had only had "one non-white editor".
>
> "These people aren't getting up the ladder," she said. "There's very much the mentality of 'people like us' […] Children's publishing is a lovely world, but it is a 'people like us' world."[81]

Another panel discussing diversity at the Stoke Newington Literary Festival, also reported by *The Bookseller*, included comments from the poet Salena Godden that: 'publishers should "be braver, be too brave" when it comes to taking on new writing if they want to become more diverse.'

Yet these panels, with the aim of highlighting the issues surrounding diversity and inclusion in literature, raise other questions. Is it the case that marginalised writers are often invited to speak on panels with a diversity agenda to discuss their experiences and

opinions based on their 'otherness', to the exclusion of their involvement in different, current debates? US-based, Man Booker Prize winning author Marlon James gave voice to his irritation about his constant appearance on diversity panels at US literary events in an article for Literary Hub:

> You would think our sole purpose as writers at these panels is to broaden the understanding of white people, when we could you know, talk about writing. Worse, it's the same talk we gave last year, and the year before that, and the year before that one, going back years, and decades. Either we're not speaking loud enough, or clear enough, or maybe nobody is listening.[82]

He also raised the notion that talking about diversity is somehow equated with doing something about diversity:

> It's not just that diversity, like tolerance is an outcome treated as a goal. It is that we too often mistake discussing diversity with doing anything constructive about it.

Might these comments indicate evidence of another form of exclusion if writers from under-represented communities consider themselves of importance only to a one-issue phenomenon managed by the established literary mainstream? This issue was recognised in the Writing the Future report, which made the recommendation that BAME writers should be invited to discuss 'more general, literary topics rather than diversity-related issues and thus acknowledge the universality of voice and appeal of BAME novelists'.

Organisations with the intentions of promoting inclusion in fiction have also been discussing their concerns and aims. The Centre for Literacy in Primary Education (CLPE) set a goal for their conference in March 2017 to: explore why we need to ensure that children from all backgrounds and experiences are represented in the books they encounter.[83]

Reporting on the event, Caroline Carpenter of *The Bookseller* opened with the following line:

> Inclusivity in children's literature is improving but there is still a lot of progress to be made in order to reflect modern realities for young readers, trade figures have said.[84]

Later in the article, Carpenter quoted Catherine Johnson as saying:

> It is still easier to buy a book with a dragon on the cover than it is to find one with a black child. Although it's good to see a wider range of YA books with LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender]

> characters now, there is still a dearth of books with protagonists of different classes, abilities or races.

Letterbox Library co-director, Fen Coles was also reported as commenting that:

> Sometimes there's a peak in a particular area of representation, but we don't sustain that and talk of an 'explosion' of inclusive publishing sometimes amounts to a handful of books. We need to do better.

Might Coles' comment suggest that the celebrated and well publicised 'handful of books' that make up the diversity and inclusion success stories do not represent what is happening below the water line of media attention?

With these ongoing discussions and initiatives, from a range of interested stakeholders, it would be fair to concede that there is a general recognition of the lack of diversity in industry personnel *and* in the output of new titles.[85] Writing in an article for *The Guardian* in December 2016, Kean is optimistic that, this time, the changes kickstarted through the Spread the Word report will produce results:

> The tide of change may have ebbed after initiatives in the 1990s and early 2000s, but this time something feels different. Perhaps it's wishful thinking, but it seems to me as if the report I put together in 2015 […] has managed to sting the book trade into action.[86]

In the same article, she goes on to remark that there is evidence that headway is being made with measures and initiatives to encourage a diversity of writers and workers in publishing. One of these initiatives was developed by Penguin Random House who offered to mentor ten unpublished and unagented writers from under-represented communities. Kean commented on this initiative:

> A sign that the scheme is long overdue is that 2,000 writers from under-represented communities immediately applied for the 10 one-year mentorships.

