

My Twist on a Tale:  
Represent!

# Winning Stories



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Stories**

My Twist on a Tale returned for its fourth year in 2022 with another brand-new theme, 'Represent!'.

As teachers throughout the United Kingdom call for greater diversity across the curriculum, My Twist on a Tale: Represent! encouraged children to shine a light on the whole story, representing what, and who, they feel are being left out in literature today. We challenged them to put the underrepresented centre-page! Children were able to write and reshape their own diverse stories, exploring topics that are important to them.

This book features 18 fantastic stories and poems from children and young people across the United Kingdom. We offer our congratulations to all the winners of My Twist on a Tale 2022.

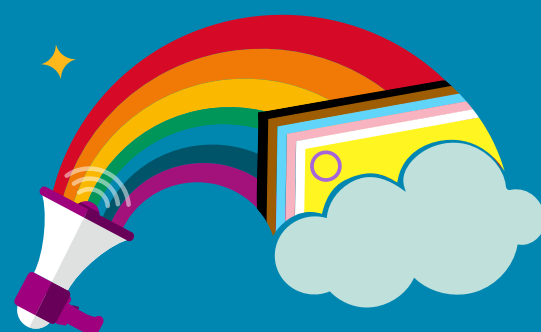
The amazing illustrations in this book are by Liliana Perez, c/o Collaborate.

**#MyTwistOnATale**



“After nourishment, shelter and companionship, stories are the thing we need most in the world”  
*Philip Pullman*

“If one is lucky, a solitary fantasy can totally transform one million realities”  
*Maya Angelou*



“What I am looking for is not out there, it is in me”  
*Helen Keller*



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# Helping Others

By **Maria Cabungcal**, KS1 winner

(Story 1) Once there was a mother and daughter walking on the street one Sunday morning. Then they saw a poor lady by the garbage bin looking for food to eat. Then the mother and her daughter went inside their house to get food and drink. They went outside to give the food and drink to the poor lady and when they gave the food the lady refused it. They tried to convince the poor lady to take the food. I will help poor children by giving them food and by praying to Jesus and Mother Mary to help and guide those who are in need and poor. I will also help poor people by making them have energy.

(Story 2) Once there was a girl who was riding a bus. When she was inside the bus, she saw a homeless man on the street. She hoped she could help the man. Then she saw another homeless man. She and her mother went off the bus and helped the man and the man said "thank you for helping me" ... end.



# The Special Senses

By **Reina Oda**, KS2 winner

The sky above grumbled like a grizzly bear. Latif and I were in a group, making a treehouse for a school project. Latif is my BFF. He's also a refugee orphan, except he's from Syria and I'm from Iran. He's blind and I'm deaf so the other kids would make fun of us and call us names. We'd tell the teachers, but they never really stopped bullying us. At least Latif and I had each other.

Soon, we were able to climb up into our treehouses. As I got in, I felt a strange vibration in my whole body. I looked for Latif's hand and signed in his palm. He spoke as he signed back onto my palm, "I heard something, Zahrah. It sounded like the rumbling sky, only deeper and from the ground."

Swiftly, he yelled down to the teachers.

"Oh, it's fine. It's probably just the creaking of the treehouse," responded one teacher. Nobody understood or believed us.

Just then, the ground shuddered like an autumn oak leaf in a breeze. Everyone started screaming and bawled in panic. Then, it stopped. An earthquake?! The teachers stood frozen

with pale faces, staring right at us. Suddenly, I felt a mightier vibration strike like electricity through my body. One look at Latif and I knew. He was groaning uncomfortably, his hands over his ears.

"What's wrong?" our group teacher asked. Latif explained what he heard and what I had felt and the teachers understood that another was coming.

We all clambered down and fled towards a clearing in the forest. Within seconds, it hit and from where we stood, we saw trees falling to the ground just where we had been. Our treehouses tumbled and crushed into pieces.

"You saved our lives..." one bully mumbled tearfully.

And there is the story of Zahrah and Latif for you. From then on, they were invited to meet blind and deaf people, as well as scientists, to teach them all how to detect earthquakes with their special senses. And at school, they were no longer bullied and were always asked to play together.





# No such thing as normal

By **Sophia Branch and Ella Kingston**, KS3 winner



## ECHO

"Echo." Students' heads turn in confusion. They've never heard that name before.

My name was always Saige before. My voice is barely audible as I say, "yes miss." People stare at me, their eyes bearing down into my flesh. My face feels hot. I hate people staring at me. When Miss Ashley finishes the register, she'll tell them why my name is Echo now. This might help them understand who I am, but it won't stop them teasing me. Lizzie tells me it will be fine, in sign language. We know sign language because my sister is deaf. I want to believe her, but I can't. Miss Ashley starts speaking.

"As most of you realised, there was a different name in the register. Saige is now Echo and uses they and them pronouns instead of she and her. If you would like, you can ask them questions." Astrid puts up her hand, and Miss Ashley points at her.

"Why did you change your name and pronouns?"

"I'm non-binary," then in my direction Astrid whispers "you're weird, Saige."



## LIZZIE

When we are walking to maths, I notice Echo slowing. I slow my pace to walk next

to them. They have blood on their lips. They must have been biting it. It's one of their stims (a repetitive behaviour done by neurodivergent people such as flapping hands and biting nails). When the maths classroom is in sight, Echo stops.

"Are you okay?" I ask. They don't respond. I realise they're probably having a shutdown. I understand, so I take them to inclusion. On the way back to maths, I know I'm late. My breathing quickens. I need to calm down. I start going over strange things that have happened in the Bermuda Triangle. I get to the maths classroom and open the door. Why does my desk have to be the furthest away from the door? Everyone's eyes follow me to my seat. Mr Stenhouse comes up to me, and menacingly whispers, "why are you late?"

In a way, this is more scary than when he shouts. I reply, quietly "I was taking Echo to inclusion. They were having a shutdown."

"THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A SHUTDOWN, THIS MUST BE PART OF YOUR MADE UP NEURODIVERSITY THING!" hollers Mr Stenhouse just as Echo comes in. When he see them, Mr Stenhouse shouts at Echo.

"WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN, SAIGE!" Echo covers their ears, trying to maintain sensory stability. Their sensory sensitivities mean they feel everything more intensely than neurotypical people.

"MY NAME IS ECHO, NOT SAIGE! I'M NON-BINARY!" The shout doesn't help and I begin to cry.

No! I can't have a panic attack here. Echo comes over and takes my hand. They take me out of the classroom, to inclusion. My breathing slows. I am calming down there are still tears in my eyes but there is an angry hot feeling in my stomach how can he say that to us how could he do that. I can tell Echo is outraged too, we need to do something about this.



## ECHO

Lunchtime is never good. We have to queue in a loud busy hall, which often causes a

sensory overload. This lunch is particularly awful. I start to flap my hands. It is too loud there is too much sensory stimuli. Tears start leaking from my eyes. I feel Lizzie's warm hands wrap around me. I usually hate hugs but Lizzie never overwhelms me. She is always gentle and comforting. I stop flapping my hands mainly because I don't want to hit Lizzie. Lizzie whispers in my ear "I can get both our lunches, do you want to wait in inclusion?" I nod. Once we've had our lunch, we go to Mr Stenhouse's office. I can tell Lizzie is as anxious as me. Her face goes blank when she is reciting the different mysteries of the Bermuda Triangle. My face is blank when I recite the Greek gods and what they are the god of in my head. When we get there we knock on the door. In a stern voice, Mr Stenhouse says...

"Come in." I suddenly get really anxious and I start to stim.

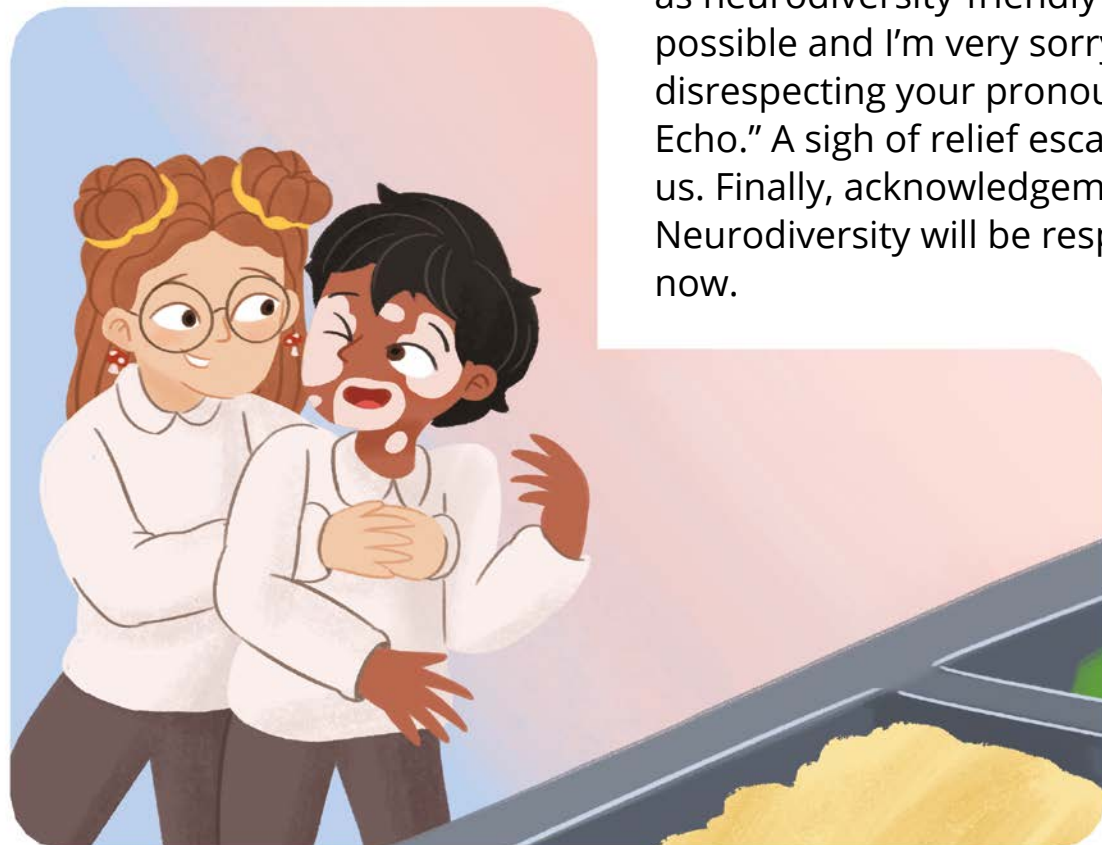
"Speak then, girls," Mr Stenhouse says.

"I'm not a girl," I mutter. I know it's only the first day, but I told him earlier. When I told Lizzie in year 7, she always used the right pronouns for me.

"We're here to talk about how you treat neurodiversity," explains Lizzie, confident as always. "We've noticed that you're shouting at neurodivergent people for

things they can't help, like bad handwriting, panic attacks, meltdowns, shutdowns, covering their ears, stimming and so many other things. We also noticed that you aren't using the correct pronouns for Echo and not accepting them as being non-binary." Louder than ever, Mr Stenhouse hollers...

"THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS NEURODIVERSITY, IT'S JUST AN EXCUSE! AND BEING NON-BINARY IS MADE UP AS WELL, GET OUT OF MY OFFICE, NOW!" As I leave, I see a look on his face I've never seen before. It could have been guilt, but I can't tell. His face is red with anger, but he's chewing his lip and avoiding our eyes.



## LIZZIE

Echo and I both spend the rest of the day in inclusion, too upset to go to lessons. The staff

in inclusion know us because my OCD and ADHD were really bad last year and Echo got really anxious too because of their neurodiversity. We spent a lot of time here. An ambiguous note is handed to us, telling us to go to the headteacher's office. The moment we enter, he apologises.

"I'm really sorry for disrespecting neurodiversity. My daughter was diagnosed with dyslexia, and I did some research. Now I know, neurodiversity exists. I'll do my best to make this school as neurodiversity-friendly as possible and I'm very sorry for disrespecting your pronouns, Echo." A sigh of relief escapes us. Finally, acknowledgement. Neurodiversity will be respected now.

# Representation story

By **Aditi Daniel**, KS4 winner

**04/07/22**

We finally landed in India! At my cousin's house right now; family greetings after not seeing each other for years take so long, but I've finally found some time to sneak away.

Anyways- I'm here now! I'll admit, I don't remember much of when we last came when I was little, but everything seems so familiar! Well... most things. I wasn't prepared for how hot it is here- a far cry from the UK- and definitely not for how many Indians there would be!

Ok, I know that sounds a bit stupid. 'It's India. And you're surprised to see Indians?' But it's just that everyone here is brown! Everyone looks like us, talks like us (my parents, anyway- my accent sticks out miles), and there's barely any white people in sight. It's refreshing, but a bit strange.

It'd probably be a more comfortable experience if I actually spoke Hindi, or Tamil or something, though. It's a bit jarring to hear your parents talking to people and not understanding a word of it. But hey, I should probably just be thankful that

my family here speaks English, or I would have been in for some awkward dinner-table discussions.

Speaking of dinner, mum's calling...

**13/07/22**

Everything's been so hectic. Driving around here is crazy- you see traffic-invading dogs, cats, even cows! And it's too dangerous to hang around the streets with my cousin. You see "rag-pickers" out pretty often, and the stray dogs always bark at them. I feel bad looking around at it all sometimes. I mean, my family's perfectly fine, we're pretty well-off (obviously, I mean, we could afford to move to the UK). Living in the UK, I do see homeless people, but it's shocking seeing so many more here.

I sound like such a downer. It's not bad here at all, really! It's not like India's awfully underdeveloped or anything- in fact, the technological advancements here are insane! So much so, it's kind of crazy to believe that it's all the same country; the well-off areas are so polished, and seemingly miles ahead of the UK in terms



of development, and the poorer places are so... not. I just can't help but feel a little bad when I see it, that's all. I mean- given any other circumstances I could have easily been any one of those people, my family and I just happened to find ourselves on a privileged path, and I ended up being raised in a country, where most streets are safe, the schools and healthcare are good, and I have a world of options at my feet, instead of having to search the streets for rubbish to sell. I guess it just feels a bit odd looking around and realising, 'This could have been me.' And I don't even know the half of what life's actually like here. It makes you think.



**19/07/22**

It's a pretty slow day today. My cousin's at school so I'm just sitting here watching TV. Though, after being in India for 2 weeks now, it's pretty jarring immediately being flooded with white teen-dramas again. I was flicking channels, purposefully looking for Indian-centric stories that weren't produced by Indian media. But... there was nothing.

Just a few shows with Indian side characters appearing in the background for a second. Talking stereotypically about their straight-As. We're either two-dimensional or invisible. I never really noticed before. I mean, why would I? It's pretty much expected that stories revolve around white protagonists; you learn that lesson as a little kid. It's just how the world works. You grow up, see white fairy this, white princess that, with the occasional POC lead that gets twice as much controversy and makes half the profit of the others. And none of them are Indian- despite the fact that we literally make up 17.7% of the population! (Yes, I checked.) You grow up around white-centric stories about white royalty and learn that's what normal and pretty and worthy look like.

Thankfully, in time, I decided to "embrace my culture". But... is it even my culture at this point? I only speak English, I never wear



Indian clothing, I've literally lived my entire life in the UK, only coming here for holidays- and it shows! I don't know how to act, how to dress, how to talk; people here barely understand what I'm saying half the time because of my accent! I'm preaching about Indian representation, but how can I say anything when I'm a stranger in my own birth-country? And I'm not exactly the average person in the UK either, so, where does that leave me? The "Indian kid", with little more to her than insufferably perfect grades back home. A confused girl with a weird accent who feels like a tourist, here.

But... maybe that's ok. Not the stereotypes, or the lack of representation- but the 'not really belonging anywhere'. I think I need to embrace that though. I mean, none of my friends can say they've flown halfway across the world to visit family, or gotten

dust in their eyes when riding on the back of a scooter through an impossibly busy street. And none of my cousins have walked alone through woodland paths with their headphones on. Or felt coldness nip at their face as their breath forms a cloud in the air during winter.

When I was a child, my mum told me to "be my own person", and not worry about following the crowd. At the time, she was mostly just trying to get me to stop feeling upset that I hadn't been put into the same House as all my best friends at school. But I feel like that's still good advice now. Maybe I'm not quite Scottish, and not quite Indian- I can't be perfectly sorted into either box. But you know what? I've got my own culture now. A unique identity. And I'd say that's a pretty cool thing to have.



# Belonging

By **Iona Mandal**, KS5 winner

She sat at the back of the class. Head down, pencil wedged firmly between her fingers. Her single long braid touched the back of her chair. She was happy to be here; it was time for her favourite subject. English. A seemingly unpopular choice for most students who despised the sandstorm of words and punctuation which got trapped within their unknowing eyelids, forcing them into a dull mid-morning doze. Language analysis, poetry, Shakespeare, they hated it all. But to her, words seemed an escape, the orifice in the middle of each 'o', a portal to another dimension, the heavy dip in each 'u', an encapsulating trench. However, there was only one barrier she felt in each lesson. A tiny obstacle that seemed to hinder the maximum amount of rapture she had the potential to feel. It was the way she was - unrepresented. Unknown and, unrecognised, equivalent to the title of each letter 'i' or the demeaning full stops that concluded each sentence. Every book she studied, each piece of text, seemed to cater specifically for people she had nothing in common with. These were mostly

written by authors who most of the time tried to accommodate the majority while leaving thousands of smaller and equally rich cultures like hers forgotten and uncelebrated.

Just in time, her English teacher strolled in, her brisk, high-heeled footsteps culling the last of her thoughts. In her hand, she held a navy-blue lever-arch folder along with thirty photocopies of the book extract the girls were to study today in preparation for their GCSE English Language exams. Swiftly greeting the class and introducing the lesson, she asked one of the girls to hand out the extracts, which she did quickly. Suddenly, a half-creased paper slapped on the desk in front of her with a two-worded title like a claw, grasped her attention. *Brick Lane*. Monica Ali. Brick Lane, in East London, home to a huge Bangladeshi community, bursting with Bangladeshi shops and restaurants. The place from where she had bought her first Bangla book as a child to learn to read and write her mother tongue. She gasped in utter disbelief! All her life, she had been reading





extracts from books she had never identified with. And now suddenly, she had discovered an entire book which was set in the very borough she once lived in. It all seemed too good to be true, almost as if a lie in front of her face. Here was a Bangladeshi-British woman who had a story to tell. With more vigour than ever before, she highlighted each language device, each metaphor, juxtaposition, and pathetic fallacy. She raised her hand for each question, spewing words from her own experiences, the ink from her pen flowing with more fluidity this time. Never in her life had she felt so recognised - eyes glinting as she read the contextual terminology, gazed at the curlicues of her mother tongue plastered on the whiteboard.

She remembered the stories she had heard. Stories of colonisers invading her motherland, picking and choosing elements of her culture which they liked best, but when it came to her own family moving here, they had felt utterly mismatched. One of the nation's favourite foods may be the chicken *tikka masala*, but back in the late nineties when her mother had crossed the road wearing a *sari* and *bindi*, she had been insulted to her face. Of course, things had got better, prejudice getting less noticeable by the day. But she had never felt that she truly belonged. The other girls in

her class had grown up watching TV shows that cast characters they could connect to. Those who ate the same food as them, wore the same clothes and spoke the same language. The only characters that she had ever related to were merely stereotypes, mimicking and subtly mocking her culture rather than appreciating it; those made primarily for white audiences, by white people, for white people to make fun of.

As the lesson ended, a new vault within her had been unsealed. The words which she had been saying inside her head for so many years had finally been unclouded, as if to materialise in the mist. It was like hearing a voice, not being able to decipher what it meant and suddenly, almost magic-like, mustering the courage to take it into the open. The bell rang signalling the end of Period 1. It was the start of recess. Her English teacher seemed impatient to leave, hurriedly gathering her papers and shoving them into her folder, as they spilled out over the edge. She felt the moment had arrived. She had to say what she had been yearning so long for the world to hear. Everyone in class knew her as the reticent, introspective one, but now, she would make herself heard. And so, she spoke:

"Miss, sorry to stop you but I just



had something to say. Thank you for including a more culturally diverse book in the English curriculum. Nothing in the entire world makes me happier than seeing my own culture recognised. I have spent all my life feeling ashamed. Today, I feel celebrated. For those who may think that studying these books is futile, always remember the solitary girl in class will feel heard from the words you read off the page. Just a while before, my British friend, sitting next to me, told me how she wished she knew to speak another language. It makes my heart swell in pride that I have managed to make the tables turn. I hope that in the future, more cultures are recognised, represented, and celebrated. In a way, I feel selfish to be complaining when so many other regions in this world are starving from underrepresentation. Please continue to do what you are doing Miss, for this is right. Each person deserves a place in this world, a place to belong."

## Create your character



## Out of Place

By **Emmanuella Shodunke**, Scotland winner

"Alright kids, your English homework for next week will be to write a 400-word essay about a time you felt out of place." Alisha raised her hand slowly and asked, "What if you don't know what to write about?"

"Dami, everyone's felt out of place before, just think about it when you get home."

"My name's Alisha, Miss."

Low sniggering rumbled around the classroom. Alisha caught Dami's attention, they both rolled their eyes in frustration. How many times can the same teacher confuse the only two black girls in class?

"Ah sorry, Alisha," she replied, sheepishly.

\*

"Hey, I'm home!" called Alisha as she kicked off her shoes, running upstairs to leap onto her sister's bed.

"Hey Ev, what's up?" Alisha said, crashing down next to Evelyn.

"I'm playing a game," Evelyn groaned, clearly focused on her laptop.

Alisha sighed and looked at the

game whilst Evelyn clicked on her character. Alisha, intrigued, asked "Can I help design the character?"

"Ugh fine!" Evelyn slightly turned her chair to the side, allowing Alisha to access the keyboard. First, Alisha selected the skin tone which closest matched her own, then added the afro option and selected a blue outfit.

"What do you think?" Alisha asked, turning her head back to see Evelyn's reaction.

"It's ok."

"Just, 'ok'?" Alisha's brows clenched together in confusion.

Evelyn took back the laptop and Alisha watched her make the character lighter, swapping the hair to a pin-straight blonde style, "Here, she looks much better!"

Alisha couldn't help but question her, "Why'd you make her lighter?"

