

BLOG INTERVIEW PRIOR TO THE MANCHESTER LITERARY FESTIVAL

*How did you select the writers whose work and lives you explore in *Outsiders*; what is the thread that joins them?*

As women wanting to change society, my chosen Outsiders look back to Mary Wollstonecraft, author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Before she published that epoch-making political book, Wollstonecraft saw herself as ‘the first of a new genus’, declaring ‘I cannot tread the beaten track. It is against the bent of my nature.’ She believed — and George Eliot affirmed it in her essay on Wollstonecraft -- that women had to remake themselves as authentic beings before they could be worthy of rights. To be an Outsider facilitated authenticity (however hard it was to be what George Eliot called herself, ‘an outlaw’). In each case, I’ve followed as closely as possible an experience of metamorphosis associated with finding a voice of her own at a time when nice women were expected to be quiet. Virginia Woolf said that she and her sister were trained in ‘tea-table’ talk — polite conversation with Victorian gentlemen — but by the end of her career, she gives vent to a volcanic voice in her feminist and pacifist treatise, *Three Guineas*, a book refused by bookshops and unacceptable to many, even within her own Bloomsbury circle.

Before these Outsiders were writers, they were readers, and they read one another. So there’s a chain of making: a new genus of womanhood across generations. It took a measure of imagination to ‘see’ what a woman might be. All five were motherless, so there was no model of womanhood at home. They found their models in books by women who had come before them. Emily Bronte is the only one who didn’t read Mary Wollstonecraft (there were no books by women in Mr Bronte’s library) but she read (and heard) her outspoken sisters. The most uncompromisingly authentic of the five — her sister Charlotte said that liberty was the breath of Emily’s nostrils — she says truly ‘No coward soul is mine’.

Do women writing in the present day navigate a similar experience of otherness - is an identity or way of life that is in some way outside the mainstream likely to have as big an impact on their creative work and how it is received as it was for your Outsiders?

The writer who leaps to mind is SINDIWE MAGONA, a South African novelist. Her identity as a black woman (she comes from a Xhosa background) and her way of life was enforced and distorted by apartheid. When she was young, she was forced to work as a servant, which meant in those days self-silencing and humility. Her wonderful first novel, *For My Children’s Children*, dramatises the discrepancy between that falsity and the way women of colour spoke freely and politically to one another on the bus taking them to work in the white area from their outsider ‘location’. The leading oppositional publisher, David Philip, took on Sindiwe, along with most anti-apartheid writers. She has a tremendously bold voice, and her wish ‘to change the world’ for women— she used that phrase to me, laughing at the outrageous daring — has been a spur to me. Once an outsider, she is now warmly acclaimed, in great demand as a speaker, but she is not known in

this country.

A theme of this year's Festival programme is dissent, political engagement and writers responding to current affairs in their work. How does writing - and reading - give us a place to confront society's problems and advocate for change? And how does this play out in your own work?

Dissent to domestic and military violence is a vital cause for all five Outsiders. Both Mary Shelley (at the age of sixteen, before she invented Frankenstein's violent monster, who thinks nothing of killing a child of five and later a young woman) and Olive Schreiner witnessed and deplored the impact of war on civilians. And when Virginia Woolf recovered from a bout of insanity in 1915, she woke up to the madness of trench warfare. The book ends with her anti-war treatise, *Three Guineas* and her idea for an Outsiders Society.

One of Sindiwe's novels dissents from the sexual norms that oppress women: men in her milieu who commonly infect partners or wives with AIDS without disclosing the condition (and their infidelities). Her subject is betrayal. Since her target is black males, she said, 'only a black woman could write this book'. Even so, she expected resentment. As it turned out, the novel was warmly received.

Anne Bronte's *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* both present horrific scenes of domestic violence. Victorian readers turned away from so grim a portrait of marriage: reviews and public opinion vilified the sisters' novels for what was thought to be unnatural brutality.

What writers and/or artists (old or new to you) have inspired you in this regard?

I'm inspired by the boldness of Virginia Woolf in refusing the whole edifice of power. Her mother and pacifist aunt were amongst the 104 signatories in 1889 to an anti-suffrage movement. The enlightened amongst the 'antis' were against the kind of women who imitates men (Mrs Thatcher is an obvious instance and Mrs May with their distortion of the English character in the direction of uncaring greed and determination to keep immigrants as outsiders). Virginia Woolf's aunt, Caroline Emilia Stephen, called for a third house of Parliament, an advisory house exclusively for women who would bring to bear values from their own traditions of preservation, nurture, sympathy, compromise and listening. This is the culmination of what the five Outsiders I chose represent: nothing less than an alternative form for civilisation — an alternative to the mess men and women in power have produced. The 'antis' predicted rightly that if the suffragettes won the vote, the woman's voice would be dissipated in the given political parties. I loved Virginia Woolf's telling herself in her diary as though she were a member of a one-person Opposition, 'I'm enfranchised till death and free of all humbug.'

What are you working on now?

On 1 January 2020 a huge and important cache of over a thousand letters from TS Eliot to Emily Hale is due for release at Princeton. Norton in New York, who published my biography of Eliot, has agreed to bring out a revised edition. This will include new material also from multivolume editions his letters and prose, which are now appearing.

Another project is called provisionally, 'In Search of Giselle'. I want to ask what each of the greatest dancers brings from her life to her own interpretation of this mysterious role: Carlotta Grisi, who created the role in 1841; Tamara Karsavina and Anna Pavlova; Alicia Markova amongst them. The underlying question is one I've pursued throughout my explorations as a biographer: the issue of what Virginia Woolf called (in *A Room of One's Own*) 'the true nature of woman'. In the second or 'white' act of the ballet, we see into the soul of Giselle, who cannot fit into the line-up — the rigid, ideological norms -- of the posthumous 'wilis' or 'night dancers' who take revenge on men.