At the completion of the inaugural programme in spring 2017, 150 of the 2000 applicants had attended a one-day seminar and had had a one-to-one session with a PRH editor. From these 150, around forty were shortlisted for the yearlong mentoring scheme. (I met with a Penguin Children's senior editor and was subsequently shortlisted for mentoring.) The eleven people eventually selected for mentoring were announced on the WriteNow website. Penguin Random House is conscious that this initiative is just one venture in a multiagency problem. Siena Parker, its UK's corporate responsibility manager was reported in *The Bookseller* as saying:

> There is never going to be a single magic solution. To get long-lasting, meaningful change there are a number of things we need to do as an industry. The biggest area of opportunity is how we work with partners across publishing, like agents and retailers. We are not going to get meaningful change otherwise.[87]

The Bookseller reports on another initiative from Hachette UK, which is focusing its attention on improving diversity in its workforce:

> Hachette UK is to target diversity in its senior management team with its Diverse Leaders Future Mentoring Scheme, designed to give up-and-coming stars from non-traditional publishing backgrounds the skills and confidence to rise up in the business.[88]

This approach to dealing with the diversity imbalance in the trade was supported by HarperCollins non-fiction publisher Natalie Jerome. In a *Bookseller* article 'Publishing seeks to address industry's lack of diversity', by Sarah Shaffi, Jerome is reported as saying:

> "I'm a passionate advocate for the need for more, many more, acquiring editors of BAME background in our industry. Quite frankly, it's the fastest, most effective way we will tackle the overwhelming lack of diversity and the fact that the content we produce doesn't always reflect the society in which we live today. If the decision makers aren't diverse, then neither will our books be."[89]

Yet, it would seem that 'getting it right' is also a challenge for the industry and confronting assumptions can be troublesome. Again, in her December 2016 *Guardian* article, Kean comments:

> But, despite good intentions, there remains frustration among writers and agents. "I had an Indian writer with stories that I thought would carry, but the rejections that came back were that it was 'too Indian'," agent Gordon Wise of Curtis Brown says of one client whose work he regarded as a universal rite-of-passage tale.

Sarah Shaffi, senior reporter with *The Bookseller,* was a panel member of the Inclusive Minds seminar at the London Book Fair, 2015. Her comments at the event reinforce the suggestion that diversity in the workforce will result in a more diverse range of novels being published:

> Another key to diversity in content is diversity in workforce. If your staff is largely white, middle-class and Oxbridge educated, with the best will in the world you're not going to relate enough to some content to see its value to different sectors of your current and, this is really important, potential, readership. But if your workforce is

> diverse - from North, South, East and West, university educated and not, from different socio-economic backgrounds, and of different political and religious beliefs, to mention just a few - your content is more likely to be diverse.[90]

She goes on to suggest that publishers have a responsibility to fill bookshelves with more diverse books:

> It's great that this discourse is happening […] because publishers have a responsibility to produce great books about the world. That responsibility means children, and adults, should be able to pick up books that reflect society, whether that means stories about one-parent families, refugee children from Syria, a boy with two mums, or a girl in a wheelchair.

Whether the whole gamut of UK publishers would agree to having such a responsibility, there is a case that ignoring the diversity debate can also be commercially problematic. A novel slated for release in January 2017 by Harlequin Teen was held back from publication following negative pre-production online reviews and accusations of racial stereotypes in the content.

The following is from 'An Open Letter on Fantasy World Building and Keira Drake's Apology', *YA Interrobang* November, 2016 by Zoraida Córdova:

> I want to talk about world building in fantasy novels and Keira Drake's apology. The Continent by Keira Drake has gone from a book I knew zero about to the only thing on Book Twitter™. The Continent follows Vaela Sun, who is gifted a tour of the Continent for her sixteenth birthday. When her plane crashes, she becomes the lone survivor of her trip, left stranded and left alone to survive in the land locked in battle for centuries.[91]

Despite it being a fantasy novel, a number of readers were offended because some of the 'tribes' encountered by Sun reflected racial stereotypes. The publishers put out the following statement:

> Over the last few days, there has been online discussion about racial stereotypes in connection with one of our upcoming 2017 titles, The Continent by Keira Drake.
>
> As the publisher, we take the concerns that have been voiced seriously. We are deeply sorry to have caused offence, as this was never our or the author's intention. We have listened to the criticism and feedback and are working with the author to address the issues that have been raised.

> We fully support Keira as a talented author. To ensure that the themes in her book are communicated in the way she planned, we will be moving the publication date.[92]

While the publisher can be congratulated on supporting its author, conspicuous feedback from readers is something publishers are, increasingly with the prevalence of social media and online reviews, having to manage.