"I don't know... she just looks right now." Evelyn shrugged, as she went back to grinding on the game, leaving Alisha in a mixture of shock and confusion.

Alisha headed to her room, still stunned about what just happened. She slouched into her chair, opening her laptop,



and began to think about her essay, still feeling stumped. It was starting to annoy her slightly. She began tapping her finger at the side of her mousepad, bouncing her leg repeatedly, and wondering what to write. She noticed her phone beside her. "I'll go on my phone for 10 minutes," Alisha said to herself, as she leaned back on her chair, scrolling through videos mindlessly. Suddenly, she came across one that stood out.

*'New Black Princess Movie Brings Controversy!'*

Alisha rolled her eyes at the headline. "We don't get a white princess for once, and everyone gets mad-" Alisha struggled to finish this thought, sitting bolt upright with an idea. Her sister wanting a white character, people getting mad at a new black princess, the teacher mixing up her name; it all fell into place. She turned to her laptop and started typing on the document as more ideas flowed in.

"At first, it was hard for me to choose a time where I've ever felt out of place, no matter how much I thought about it. Although, I've now realised that because I'm black, there has never been a time where I haven't felt out of place.

It has been hard to answer whenever someone asks me where I'm from, because I don't

even know myself. It always takes me at least a few seconds to think about it. 'Do I say I'm African or British?' That thought always comes to mind, and because of it, I end up changing my answer each time. Saying I'm British feels wrong at this point, I mean, it's obvious that I look different from all the other kids, and I wouldn't say it's a nice experience. The constant touching and remarks from people as if I'm an alien, definitely makes me feel like I don't belong here. That really damages my self-confidence, but no matter how much I try, it will never be truly understood by everyone else.

But saying I'm African also feels wrong. How could I call myself something that I barely know anything about? This is what I think whenever I realise how out of touch I am with my culture. I'm constantly asked if I would ever visit my home country, but to be honest, I'd also feel disconnected there too. They can be pretty unaccommodating to "outsiders" like me, and I fear they would say I act too "white".

When I was younger, I thought trying to act as white as possible was the best way to fit in. Obviously, I now know it's not, but a part of me still believes it. As a kid, seeing that being white was so glorified, made me want to be white myself. Why did I want to be so light to the point I truly thought

life would be better that way? Why did I think I would be prettier that way? Why were all my drawings white girls with pin- straight hair? Why did my whole life revolve around me wanting to be white? However, this was normal to me, it shouldn't be, but it was, which is why I never realised that I felt out of place at first. There has never been a moment in my whole life where I've felt IN place."

Alisha sat back with a proud smirk on her face, then texted her friend, Jesse, to ask her to read over it in the library tomorrow.

\*

"Oh wow, this..." Jesse turns back to look at her with a sad smile.

"What? Is it not good?" Alisha asked with a slight worry in her voice.

"NO, it's amazing, trust me, it's just... I never realised you go through so much, I'm sorry." Jesse looked down as Alisha giggled a little and gave her a hug.

"If it's made you see a bit of my life through my eyes, that's all I care about."

"This is definitely the best thing I've ever read!"

"You're just overreacting now, but I'll take your word for it!" The two girls laughed quietly, trying not to cause a disruption.





# Transgender representation

By **Jacob Pozniak**, joint Northern Ireland winner



Have you ever read a book with a transgender protagonist? If you're lucky you might have, but we honestly lack representation and it's irritating, annoying and upsetting! We have to search for a transgender character just to be mentioned. We have to search for representation, and there's a chance the representation won't be good or even dehumanizing! The last time I searched up books with a transgender protagonist there were only 7-8 books!

Having transgender characters can benefit shows, movies and books as it can impact others in the best way possible. It makes a show

way more diverse and engaging; having a character that's a part of a minority can make them more enjoyable or interesting! When shows have relatable characters it can benefit the show especially when the characters are minorities, transgender and LGBTQ+ youth should have the right to a character that goes through a similar thing as them.

Just search it up!

But there's a chance that the representation we do find is just terrible or dehumanizing! For example, transgender women are often drawn as big buff guys

with pitched up voices. I mean, once I saw a bearded guy with a feminine voice that was passed off as a transgender woman! It's unbelievable how people are okay with this! How are people okay with this? How are people okay with big companies dehumanizing transgender people? It's all so confusing to me!

Minorities often hear diversity being used as a negative. There was a time where I couldn't go a day without seeing someone on social media saying something along the lines of "has diversity gone too far?" with millions of emojis in the caption, which is just absurd! Then there's also people who think a singular minority character is diverse! It's frustrating how people have set such a low standard and then are satisfied with the bare minimum!

Sadly there's people who think minorities are asking for far too much to have a transgender character just to be mentioned, it truly wouldn't be that hard to include us or other minorities into novels and shows, would it? It's just terrible how much our community lacks representation, GOOD representation!





# Gallery

By **Sophie Campbell**, joint Northern Ireland winner



In a quiet corner, all alone  
All but one or two people.  
'Who picked this colour of stone?'  
Even though you act strong  
Puff your chest and stand your  
ground  
You can't stop wondering why  
everyone thinks you're... 'wrong'.  
Why do crowds just adore them?  
But in the shadows,  
I'm a rooster in a world full of hens.  
Is it because online there are no  
pictures of me?

My colour? My face?  
Or because I came from across a  
sea?  
I don't even know why I'm different,  
Am I an outcast or just unique?  
All I want is some help, a hint  
All I know is that it's just not fair!  
But my day will come, I'm almost  
there.  
And for silly problems; I will no  
longer care.  
I will live my life with love and flare.

# My Millie

By **Ava James**, Wales winner

## Day of 1/9/20

Dear someone,

Today was my first day of year seven, and if I'm being honest, high school is extremely hard. I didn't see my friend Millie all summer, she said we would meet up in the summer, we never did though. I never really wondered why we didn't, thought she must have been busy.

However when I walked in high school with my blazer, that was ten sizes too big, Mum says I will grow into it though. And I see her, Millie. My Millie, dressed in the school uniform that was ten sizes too small, with black false lashes and apparently a new attitude. She carried a Marc Jacobs handbag that was definitely her mum's because my mum bought it for her mum's birthday. She wasn't herself. At all.

In Science, the teacher wouldn't let her go to the bathroom because we just had break, so Millie decided to cause a scene and start swearing across the classroom, calling the teacher words that I'm way too scared to even write about otherwise Mum will kill me. When she was finally allowed to go to the bathroom, I followed her. She locked herself in

the bathroom stalls, but I heard a familiar sob.

The last time I heard Millie cry was when we were six, Connor Lambert had said she looked like a frog, and she ran into the first girls' bathroom stall, crying. She wasn't a horrid person, she wasn't loud, she wasn't mean. In fact, Millie is my rock. For example, say a plane's crashing, but you look at the flight attendants and you see that they're still smiling, that's Millie.

Déjà Vu hits me harder than I thought, but now I need to be Millie's rock. I knock on her bathroom stall. "Hey, It's Flo," I say quietly.

"Flo?" She wondered, while still sniffing through her tears.

She seemed awfully surprised.

"You wanna talk?"

She didn't reply, she just opened the stall door and pulled me in. I shut it behind us, then I looked at her. Oh Someone, when I tell you I saw the same six year old girl who had her feelings hurt by Connor Lambert that one time, I only speak the truth. Sure she looked different, but underneath she was still Millie, My Millie. "Flo, I think I have a problem," she whispers.





I look at her inquisitively, "What's the problem Mills?"

Mascara was all down her cheeks, but through it I saw her eyes fill up with a whirlwind of guilt.

She lifted up her sleeve, and I don't really want to write anymore about what I saw. I swear Someone, I swear I thought I heard my heart crack.

"Don't tell anyone Flo, I really don't want anyone to know."

"Not even your own Mum?" I asked her with worry lingering in my voice.

"Not even Mum, please Flo! Please!" She begged me.

My best friend begged me not to tell anyone she had hurt herself, and that's what I did.

I'll keep you updated.

Maybe.

### **2 years later: 22/11/22**

Dear someone,

Tell you what, it's been two long years since I wrote. See here's the thing, high school changes you. I can say that with confidence,

well the remains of it. Kids are brutal when they want to be, and I wish I could say it was all their personality. That it was their pure thoughts, their opinions and their actions. However, at ages like we are at now, it's extremely easy to get tired of trying to figure out how we should do things, we copy the people who raise us, internet or none. When I talk to my friends, I am not talking to my friends, I'm talking to influencers. I'm speaking to bad influences, bad opinions, bad actions. Watching people grow into the worst sort of people you were praying they wouldn't turn into, is one of the most painful things I hope no one has to go through. You remember Millie right? You probably wouldn't, because you couldn't even recognise her. After the last time I spoke to her, I never told anyone about what she did. However, I didn't tell you what happened after. She told me that she did what she did because she met some girls in the summer, and they taught her how to steal, how to get a guy. Millie went into the details, that I remember vaguely, but something about showing her shoulders more, and many toxic friendships. All that apparently made her do what she did. I don't think so though, I think that it all got too hard for her and she didn't know what to do but blame herself.

Millie was only 12.

I was only 12.

Now you must wonder about her now, right? Well, she is carrying on her performance of a vile person. She wore long sleeve t shirts in P.E, and started to wear tights more often. It was only spreading, the thoughts of herself were only developing into hurting herself more.

I have nothing to do with her, she is no longer My Millie.

So, the one unanswered question that you must be dying to know Someone, is who is Someone? I don't even know myself, but if I did, you would be the person who listened to us.

I have been on this planet for 14 years now, and all the other kids who have also been on the planet for 14 years, all share the same feeling. The feeling of never being enough. The feeling of always having to prove something to Someone. You're not like that Someone, not at all. You listen, to my story, to Millie's. Not many grown ups do that Someone, not at all.

The truth is, you can represent all the LGBTQ+ people, all the races, all the women and men.

But I haven't seen anyone represent all the children who will grow into every one of those categories.

# Martha Brown

by **Eden Collin O'Hare**, South West winner

I keep a book of stories hidden  
under my pillow.

Secret worlds, and people, animals  
and mystical creatures, all known  
only by me.

I made these stories, taking  
inspiration from the world around  
me.

When a person sees a tree, I see a  
hidden palace filled with magical  
creatures, hidden just out of sight.

When a person looks up at the  
sky and sees a vast expanse of  
blue, smudged with clouds and  
speckled with birds, I see the  
beauty of all of that, and then I  
look harder.

I see space, a universe of stars and  
suns, planets and mysteries.

Stories.

We are surrounded by them, but  
you have to look hard to spot  
the ones that are truly special.  
The ones that deserve to be  
preserved in ink, in the pages of  
my notebook.

There is one particular story  
which I love. It is all about a girl  
named Iris, after the Yellow Irises  
that fringe the stream that runs

through my meadow. Passion,  
that is what they symbolise, I read  
that in one of Father's books. He  
loves plants. Well, he did.

Before he fell ill.

But that is something I will come  
to in a moment, and I would  
much rather be talking about Iris  
than that, I find it a little difficult  
sometimes, to think about reality.  
I much prefer being in my own  
worlds.

Iris is everything I would like  
to be, someday. She is strong,  
and clever, she has a cottage  
with a bench outside where she  
writes her famous novels, aided  
by the music of the birds and  
bumblebees.

And best of all, she doesn't have to  
cook, or clean, or sew, or do any of  
the things that my older brother  
expected me to do, just because  
I am a girl. Just because my name  
is Martha; mistress, it means. I do  
not want to be a mistress.

I want to see the world.

To travel to different places each  
month, exploring and writing my  
stories, recognised wherever I  
go, not for cooking, cleaning and



sewing, but for being Ida Moon;  
writer and naturalist.

But I suppose I could never do  
that.

Because of my father.

He taught me everything I know,  
including how to read and write.  
But not just that, he taught me  
about the beauty of the world, and  
how to treasure it.

He doesn't teach me anymore. He  
just lies in bed.

Dying.

He is very ill, and my brother says  
that heartbreak is an illness that

cannot be cured.

He can only be cared for, for the  
remainder of his days.

Cared for by me, because I am the  
girl.

I love my father, of course I do.

I just think that my brother should  
help, just a little bit.

We are all family, after all, and  
families care for one another, no  
matter who they are.

Besides, it is just me, my brother,  
and our father. All together on our  
slowly dying farm.



And here is the thing I never forget.

How my mother died.

She passed away when giving birth to a child.

I am that child.

I believe that I may have killed my mother, and I think that my own brother holds it against me, that as much as he tries to forget, he cannot.

And if I do not look after my father, and keep him alive in his grief, like the woman that I should be, he will die as well, and it will all be my fault.

So I will never be Ida Moon; writer and naturalist, travelling the world, because it is my duty to save our farm, care for my heartbroken father, feed my brother and live up to my mother's sacrifice.

It is my duty, as mistress of our house.

Even though I do not want to.

One morning my brother comes in from feeding the few thin chickens that we have left, and sits down as I lay out breakfast on the table in front of him. I sit down too, and slowly begin chewing. We often eat in silence, overwhelmed by all of the unspoken problems that we try to ignore.

Not today we won't.

I swallow my thick, hot mouthful with difficulty.

"So." I say loudly, so that he could not pretend to have not heard.

"What will you be doing today?"

He looks up in surprise for a few moments, before shrugging noncommittally and lowering his gaze to stare at the bowl of steaming porridge before him. I sigh.

"Well it does not sound as though you have all that much to do, and in that case it would be rather helpful if you could make yourself useful around the house by at the very least cleaning the bedrooms."

He nearly chokes on his porridge as he looks up at me incredulously. "What on earth do you mean?" He splutters.

"Well, I suppose it would just be the beds that would need changing, and the floors may need a good sweep." I reply.

"No, I meant, that is your job!" he says.

"No more than it is yours! Now do what I say or you will be cooking your own food from now onwards!" I say, standing up and striding out of the door, and into the garden.

I walk down the garden path and breeze through the gate, making my way across the small farm, over the stile, and into my meadow. I step through the long, autumn grass and finally reach the river. I sit in my favourite spot, under an old weeping willow

whose branches just stroke the burbling surface of the stream, and flow out all around the beautiful, twisted trunk. Its leaves have bled from dainty green little things, to a bright, warm yellow which I love.

I sit there, blissfully, for a long time.

I think of characters to turn into stories that I can write into my notebook, gnomes and fairies and anybody that isn't a human. I cannot deal with thinking about humans at the moment since all of my problems revolve around them. I twirl a lock of my deep red hair around my finger. I remember someone called me an imp a long time ago, because of it.

I think of all of the people I wish I could run from. My brother, my father, the memories of my mother, even though I have none.

But Ida would not run. She would face her problems.

Oh no.

I suddenly realise something, and it hits me like a heavy stone.

My notebook is hidden under my pillow, the pillow my brother will be plumping if he did as I said. He will see it and I will lose the only hopes I have left.

I stumble to my feet, and hitching up my dress, I run.

Perhaps he did not listen to me, I think as I run up the stairs.

I burst through my bedroom doorway.

My brother is sat on my bed, my notebook in his hands, reading.

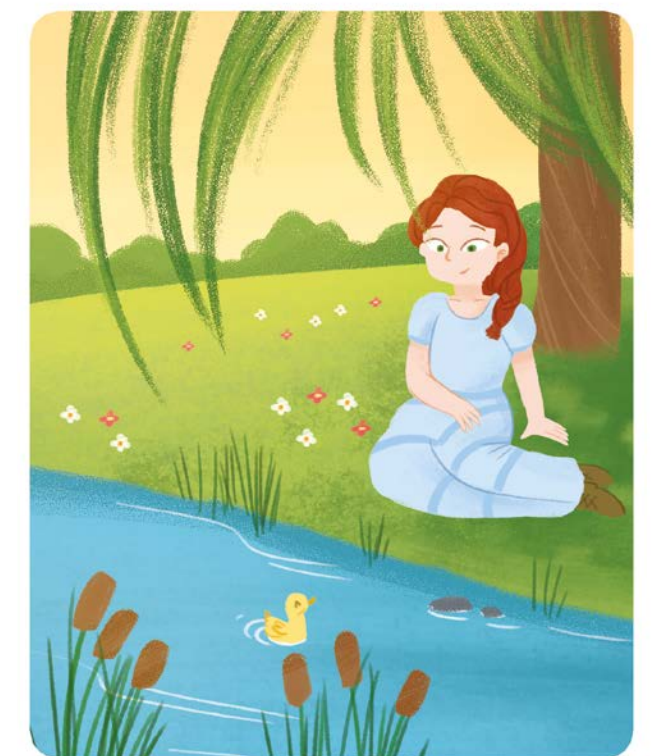
He turns the final page and looks up to see me standing over him, flushed red in the face and panting.

"Did you write these?" he asks, and I nod. "They are incredible."

Hesitantly I smile, my cheeks burning red, though not from my running.

"Do you realise how much money we could make out of these? If we sent them to a publisher?" he asks me, a look of excitement dawning on his face.

"I do not know ...." I say cautiously. "I quite liked it when only I knew of them."





My brother frowns. "Do not be so selfish, Martha. Think of how the farm will prosper, we could even afford a doctor for Father!"

I flinch in annoyance when he calls me selfish, but then I mentally kick myself. What am I doing being so hesitant? This is my dream come true! And a doctor for Father means that I will no longer have to be caring for him day and night, though I do love him. All my problems would be gone!

"But which one?" I ask.

"Whichever one you like the most!" he says, face shining.

"I know just the one." I say.

My brother is gone for a few days, off to town in search of the post office, so life continues almost the same as ever for me.

Until that night.

I am lying in bed, in the dark, dreaming of all the places I will visit, when I notice something.

Silence.

I cannot hear my father coughing as he always does.

Suddenly I am seized by panic and I fling myself out of bed, grabbing the candle next to me and hurrying out of the bedroom and along the corridor, until I reach Father's bedroom door.

I gingerly push it open.

"Father?" I whisper.

No reply.

I creep over to his bed, and hold the candle near his face.

He is a chalky white, and his eyes are open, glassily reflecting the winking flame that he cannot see, that he will never see ever again.

A sob escapes my lips.

My father is dead.

And, like my mother, it is all my fault.

Many long weeks had slowly passed since that night, and me and my brother had all but forgotten about my book.

So when it arrived in the post, it was quite a shock.

The house is gloomy today, as it had been ever since I found Father dead in his bed.

I am sitting at the table, staring at nothing, when there is the sound of someone knocking on the door. It takes me a while to fully register the sound, and what it means, and by that time my brother had already answered it. He is there for a while talking to someone, and finally he says "Thank you" and closes the door. Slowly, he turns around. I stare at him expectantly. He clears his throat and at last says, "Good news."

"What is it?" My voice sounds strange in my throat, most likely from hours of not speaking.

A smile suddenly startles me by breaking across his face and erasing all signs of grief from his



expression. I stand up quickly.

"It is our book, the publisher liked it, so much so that I believe that there are people all across the country - no - the world reading it as we speak!" my brother says, still grinning at me like a maniac. "WHAT?" I shriek, and he laughs out loud. A sound I have not heard for too long, I am beaming before I know it myself.

He holds up an envelope and opens it. Inside is more money than I could possibly count. My brother is holding our future right in front of me. My future. A future that I have dreamed of for a very long time.

That was the first of many envelopes of money. We published all of the other stories in my notebook separately, keeping a steady flow of money coming into the farm. My brother keeps it all safe, hidden in a drawer in his bedroom. Soon, I think. Soon I will have enough to travel all

around the world, and people will recognise me from my name being on the front cover of many famous books, soon my dreams will come true.

I keep count of the money as it comes in, of course keeping most aside for my brother.

And then the day comes when the final envelope arrives.

Enough money to finally see the world.

Packing is easier than I thought it would be, I am only going to bring my notebook, clothes, other essentials, a few books, and, of course, the money.

"There," I say to myself as I close the now bulging, simple cloth bag.

My brother pokes his head around the door, and seeing the bag, frowns. "What on earth are you doing, Martha?" he asks.

"I am packing." I reply simply.

"What for?"

"Travelling the world!" I say proudly.

"What do you mean?" he asks quickly. "Where will you get the money?"

"Brother, have you not seen the envelopes of money that have been arriving almost each day?" I ask, slightly vexed now.

"No. Absolutely not," he says firmly. "This is ridiculous. You are a girl, for heaven's sake! You are not going to leave this farm."

My heart sinks, and my face drops.

"Of course, how foolish of me. I am sorry," I say. It is only half a lie. I am, after all, sorry that I will be leaving him without his consent, or his knowing about it at all, but I am determined, and he cannot tell me what to do, just because I am a girl.

I go to take the money and leave, that very night.

It is dark as I sneak into his room, tiptoe over to his wardrobe and quietly pull open the drawer which contains the money.

I keep one eye on his sleeping figure, nestled into his bed, and, careful not to wake him, I reach into the drawer, and pull out an envelope.

It is empty.

My face crumples.

Where is it?

I pull out another envelope.

Empty.

My heart quickens and frustration fills me.

Another envelope, nothing.

Another.

Another.

The money is gone.

Every last bit.

"What the hell do you think you are doing?" my brother cries from behind me, causing me to jump. But I clench the horribly empty envelopes tight and turn around to face him.

"Where is it?" I ask, my voice wavering. He says nothing. "Where is the money?" I repeat, my voice raising.

At last he speaks. "I have a confession to make, Martha. I am going to college in three days' time. I am sorry." But I know he is not sorry, deep down.

"I do not believe it," I say firmly. But I do. I do believe it. "You spent my money so that you can leave me alone here, forever. What brother are you?" Tears fill my eyes and suddenly I am shouting. "I despise you! How could you?! You, you foul, evil THING are no brother of mine! How could you STEAL FROM ME?!"