Submitting a manuscript to an agent or publisher may also be a time when writers who are portraying characters from marginalised communities can come up against the 'quality of writing' argument. Liz Bourke, who holds a Ph.D. in Classics from Trinity College, Dublin, comments in a blogpost on the inevitability of the question: 'But what about the *quality*?' which is raised against non-mainstream representations in fiction. She explains:

> Frequently, one's interlocutor will frame this interjection as though it is a helpful one. He—sometimes, though more rarely, she—will worry that you are alienating your (presumably straight, white, cis, male) audience by an over-emphasis on representation; will chide that you're focusing on diversity over the quality of the storytelling, characterisation, plot, ideas. I've had more people than I can count deliver a variation on this theme.[93]

Bourke goes on to discuss the subjective nature of 'quality' and of the criteria used for assessment:

> Let's take the idea that all people judge on the same criteria of quality. They don't. Past a certain level of prose and structural competence, "quality" is a nebulous concept.

The reliance on this 'nebulous' concept of quality when judging fiction for literary awards was exemplified by the controversy surrounding the 2017 Carnegie Medal longlist. *The Bookseller* reported that:

> has responded to criticism about the diversity of its Carnegie Medal longlist - which features no BAME authors - saying that while it "acknowledges and respects the concerns expressed", the longlisted books were "judged on merit and on an equal playing field".
> The 20-strong longlist […] has been criticised for not including a single black, Asian or minority ethnic (BAME) writer.[94]

Just a month later, *The Bookseller* reported that following criticisms from a range of concerned individuals and organisations, CILIP had 'announced the launch of an independent review of its Carnegie and Kate Greenaway Medals to identify how diversity,

equality and inclusion can "best be championed and embedded into its work"'.[95] While this is not to suggest that the members of selection panels of major literary awards are consciously prejudiced, there is, however, the intimation that unintentional bias is at work. Dan Keiran of Unbound refers to this issue in his article for *i Books*:

> A few years ago I had a meeting with a black novelist about diversity in publishing. He came to the offices of Unbound, the crowdfunding publisher I run. When he arrived I felt suddenly uncomfortable about the whiteness of the staff in our office – we had just moved in and I realised he was the only person of colour who had been in our office who was not there to clean. […] I tried to be honest with him about why we had not employed any people of colour. I trotted out something about authenticity. I thought that might account for why an office of white people had accidentally only ever hired white people. It wasn't conscious, I said. We weren't bad people. We just had a bias without realising it.[96]

Writers from marginalised communities might be forgiven for questioning the 'equal playing field' when a publisher who is open to questioning his position on diversity in the company's workforce and output admits to this unintentional and difficult to recognise bias.

It is not publishers alone who bear the burden of discovering or seeking new talent, whether from under-represented communities or otherwise. Literary agents are often viewed as the gatekeepers between submitting authors and acquiring editors, second guessing editors wish lists and filtering the books that actually make it to an editor's in-box. This extra hurdle in the quest for publication can be seen by emerging writers as another white, middle-class obstacle to navigate, where they first have to convince an agent that their product is worth touting to publishing house editors. Yet some agents are now mindful of the movement towards greater representation in published fiction and are making steps to encourage a wider spectrum of submissions. Amongst their number there are those who promote 'own voice' submissions and those who incorporate requests for such submissions in their online spiel. For example, the biography of Catherine Pellegrino at Marjacq Agency states: 'Particularly interested in championing diversity in children's fiction, Catherine is a judge and sponsor of the Commonword Children's Diversity Prize'; and Alice Sutherland-Hawes from the Madelaine Milburn Agency says she is 'Actively looking for: Diverse authors across all ages and genres.'[97]

Contributing to the discussion regarding responsibility for diversity within the trade, US children's agent Eric Smith comments:

> I mean, I can't speak for the goals of other agents or editors. But in a dream world, sure, ideally everyone is actively looking for those marginalized voices and using their position in the industry to elevate their work. And I certainly feel like I'm seeing more and more agents and editors discussing wanting more diverse authors on their wish lists. Which makes me happy and hopeful.
>
> Personally, though? It *absolutely* is my responsibility to represent diverse voices. If my children, and my nephews and nieces […] if they grow up and one day ask me about the books I've worked on, and are unable to see themselves in the work I've represented […] I have utterly failed to do my job.[98]

It will be interesting to observe the impact these various initiatives and good intentions will have on the diversity of personnel in the whole publishing industry and in the output of content. Whether an emerging writer from a marginalised community in the UK, perhaps one of the two thousand applicants (less the handful accepted for mentoring) to the PRH WriteNow programme, will find it less difficult to get their well written novel onto book shelves is a case for future investigation.