"I am not stealing! I do it for your own good! Listen to me!" He interrupts me as he sees me opening my mouth to speak

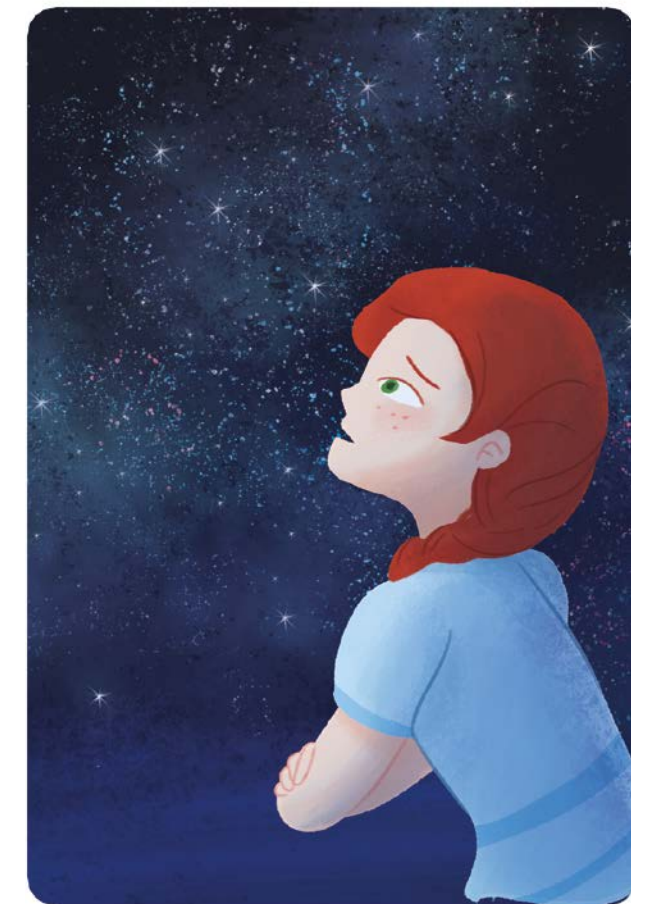
in outrage. "Your, your dream, this ridiculous idea that you can just go off gallivanting around the world on your own, writing books and having a fine time is utterly absurd! YOU ARE A GIRL for goodness sake! No one will read a book written by you, can you imagine the disgrace of it, a young, red-haired woman, with no husband, writing books! It would be shame upon us! Yes you do have some talent, perhaps even potential, but you are lucky that I published them under my own name just for you!"

"YOU WHAT?!" I shriek.

"HOW CAN YOU BE SO UNGRATEFUL?! I DID THIS FOR YOUR OWN GOOD!" My brother is red in the face and shouting now, too.

"But it is not right, it is not fair," I whisper through a haze of tears. Then I run, out of his room, down the stairs and through the front door, across the farmyard, into the meadow and to the willow tree. It is dark and I trip more than once but now I am standing by the whispering stream, tears streaming down my face.

This story does not have a happy ending, but it is a message of hope for the brave, clever girls of the future. A chance for me to share my story and to say it is possible, and do not let anyone tell you otherwise.



In the year that I lived, I could not fulfil my dream. But you can fulfil yours.

My brother went to college and I stayed on the farm since that night. Alone until the day I will die.

But I kept on dreaming.

Standing by the stream that night, tear streaks staining my face, I look down at the mud beneath me. And then I look up and see the stars.



# Dear Ghetto Girl

By **Emma Appah**, South East winner

Twinkle twinkle little star.

You are not a diamond; you are too dark.

They don't want my skin - they just want my hips. But that's sick to think.

And yes.

I've been singing the same melody in my head.

It's a damn catchy tune, but the other girl said:

"The song is too cliché"

Can we switch it up a bit? Sure.

To a ballad of a blonde in a story, Where black people don't exist.

Do you say, Black Lives Matter? You might be tired of a hashtag online.

While people like me are stuck doing time.

For crimes the privileged did.

Destroying homes!

Leaving widows with a kid.

The blacker the berry the sweeter the juice,

A kid dies, the blacker the killer, the sweeter the news. Who wrote the rules and ruined schools?

Last I checked, it's the leaders that were fools.

It's one way for you and another way for me,

I think it's time we revoke that legacy.

R-A-C-E

What are you going to be?

Harriet, King, Floyd, Breonna.

They all had a dream so why can't you and me?

Even though they're quiet I can still hear you.

"Go back to your country" Ok, let's say I did.

I'd visit my family's mansions in Ghana.

Walk the road with milo cubes in my hand.

Look to the left and see Ivory Coast,

Look to the right and see

Greatness.

But hiding only makes you harder to find.

So, I've made up my mind,

I'm going to change the world one day.

So, I'm here to stay.

I'll hustle and make millions,

Investments, establishments,

I'll be winning tournaments.

Then maybe you'll remember who I am.

Or who I could've been.



Instead of comparing me to a future, only God can see.

In an embellishment of elegance from eloquence,

Now excuse my expressiveness...

I'm a mess!

Yes?

It's the stress from the pressure of reality.

And I can be introverted but still have a voice.

That's a choice to choose when you lose.

Over... and over again without air.

And it's not fair that my truth is a lie, and you make the other girl's truth the deciding factor as to whether I get locked away.

The refugees are not a crisis.

If it's your home, it can be theirs too.

Don't be selfish,

Or it'll just come back to you. Immigrants get the job done.

And waiting for change, it's breaking my heart.

It's the key to a door that just won't budge.

I can't wait for the Next Generation to start.

The future is a picture I'll never get to paint,

The colours of a rainbow running too faint.

That's me:

an impossible dream.

For the part that King had in our history.

While ignoring all the other legacies.

That's the reason black history is a mystery.

That this letter is to me...

Dear Ghetto Girl,  
Just breathe.



# Smile

By **Nora Kadar**, London winner

Sam glares at the newly hung glittery poster on the corridor wall. 'School disco, £1 a ticket! Bring all your friends!' the poster says in massive blue bubble writing. "Bring all your friends. Easier said than done." Sam mutters bitterly under his breath.

Sam didn't have any friends – well, he didn't have any friends. He couldn't figure out how to fit in with all the other boys. At first, he didn't know what he was doing wrong. He downloaded all of the fighting video games that all the other boys were obsessed with, he joined a popular football club that he found as boring as ever, and even, after months of begging and nagging, got those ugly new Nike shoes that no one took off. And yet, nobody bothered to say a word to him. He's now come to accept the fact that he doesn't fit

in because he doesn't truly enjoy all the weird activities that all the other boys do, and they can all tell. He just wasn't happy. But he had no idea why.

As soon as Sam trudged through the doorway, his mum bombarded him with questions. "Sammy! Did you hear about the disco? Isn't it exciting? Aren't you going to have the best time? We must go clothes shopping this weekend! Your closet is a mess! Maybe we should get *blah blah blah!*" Sam couldn't care less about the disco. He couldn't care less about anything at the moment. He didn't want to go to the disco. He didn't want to go clothes shopping. But somehow, he found himself with his mum at the shopping centre on a rainy Sunday afternoon.

Sam's mum bolted about the shop, snatching shirt after shirt.



Meanwhile, Sam was slumped on a wooden bench in the girls' 12-13 section, brainlessly watching raindrops trickle down the window. He'd rather be anywhere but there. Even at that pointless football club. "Looking for something?" a perky voice asks, startling Sam out of his thoughts.

"No, I'm okay." Sam replies bluntly. He looks down at the shopkeeper's name tag. Izzy. They/them.

"Are you sure? Nothing here catches your eye?"

"Here, in the girls' section? Yeah right," Sam scoffs. But just as Sam is saying this, his eyes catch onto a purple velvet dress with a satin belt and flowing pleats.

"Some things can surprise you, can't they?" Izzy grins, a twinkle in their eye.

After what seems like merely a few seconds, Sam was gazing at himself in the fitting room mirror. He was...confused. But he felt a sense of safety, a sense of warmth. He felt like he belonged, something he never felt. His fists unclenched and his shoulders relaxed as a smile spread across his face. Not the type of smile that he faked in family photos, or the type of smile he smiled when his mum asked if he was okay. No. This was a real smile. Full of hope. He gently tied the satin belt and straightened out the pleats. "Sammy? Are you in there? Come out and show me

what you found!" his mum says through the fitting room curtain. Sam tenses again. He hesitantly pulled back the curtain with shaking fingers. 'What if she thinks it's weird? What if she hates me forever? What if-' Sam's downward spiral was interrupted. His mum pulls him into her arms. Sam peers out the window. A glimmering rainbow shines through the rain.

*A few weeks later*

Samantha sat in the backseat, her mind racing through the thoughts she thought not too long ago. "What if they think I'm weird mum?"

"Nonsense. You're finally you now! No one can think you're weird for that!" Her mum smiles warmly, pulling into the school parking lot. Samantha takes a deep breath and opens the car door, giving her mum a half-hearted wave. Samantha's mum gives her a nod, as if to say 'you've got this'.

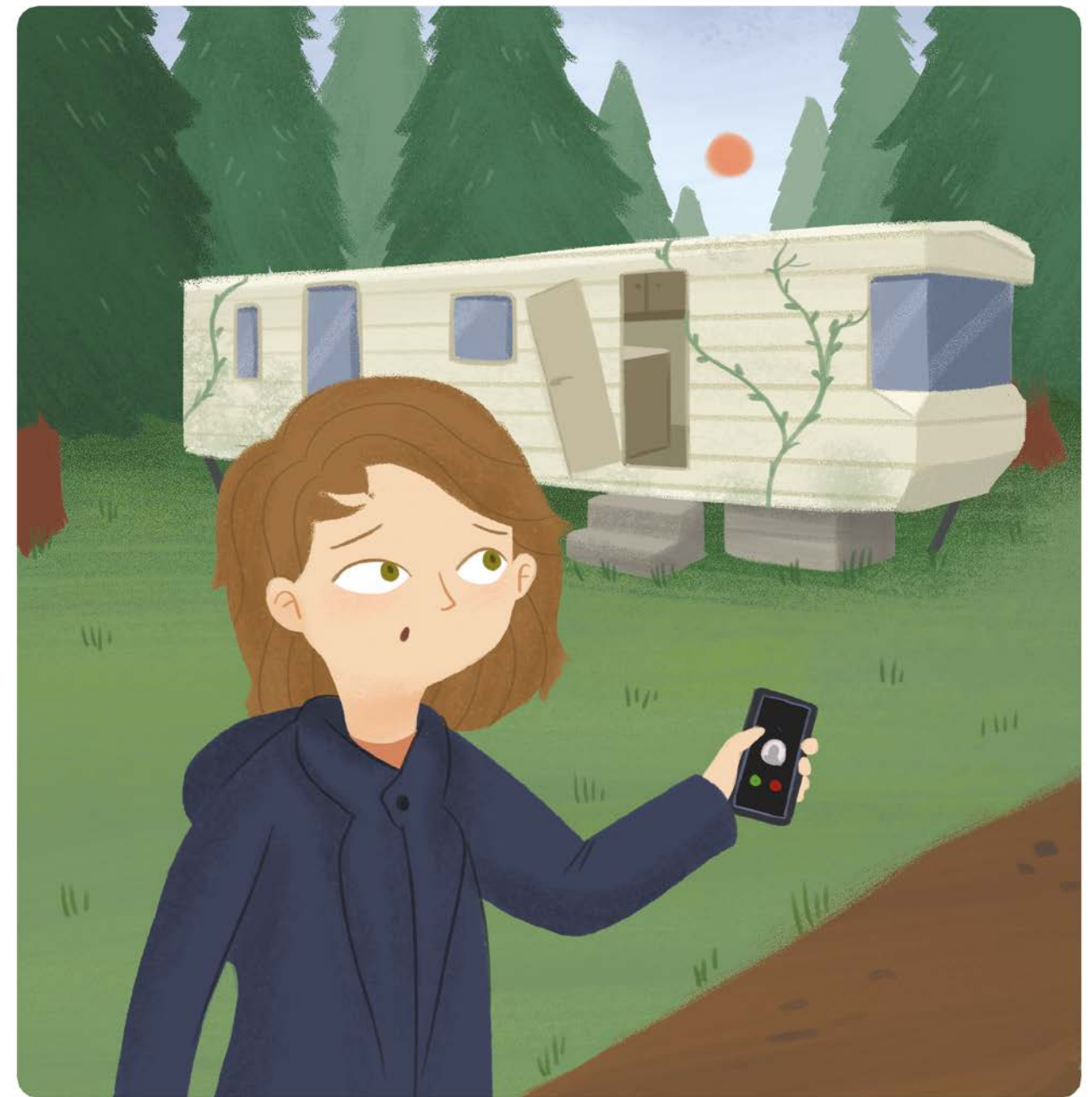
Samantha wished she felt the same way. She heard thumping music through the door, beating faster and harder than her heart. She scrunched her eyes and fiddled with the satin belt. Once she opened them again, she was ready. In three seconds, she was going to walk through those doors. One. *You've got this.* Two. *Some things can surprise you can't they?* Three. *Smile.*