Conclusion

Author Kamila Shamsie gave an RSL/Booker Prize Foundation masterclass on 'writing the unfamiliar'.[99] In her presentation, she urged writers to break away from writing only what they know, citing her novel *Burnt Shadows* (2009) set in 1945 Nagasaki. She comments that she had never been to Nagasaki, she had never been to 1945 and she had never been a Japanese woman. In her top tips, she suggested: 'Never underestimate what can be achieved by the combination of research and imagination.'

However, writing what you are unfamiliar with can take you into hazardous territory when the characters you wish to portray are members of marginalised communities. In a blogpost, award winning author Patrice Lawrence gives a clear message to writers who are feeling uncertain about attempting to write under-represented characters, advocating that writers from mainstream positions should 'understand, support and challenge'.

> It is often noted that the publishing industry is not ethnically diverse […] This means that those of us who through accident of birth are labelled 'diverse', have limited power. It is the white people in a predominantly white industry who must catalyse and promote change.
>
> How? Understand. Support. Challenge.
>
> Although, from personal experience, I am referring primarily to ethnicity, these principles can be used when any of us are in a majority culture at risk of ignoring marginalised voices. For instance, as a straight woman in a straight relationship I must continually remind myself of how society and its institutions are set up to support me.[100]

This comment makes a call to mainstream writers to accept the responsibility to 'catalyse and promote change' and Lawrence describes the methods to assist writers in their quest. When discussing the 'challenge' aspect of her proposition Lawrence comments:

> This is about not accepting the status quo. This is about using our own privilege and power to create change. […]
>
> White writers – write, draw, promote diverse characters. Do it with sensitivity and humour [...] The more the merrier and it takes the pressure off me. I'll be able to write non-black characters without feeling that I've lost an opportunity to extend the pool of black protagonists. […]

> Challenge because of your own fundamental beliefs. Challenge because you understand that the world remains unequal. Challenge because even if it undermines your own position, you believe in and want change.

Throughout this project I have come to understand that writing diversity as inclusion means being open-minded, risking failure and aiming for success. It means 'getting it right' through research, collaboration and feedback. It means writing what it is to be human by connecting with the universal and writing without labels. It means knowing your own deficiencies, prejudices, insecurities, chippiness, blind spots, personal agendas and privileges; and, if you are a member of a marginalised community, it means engaging with your own feelings associated with that sense of being 'other' with an aim to translate them into your characters.

Writing for inclusion means recognising and avoiding stereotypes, tokenism, appropriation and exploitation as well as seeing and pushing against inequality and prejudice. It means weaving in the reality of injustices based on difference with the celebration of marginalised cultures, aiming for a text with a subtle polyphonic texture in the hope that readers will understand, empathise and, where relevant, possibly realise empowerment.

When writing diversity as inclusion for an adolescent readership, it means all this and more. It means being mindful of readership expectations, reading desires and reading habits; it means paying attention to responsibilities and treading through censorship minefields without being patronising. It means re-engaging with the adolescent in yourself and writing with empathy. And it means not being too afraid to step onto the burning coals.

Appendix I

Conversations held with established YA authors and publishing industry personnel in the UK and meetings with a focus group of volunteer teenagers.

I greatly value the advice and support I have received from successful YA authors at the various events and workshops I have attended. Before starting this project, I approached two authors, (Melvin Burgess and Keith Gray) with a request for a short informal conversation, with the hope that they might share some of their thoughts about the ongoing discussions concerning diversity and about writing for inclusion. I am very grateful that they both agreed to this request. Melvin Burgess then recommended that I also contact Peter Kalu, a writer from Manchester who is also researching for a creative writing PhD and is concerned with issues of race and diversity. The following is a summary of some of the points raised in the conversations which I held in mind as I worked through my project.