# A Faint Shadow

By **Millie Graves**, East Anglia winner

Walking home alone in the ancient witches wood the sun started to set. I looked at my watch 4:50, I stopped for a moment looking around, silence. I looked down at my mucky trainers and realised how freezing I was. I thought that I would take a different path back. All of a sudden, I stumbled across an old creepy-looking caravan. I looked back in my trails and pulled out my phone, "One message from Mum" I said aloud. Rustle... I looked up quickly shoving my phone in my pocket completely forgetting about the message. I felt a bit frightened but also strangely curious. Without warning the grubby curtains twitched, I quietly tiptoed closer and closer and saw the door was open. Cautiously, I stepped inside, peeking in. In one corner a candle flickered. A faint shadow appeared at the other side of the room, stepping in a bit further, free willing. "Millie, is that you?" the whispering voice asked. "How do you know my name?" The door shut. The candle blew out. Petrified. I was left in pitch blackness... "Ahhhh," I screamed, "stay back I'm warning you" I said, trembling with fear. I had one arm forward, one arm back, fists

clenched very tight. I waited. The wind whistled. I put my hand over my face, waiting for something to happen or jump out, my face clenched. Waiting waiting, praying for hope. "Who are you? What do you want? Please can you put the light on?" Absolutely nothing then tap, tap, tap, "oh my goodness that's the door, are you going to get that?" Before I could shout for help, SHUFFLE, shuffle, shuffle the person moved away. "Alright you win, I am just going to step over here." Creeping to the door, I felt around, feeling for the door handle. "Got it" I said loud. The wind whistled again. Twisting the handle whilst sinking behind the door I opened it, the faint sunglow came in. I saw a light switch before looking around the room, I switched it on. I was shocked... a completely empty caravan. I breathed such a sigh of relief, I started shaking again, a big smile spread across my face. Clearly too quickly, as a tall man appeared in view. "Who are you?!" he said gruffly, I had so much to ask, but I just stood there staring, when eventually I said, "Are you the person in the caravan a minute ago, trying to scare me? Did you climb out the window? Are you



trying to hurt me?" I said it all in a rush. "None of those things," he grunted. "I only came and knocked on the door to see if my dessert is ready, me and my wife live in this caravan." "I don't mean to be rude or try to scare you, but I think it is haunted? Someone just said my name and I completely freaked out." "So," said the man meanly. "Is your name Millie as I heard someone calling it a few minutes

ago, it was quite an echoey voice, so I am not too sure." "Yes it is." "Oh and have you seen my wife, Valerie?" "No, sorry I haven't." "I better have a quick look then," he moved passed me and looked around the caravan, in cupboards, under the bed, behind the one door. "I better go and check, she hasn't gone to pick some plums or something," and with that he was off. "I will look this way," I



called. "OK thanks," he said. I started walking off just seeing a few metres ahead at the time. The moon had come out thankfully. "Wow, full moon, cool" I said out loud. Looking dreamily into the moon, suddenly, "Valerieeee" a voice called. Huhh I jumped. Snapping back into reality. Hang on, I thought, that's the same echoey voice that man had described earlier, it sounded light and eerie nothing like that gruff man's voice. Oh no she could be in trouble. I started running scanning up and down behind trees, looking everywhere. I saw some figure up ahead, my adrenaline kicking in. "Oh, hi again, seen Valerie? I mean your wife?" "No, I wonder where she has got to, maybe gone round a friend's although why wouldn't she tell me?" "I heard someone calling her name like that same echoey voice, you described calling my name earlier. Did you hear it?" But before he could answer we turned around and saw someone lying on the ground, wrapped in vine leaves tangled up, we both gasped, "Valerie?" We walked closer and closer and bent down unwrapping the vines around her, why is she so pale? She's not moving or breathing, we both looked at each other, "it's a dummy!" The man said, quickly. "Oh my goodness, why would someone do that?" "I don't know" exclaimed the man,



"but let's go back to the caravan and solve this mystery, maybe she went back." As we were walking back I realised my Mum could be worried about me. No, I thought, this must be more important. 10 minutes later we were back, "oh good she must be back, the caravan door is shut." The man started to step forward, I grabbed his wrist, "wait" I whispered. "Please be careful, trust me on this one?" "Well alright, I will." The man opened the door, but there was no Valerie instead there was a pan with a lid on on the small hob boiling over with plums in, but no sign of her. "What do we do" the man said. "I don't know, I think we are being followed and maybe even watched?!" "Let's not jump to conclusions," exclaimed the man ... Thump we both turned around and there she was, holding a knife smacking it in her hand. "What are you doing here my darling," he gulped... She pointed the knife at him and started walking towards him...

# Empty Minefields

By **Bahar Kayani**, West Midlands winner

Every day, I feel like a burden. My father never fails to make it clear that I am an added weight in his life. Before I left for school each morning, I used to try and tell him that it wasn't my fault that I had to go, that I couldn't spend my days working at the butchery with him, the law was the law. He didn't listen. Instead, he replied with a firm snatch of the soft flesh of the inside of my upper arm, a swift blow with his other free hand that was sometimes holding something - sometimes not. Nowadays I just try to slip out of the house in the mornings without waking him up and hope for the best when I get home.

Today at school we're doing Show and Tell - my least favourite activity; someone brings a cool pet snake or souvenirs from an extraordinary day out with family, but I always have nothing. However, today is different. I have prepared something that I think might be a step toward the solution to my never-ending chain of blocked roads and tangled strings.

Mrs Baxton calls me to the front of the class "here we go again"

written all over her face. I shuffle forwards whilst looking at my feet and clear my throat.

"Hello everyone," I say. "Today, instead of another joke, I'd like to read a poem that I wrote about..." I hesitate, my stomach clenches, fear getting the better of me. What if they don't listen, what if they... no, this is my time to show them what I've been battling other than all their snide remarks. Pushing the disheartening thoughts aside, I continue, "my own life."

"No one cares!" yells Jackson from the back of the classroom, where he's sitting with his fellow cronies. They're a ravenous pack of hyenas to my naive, unblemished zebra, uncaring for who they crush between their teeth and tear beneath their claws.







Looking back down to my sheet,  
I take a deep breath and start  
reading:

### ***Struggle in the depths***

*"Get some rest tonight," my teachers  
say to me*

*"Your eyebags look horrific," I hear  
others add*

*How I wish to scream to the world  
I am beaten, belted, and bashed  
Punchbag of the man who struggles  
to provide*

*For us*

*The bruises hide undercover as  
symptoms*

*Of lack of sleep*

*I grab the £1.50 chicken from the  
paper box*

*Bought with the money mum  
scraped together*

*Hands covered in succulent grease*

*This is my salvation*

*The resurrection of my being*

*My stomach laps it up with every  
bite*

*My intestines squirming with  
impatience*

*For food to eat*

*"How do you stay so thin," my  
classmates spit*

*"I wish I could have your body," they  
repeatedly snarl*

*Little do they know that starvation is  
the cause*

*Inflation is the cause*

*We are poor because of the system*

*We need help because of society*

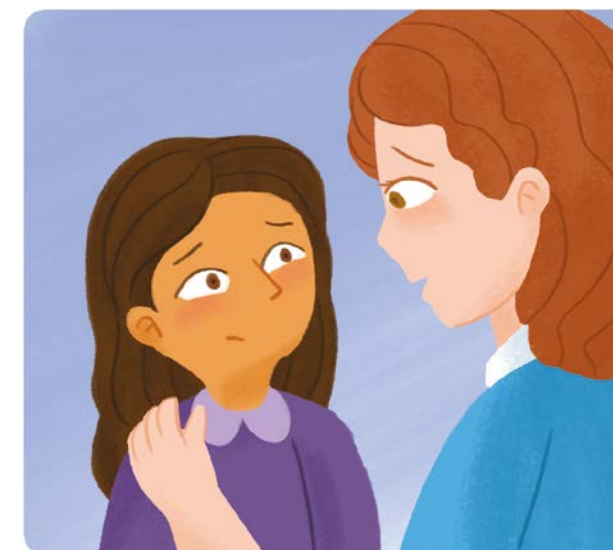
*We are weak*

Looking up from my wrinkled  
piece of paper, I see the whole  
class staring back - eyes popping  
out of their heads with shock.  
No one knew. But then again...  
how could they possibly know?  
All these years I've tried so  
hard to conceal everything  
from everyone. The rushed eye  
makeup every morning, the timid  
smiles returned to backward  
compliments on my ideal weight.  
Now, after blowing the lid off  
my inconspicuous disguise, I  
feel free. I'm a bird let out from  
confinement, a thorned cage.

"Thank you... for that... lovely  
poem." Mrs Baxton fumbles,  
evidently lost for words after  
realising how blind she has been,  
and then proceeds to whisper, "If  
you don't mind, may I have a little  
word with you in the hallway?"

Reluctantly, I trail behind her,  
making sure to keep my distance  
in case she may be able to hear  
my heart roaring in my chest.  
Turning around slowly, she takes  
me in properly for the first time, it  
seems.

"It breaks my heart that you are  
having to go through so much at  
such a young age and I'm very  
sorry that you feel this way about  
us. If you'd told us, any member  
of staff, earlier we could have at  
least started by giving you things  
like free school meals. Please do



not keep these things quiet and  
let them build up inside you; they  
could cause much more damage  
if you keep them bottled up and  
they burst out all at once rather  
than if you let them out slowly and  
one by one."

She was rattling on with such a  
passion as I'd never seen before, I  
could see the perspiration dotted  
on her brow, cheap foundation  
sliding down her cheeks. If I had  
known she would have been so  
gentle and understanding I would  
not have been concerned to tell  
my issues. It just didn't occur  
to me that people would be so  
thoughtful when it came to others  
suffering from poverty... like me. I  
didn't think once that they would  
stop and go out of their way to  
help us.

As I continued to hear her  
sympathetic words I wished for a  
wish that could save the world. I  
wished that everyone could be as  
compassionate as Mrs Baxton was  
now.