I first met Keith Gray at a Scottish Association of Writers Conference in 2010 when he was the adjudicator of the TC Farries Trophy and the manuscript of my YA novel *Deleted* was the winner. Following on from that, I received support from Keith when I was a recipient of a Scottish Book Trust New Writers Award for Children's Fiction. I have also attended some of Keith's workshops on writing for young adults. Announcing his events at the Edinburgh International Book Festival 2017, he is described thus:

> In his earliest years, Grimsby-born Keith Gray turned from reluctant reader to passionate reader – then straight on to being a dedicated writer.

As well as being an award-winning YA novelist Keith Gray has edited two YA short story anthologies, *Losing It* (2010) including stories about virginity and first-time sex and *Next* (2012) with stories concerning thoughts about the afterlife. A number of his stories are published by Barrington Stoke, who publish 'super-readable children's books that break down the barriers that can stop kids getting into reading'.[101]

Keith Gray is an unapologetic campaigner to encourage teenage boys to read. He speaks with passion when discussing how to support literacy for those boys who find reading novels less appealing than other pastimes. In our conversation, he commented that he aims to write with truth, stating that he writes about 'what he knows' in this quest for sharing the truth. With his characteristic lack of hubris, he suggests he lacks the imagination to put himself into the shoes of those who have too different a cultural upbringing to his own. Yet in appreciating that 'we need stories from different points of

view', and that 'the world lacks empathy and the way to teach empathy is through fiction', he strongly advocates a greater diversity of writers in the pool of YA authors.

Melvin Burgess was a tutor at an Arvon 'Writing for Young Adults' course that I attended in 2014. In our conversation for this project, he suggested that a novel should 'ask questions and explore difficult areas', and that this exploration should then come through the story and characters. He emphasised that people from marginalised communities need to be respected and that writers should be wary of attempting to portray a culture beyond their own experience; that they should be aware of the pitfalls such as tokenism and inadequate research before writing for inclusion. He stressed that a writer needs to have a love of story and be keen to explore to give voice and empowerment, adding, ultimately, that the overriding question is whether the story and the writing are good or not!

Peter Kalu has worked extensively with Cultureword, a centre for Black creative writing in the North West of England, which 'has achieved national renown for discovering, developing and promoting Asian, African, Caribbean and Chinese writers'. [102] His current research is concerned with personal consciousness and identity. In agreement with the sentiments of both Keith Gray and Melvin Burgess, he feels that there is a responsibility to face difficult truths through literature.

During our conversation, he expressed concern at the lack of black protagonists in children's novels on bookshelves, commenting that black voices are still under-represented in literature. When discussing how to write for inclusion, he felt that it was necessary to have an accurate reflection of our culturally diverse society in literature. He went on to express how when running writing workshops in schools, black writers are saddened when black children write stories with white protagonists.[103] We discussed that if writers intend to step outside their own lived experience to include characters from marginalised sections of society, they need to do in-depth research – getting accurate details and the specifics of a culture for that 'ring of truth'; work with sensitivity and be open to feedback from prepublication readers.

Kalu hopes that a commercial imperative for a greater diversity of authors will increase the number of writers from particular marginalised communities or cultures and that, consequently, the burden of the responsibility of representation can be shared.

Working with a focus group of teenagers - taking my research project to the target readership.

I initially approached the local secondary school, (from which I had recently retired as the music teacher) to engage with pupils in the fourteen years plus age group (S3 and above) to discuss my research project. I had planned a variety of activities to engage with the pupils in the current debates on diversity and inclusion in fiction aimed at their age group. Before embarking on the work in school, I gave due consideration to the report 'Get your facts right: a guide to involving young people in social research', initiated by Cath Sinclair, deputy head teacher of Shawlands Academy, Glasgow and Peter Hopkins of Newcastle University (2015).[104] I also sought guidance and clearance for my engagement with the pupils from the University of Glasgow Ethics Committee.

My first point of contact with the pupils was during their Personal, Health and Social Education classes where I gave a presentation describing my project. The presentation led to discussions topics regarding the call for greater diversity in YA fiction from concerned young people. Following these initial class based activities I gave the pupils the opportunity to join a focus groups which would provide the opportunity for more in-depth discussions surrounding the questions raised and greater involvement for those pupils with a particular interest in reading fiction. Seven pupils volunteered and we met as a focus group on five different occasions. I had activities planned to facilitate discussions in these sessions, including looking at book cover designs and book trailers for example. Unfortunately, as time went on it became increasing difficult to get the whole group to meet together due to timetable constraints. However, we had wide ranging discussions about reading and writing and we spent some time considering the pupils' own research project ideas. (One pupil went on to plan a research project looking at female roles and variations from the original stories in Disney films for her English class.) We dissolved the group before the end of the school year when external assessments and examinations became the priority for the majority of the participants. The points which emerged from the group are incorporated in this essay.