# Representing women's bodies in modern society

By **Imogen Plater**, East Midlands winner

Celebrities create an unrealistic representation of women's bodies and beauty standards in our society. Now that is a very strong statement. Every single celebrity is a poor representation of women in society? That just can't be true. Don't get me wrong, they aren't all perfect, but is anyone? Celebrities are automatically placed with a beaming spotlight surrounding them, however what they choose to do with that attention and platform is what matters.

Most of us have had a phase in our lives where our minds were fixated on that one celeb. Anything they said you would believe, anything they did you did. "Why don't you like carrots? They're good for you," my mum would ask, "well you see, Hannah Montana doesn't like them so neither do I." Something that looking back at now is utterly insane but to us during those times, it made complete sense. However, whilst something such as liking carrots can be influenced by celebs, much bigger opinions, views, and behaviours can be affected by these household names. Who you

accept, your opinions on yourself, on what you can accomplish, what is, okay? All of this can be decided by one simple sentence said by these socialites of today's society. And in the growing minds of the new generation of young women, anything that the famous females of the world say can change their lives and decide their futures.

I am sure that any girl or woman of the 90s and 2000s, including myself, knows the name of Kate Moss. The supermodel plastered on pages of magazines and young people's walls; all her beauty laid out on the front cover of Cosmo for all to see. "Nothing tastes as good as skinny feels" – Kate Moss 2009. A quote that not only then but now bounces round the heads of girls and women, forcibly knocking the feeling of hunger from their brains, trying to remind them to hit the gym for the third time that day. That one quote made by the "heroin chic" icon could and would have decided the lives of so many, causing them to skip breakfast, pay hundreds for that gym membership, to miss out on that slice of cake on their



own birthday. Is this what we like to call a positive representation of women in society? I really hope not.

As I would sit there with my stomach rumbling, the pain physically unbearable, giving my stomach a not-so-comforting hug desperately trying to get rid of the pain. Better than period pains, haven't had that for months. That's the exchange us young girls are making these days, trading our fertility for that flat stomach, the only thing that we are told is perfect and makes us worthy. That Insta picture of Kendall Jenner in the skims bikini burned into our eyes, we all know the photo that I am talking about. The perfect balance of curves and tone elegantly laid across her golden tanned body. But none of it was real. The warp tool, the paintbrush and the smoothing option always coming in handy. We double click to like her post to become the 2,938,020th like, and get ready to place a pot of makeup on our face, book the plastic surgeries early and change into our gym clothes.

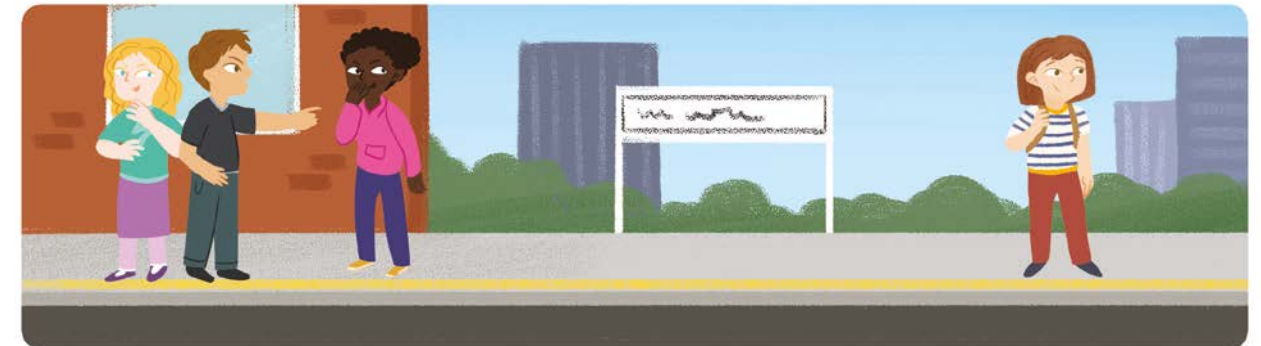
Making my way downstairs just to open the pantry and stare at the cupboard of calories for half an hour.  $53 + 130 + 47$ . The automatic calculator in my head tallying up. 230. That's too much, my stomach growls once again, the hunger clawing at my insides begging me

to put some nutrients into my feeble, energy-drained body.

Is this idea of "perfect beauty" what should represent the society of women? Should these socialite women have such a platform to create these never-ending thoughts in other girls' minds? Women come in all different shapes and sizes. If Aphrodite, the God of Beauty, could have stomach rolls, why can't we? The minds of the world have been warped, forced to think there is a rule book on what beauty is. In reality the best representation of what a woman is, is the amazing things that our bodies can do. This vessel, this home, this instrument that carries our personality is able to make a whole other human for God's sake. And somehow all we can care about is if we have "bingo wings" or a "thigh gap", these female body expectations that change every year. We will never be truly good enough for the society that we live in, but that doesn't mean that we can't be good enough for ourselves. So, I'll ask you now, is this what we should call a positive representation of women in society? I really hope so.

# One Smile Means A Lot

By **Soha Shabaz**, North West winner



She sat there quietly in the corner of the room. Alone. Unsure of herself. Aziza wasn't any ordinary child. In fact, she considered herself less than ordinary, for Aziza was confined to a wheelchair. She was what you would call 'disabled'. It was only a few years ago when her life changed. She was pushed off a large train platform by a group of unruly schoolchildren.

Before her accident, Aziza was a bubbly child who happily played at her friends' houses. She was a confident child and the centre of attention, until one day she was pushed off a train platform at her local train station. At that exact moment, her life turned upside down. Literally. Her life flashed before her eyes as the train rapidly charged towards her. Her name meant 'brave', but Aziza was anything but brave at this moment.

After months in hospital, Aziza returned to school but she wasn't the same person that she had been earlier. Very soon, her best friends abandoned her, even her teachers made her sit in the corner all the time whenever she came to school. They had no idea how they could help her because she was unable to help herself anymore. She became invisible to everyone; her words silenced by the sound of her creaky wheelchair. The silence around her convinced her to leave school. None of her old friends bothered to say goodbye. They probably didn't even notice considering they had always ignored her since her terrible accident. She never had a chance to share her opinions or explain how she felt. What she didn't realise, however, was that her friends couldn't bear to see her in pain and they didn't know how to react so they ended up ignoring her. In Aziza's eyes, she



thought they didn't care about her anymore.

Outside, there was a torrential downpour. Aziza stared at the crying heavens and steered her wheelchair towards her bed. Her soul was drowning into the river of her grief. She dropped her head into her hands. She finally looked up into the cracked, petite mirror to survey herself. Why did everybody desert her?

The very next day, on what was yet another normal and miserable day for Aziza, she manoeuvred her wheelchair through the busy streets of London. She kept going until she reached what looked like a very upset old man at the bus stop. Even though Aziza was feeling very down, she felt like giving this old man a big smile before she boarded the bus. He looked like he needed it.

Although the bus driver had lowered the step for her to get on, she still struggled to get on. Moving back and forth, trying hard to find a way to get the wheelchair onto the bus, she didn't give up. No one came to help her, even the bus driver just looked at her as if to say, "hurry up, I have places to go." Finally, she managed to get on to the bus and moved her wheelchair over to where the pushchairs stood empty.

She cautiously looked back one last time, at the man who, unknown to her, had been feeling dismal, but now happy that she had smiled at him. "One smile means a lot," Aziza muttered under her breath as she slowly helmed her way towards the library.

That evening as Aziza was making her way back home, she noticed someone familiar standing outside a property with a 'Sold' sign in the front. It was the old man who she had earlier seen at the bus stop. "Are you going to move here?" Aziza asked the old man, as she approached him. To her surprise, the man had recently moved here and had just finished putting his possessions inside. His name was Ahmed - she soon found out.

They stayed there gossiping about his move for quite a while. Neither of them realised they had been confabulating for half an hour! Aziza found herself talking about how all her friends had abandoned her. She finally thought she had found someone to chat to. Outside of her parents, no one else wanted to listen. Ahmed told her about his wife who had sadly passed away. Watching Aziza be independent and travel around the city was an inspiration for him.

She was so brave, he said.

He didn't think he could do it anymore as he was getting old and tired very easily but when she had smiled at him from the bus stop, it made him realise that his life was not as tough as others. Despite being in a wheelchair and struggling herself, she still found time to think of someone else, he had told her. Aziza couldn't believe what she was hearing. She was brave? She was an inspiration? She was independent?

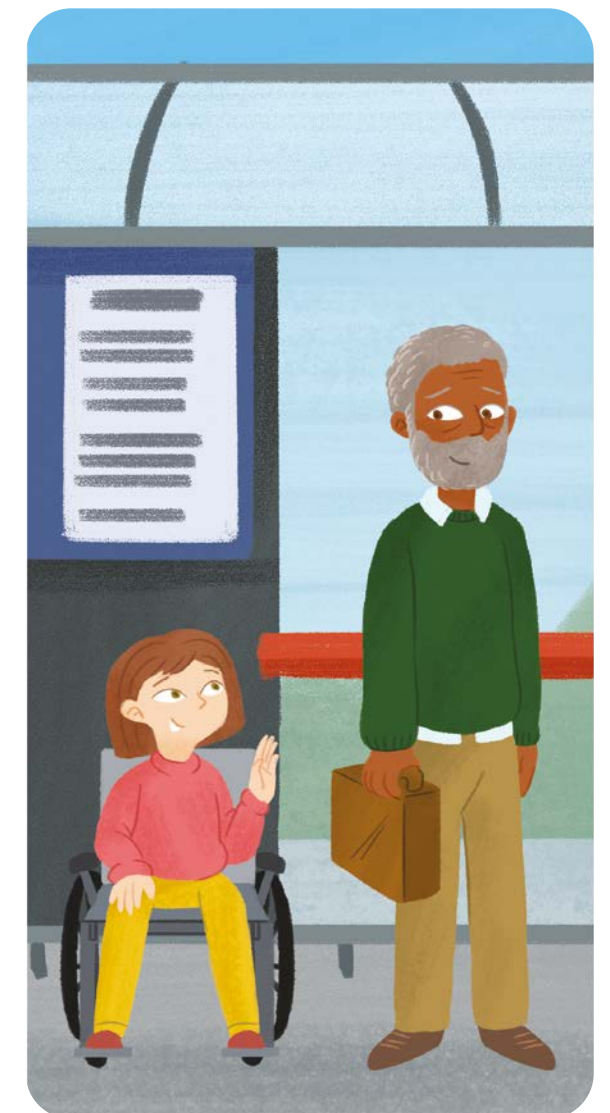
She went home that evening thinking about what Ahmed had said. The next morning, Aziza looked up to notice the small clouds sidestepping along the charcoal sky letting in only peaks of sunlight. She felt like the sky was having the same challenges and feelings as she had. It had bits of happiness peeking through the sadness. Rather than think about the charcoal sky, she focused her mind on the peaks of sunlight coming through. For the first time in a while, she felt hopeful.

That week after much thinking and building up her courage, Aziza returned to school. She confidently sat at the front of the classroom. Teachers started to take notice of her again.

Gradually, her grades changed and she moved back to the top

of the class! To her amazement, people started to notice her but not because of her creaky wheelchair. They wanted to hear her speak. They thought she was incredible.