Appendix II[105]

Character self-assessment grid

Give (your character) a personal score from 1-5 (5 being highest score for this quality)

	Alex	Daniel	Caitlin	Chuck	Angus
1. **Temperance**					
Caution, prudence and discretion	2	5	4	4	3
Industry, diligence and perseverance	4	5	4	5	3
Self-control and self-regulation	2	4	3	5	3
Honesty, authenticity and genuineness	3	5	4	4	3
Judgment and open-mindedness	4	4	4	4	3
Hope, optimism and future-mindedness	2	4	4	5	4
2. **Vitality**					
Humour and playfulness	2	3	4	4	5
Leadership	2	3	4	5	4
Bravery and courage	2	3	4	5	3
Perspective (wisdom)	3	4	4	4	3
Zest, enthusiasm and energy	3	3	5	5	4
Social intelligence	4	4	4	5	3
3. **Curiosity**					
Curiosity and interest in the world	4	5	4	4	4
Love of learning	2	5	4	3	3
Creativity, ingenuity and originality	3	4	3	5	2
Appreciation of beauty and excellence	4	4	3	4	3
4. **Interpersonal strengths**					
Modesty and humility	4	3	3	4	3
Kindness and generosity	4	3	3	4	3
Forgiveness and mercy	4	4	4	2	4
Fairness, equity and justice	4	3	4	5	3
Citizenship, teamwork and loyalty	4	4	4	4	4
5. **Transcendence**					
Spirituality, sense of purpose and faith	2	3	4	3	4
Capacity to love and be loved	3	3	4	5	4
Gratitude	3	3	4	4	3

Appendix III[106]

The Blake Snyder Beat Sheet

1. Opening Image
2. Theme Stated
3. Set-up
4. Catalyst
5. Debate
6. Break into Two
7. B Story
8. Fun and Games
9. Midpoint
10. Bad Guys Close In
11. All Is Lost
12. Dark Night of the Soul
13. Break into Three
14. Finale
15. Final Image

Appendix IV

Biography

Short courses and training:

I attended the following short fiction-writing courses at Arvon and Moniack Mhor writing centres:
Several *Writing for Children and Young People* courses tutored by: Malorie Blackman, Melvin Burgess, Jamila Gavin, Keith Gray, Jonathan Meres and Meg Rosoff.
Several *Crime Writing* courses tutored by: Simon Brett, Allan Guthrie, Stuart MacBride, Val McDermid, Dreda Say Mitchell, Andrew Taylor and Louise Welsh.

As a winner of a HiWireless radio drama development competition, I received scriptwriting mentoring with Chris Dolan, 2013/14.

As a winner of an IdeasTap film development competition, I attended a workshop with Screen Arts Institute in association with Working Title Films, London, 2014.

Profile and Awards:

Sea Change, a YA crime novel, was shortlisted in the Caledonia Novel Award 2017.

I was shortlisted by Ruth Knowles for the PRH mentoring scheme following their WriteNow events for under-represented writers in 2017.

One Last Push, a radio play featuring Gary Lewis and Sharon Rooney, produced by Amanda Millan and directed by Allan de Pallette, was broadcast by BBC Radio Scotland in December 2015.

I received a Scottish Book Trust New Writer Award for Children's fiction in 2013/14.

Safe Ground, a YA contemporary novel, was the winner of the Constable Prize, it was submitted by University of Glasgow for the Sceptre Prize in 2013 and was longlisted in the MsLexia Children's novel competition.

Deleted, a YA contemporary novel, was the winner of the TC Farries Trophy.

Oban – The Perfect Destination was the winner of the Tarbert Book Festival 2017 short story competition.

A Time to Leave was the winner of the Scottish Association of Writers' short story competition and was longlisted in BBC Radio 4 Opening Lines 2015.

Ruralba, a screenplay for a children's TV series, was longlisted in BBC Scriptroom 7.

I presented findings from this DFA project at the NAWE conference, November 2017.

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