Today, she was not alone. Aziza was the centre of attention. Aziza was brave. Aziza was extraordinarily gifted. Over the years, Aziza trained to be a doctor. Being in a wheelchair would not stop her from achieving her dreams.



# I Have a Dream

By **Lleyton Rennie**, North East winner

The year is 2022 in the North East of England & Sharbat has flown in from the military as a refugee of the Afghan-American war.

Drrrrrrrrrring.....

"H-hi... m-my name is Sharbat" said the young girl. "I-I'm ten years old, just like you!" she exclaimed trying to sound cheerful. "Now before I continue with the story, I'll tell you a bit about Sharbat, are you ready?" "OK then, this all started when her parents were no, no you won't want to know. Moving on."

"Em... should I sit d-down now, m-mr?" she questioned. Her teacher nodded.

Curiously, Sharbat scanned her surroundings, squinting to paint a clear image through her broken, fogged glasses sealed on with a small piece of Sellotape along the left rim, pushed through the slim eye gap of her onyx, wool hijab overlapping her rough baggy robes with gaping arm holes. As she wandered down the row of hardwood flooring surrounded by individual industrial-like oak desks in uniform line, she glanced to her left. And then to her right, trying

to avoid eye contact with the other children. All the children were either sniggering and whispering or pointing and laughing. "QUIET, NOW!" roared the teacher, "HOW DARE YOU ALL!" All the children hushed in a heartbeat, they weren't used to their teacher getting angry, especially like that but when he did, he seriously meant it. "Ok sir" whimpered a voice from the back.

"RIGHT, THAT IS TEN MINUTES OFF OF BREAKTIME," bellowed the teacher.

Sharbat wasn't sure whether to smile or frown, she didn't want to be disliked or even despised because she sort of made them miss most of their breaktime yet at least she had someone who could stick up for her. "What is even a breaktime anyway?" Sharbat thought to herself, "And what's so good about it anyways?" Sharbat didn't particularly care, all she could think about was dinner. As she walked past the bus stop she got to see a small glance of the food. Curry and rice in large open tins, chicken nuggets and fries in trays collapsed on top of each other like dominoes.

Naan bread with salad in shiny pots. And dessert. Oh, she had never seen anything like it, rich fluffy chocolate cakes with the melt-in-your-mouth look stacked horizontally like slabs of pavement. Just thinking about it was making her mouth water. Suddenly Sharbat snapped back into reality. She just had enough time to snatch a desk and launch onto the chair.

She looked around, it was nothing like her old school. It was a lot cleaner and roomy, but she still didn't know whether it was better or worse! The walls were not vibrant nor dull allowing room for fun but unfortunately, more room for boredom. Just as Sharbat gazed around, trying to take everything in, the somehow only coloured thing in the room, the glossy, rose red bell, rang. It was continuously ringing at an alarming rate until all students stood up behind their chairs and rushed down the corridor to the main door and poured into the playground. Children were grouping up to play tag, hide 'n' seek, all the different games you could think of. "Hi Sharbat!" called a young boy.

"H-hi" replied Sharbat, her hijab moving slightly revealing a smile creeping across her face.

"What's your name?" questioned the boy, "I'm Lleyton."

"Cool." She replied, "My name is Sharbat."

"So, what do you want to be when you grow up, Sharbat? I'll go first, I want to be the CEO of a huge tech firm!" exclaimed the boy.

"Woah!" replied Sharbat, quite bemused, "I want to be something like that, I gue -" It was at that moment that the bell rang again. Disheartened, all the children piled up into single file lines and trailed back inside. "Emm, hello," came a voice with a warm heart, pushing the door slightly "Can I speak to Sharbat, please?" Just as she said this, Sharbat stood up and pushed her chair in. She knew who this was. It was her counsellor. "YES!" she thought to herself, "IT'S MANDY, I'm so glad she is here!"

Maybe, just maybe with the help of Lleyton, her new friend, and Mandy, her counsellor. She can be happy and prosper. She had a feeling that she hadn't had in a long time, the feeling that anything is possible. She liked that feeling. In fact, she loved that feeling.

The message is, no matter who someone is or what they think, believe or do, be kind to someone. Because you never know, one kind gesture could change someone's life forever. Never judge anyone until you have walked a mile in their shoes.





# A Woman's Right

By **Dija Jonaviciute**, Yorkshire and the Humber winner

A woman's rights grow with them. When they are younger, they don't need to worry as much about the world. But as they grow older, that excitement of freedom and easy-goingness gets taken away, and their life is controlled by other people who they don't even know.

Amalia was a young girl, who was 15 years old, she loved to paint and have fun, it brought back childhood memories. Every night she would create another unique masterpiece. But today, her life would change forever.

"Yay it's my birthday!!!!!" exclaimed Amalia, joy rushing through her body.

"I'm finally 15!"

"Happy birthday Amalia!" cheered her entire family, her uncle, auntie, two sisters, brother, mum, dad, cousins and grandparents.

"Now because you're 15, you are officially a woman. You will have to start cooking, cleaning, buying, shopping and looking after everything now :)" said her mum patiently, waiting for her response.

"B-but what about roblox, football, going out with my friends?" Amalia stuttered, frozen to the spot.

"No, of course not! And you will now be wearing pale pink dresses to college. No more of them idiotic trousers and baggy t-shirts! You should thank me! Don't pout! Your posture should be straight! After all, you're going to be a model someday!" smiled her mum, walking away.

"But I want to be a football player..." murmured Amalia, going back to bed.

Her mum reminded her every day what she had to do, to the point where she almost fainted. She had to stay up all night sometimes for homework she couldn't catch up on. Soon, instead of a lovely, kind football lover, there was a tall, "pretty pink" princess who walked "like an angel" and "talked like an angel". Everyone adored her, even though the slender girl was being tortured. She exercised and woke up at 4am just to put on her dress and make up.

"NOOOOOO! I DON'T WANT TO KEEP LIVING LIKE THIS! I'VE GOT BRUISES DOWN NEAR MY STOMACH AND MY FACE IS FULL OF SPOTS! GET ME BACK TO MY NORMAL LIFE!!" Amalia screeched, fed up after a year of this nonsense.

When her mum and dad finally saw the reality of what they had put Amalia through, her mum fell down on her knees to tell Amalia something very important.

"Yes, and we understand that now," said her mum softly.

"We are very sorry, we just wanted a perfect child, not like your brother who is a silly YouTuber and only gets 50 pounds a month," her dad explained calmly.

"SO YOU GUYS ARE GOLD DIGGERS?!" screamed Amalia.

"Well it's not like that..." her dad said guiltily.

"IT'S EXACTLY LIKE THAT! NOW I'VE SAVED ENOUGH MONEY TO BUY MY OWN HOUSE AND THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT I'M GOING TO DO SO YOU CAN'T CONTROL MY LIFE GOODBYE!" Amalia quickly packed up her stuff and went to live as a professional football player with three beautiful children; two golden retrievers and six rabbits.

Soon her parents went broke and they both died at 56 years old. Amalia went on to live a long happy life.

"Mummy! We want to go to the shops!" squealed her two children (Raena and Max).

"Alright children but go with your dad, mummy needs to go to football. I might win the trophy!"

Amalia whispered to her excited children, smiling. The children's dad (Daniel) went to the shops while Amalia fought in the game for the world cup. It was the finals. But guess what? Only a couple of thousand people were there! However, almost one hundred thousand people were at the boys' football game!! Amalia's blood rushed through her skinny veins, and her face turned red but she kicked the ball as hard as she could and...

**SHE MADE THE WINNING GOAL!**

Although, the boys had lost and everybody was sad for the boys instead of elated for the girls.

"Hold on, why do we not get a celebration? Why do we need to be sad just because they lost? We won! We should celebrate and we should be paid! I worked so hard to win! I scored the winning goal!" screamed Amalia furiously at her male coach, who did not act like he was bothered.

"She's right! If she scored the winning goal, she should get the trophy!" said one of her colleagues.

"Yeah but we all scored a goal so we should all be paid!" her sister exclaimed, her face getting red.

Their coach's face went red as he was overwhelmed by all of the shouting and screaming,

"But if we do that it will be the first time in history that that has happened!" their coach fought back, hoping they wouldn't have to be paid.

"So? It will be a wonderful moment and we will be well known! Also the boys should get paid less today because they lost and we won!" Amalia said calmly, already waiting for this epic moment to begin.

"Alright then, but Amalia takes home the trophy!" their coach finally gave in.

"WOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!" The girls screamed and Amalia took home the trophy.

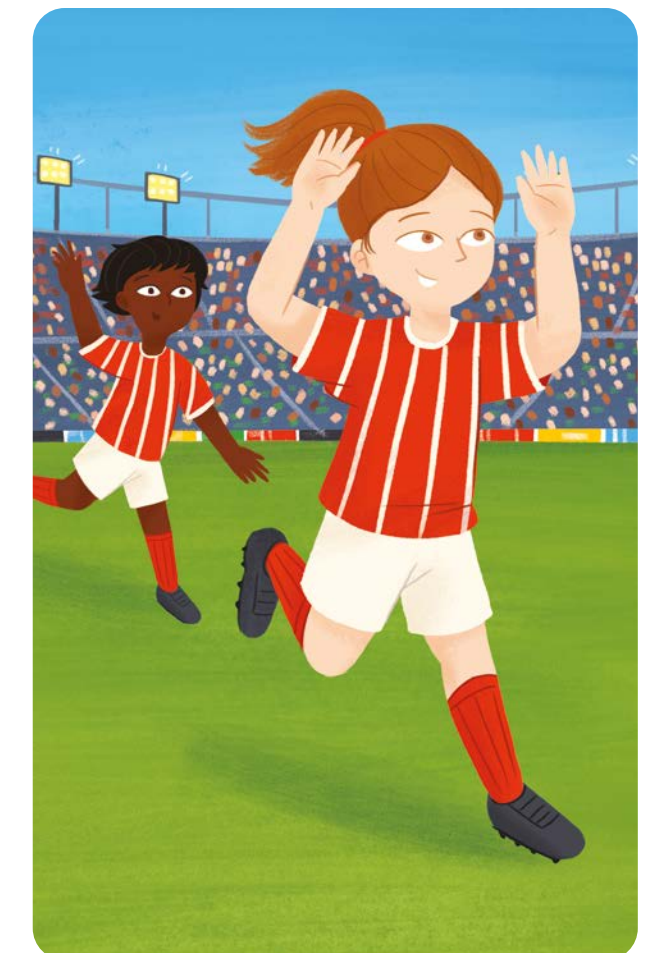
"Look children! Mummy is home and she won the trophy!" Amalia explained to her children, elated for one of the first times in her life.

"YAYYY!!" screeched her two six-year-old children.

"Gagaaaa!" her baby girl squealed happily for her mother.

Soon, after a couple of months of this winning, Amalia was one of the most famous people in the world and was written in history multiple times.

So, remember just believe and you can achieve! Maybe you will be a world changing hero like Amalia was! And don't be tricked by the stereotype people! You don't need them in your wonderful life! You are worth it! Thank you for reading my story. Bye! Don't ever forget this story!







“You can make anything by writing”

*C.S. Lewis*



“If there’s a book that you want to read, but it hasn’t been written yet, then you must write it”

*Toni Morrison*

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# Acknowledgements

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**Sara Browne**, Trainer at Coram Beanstalk

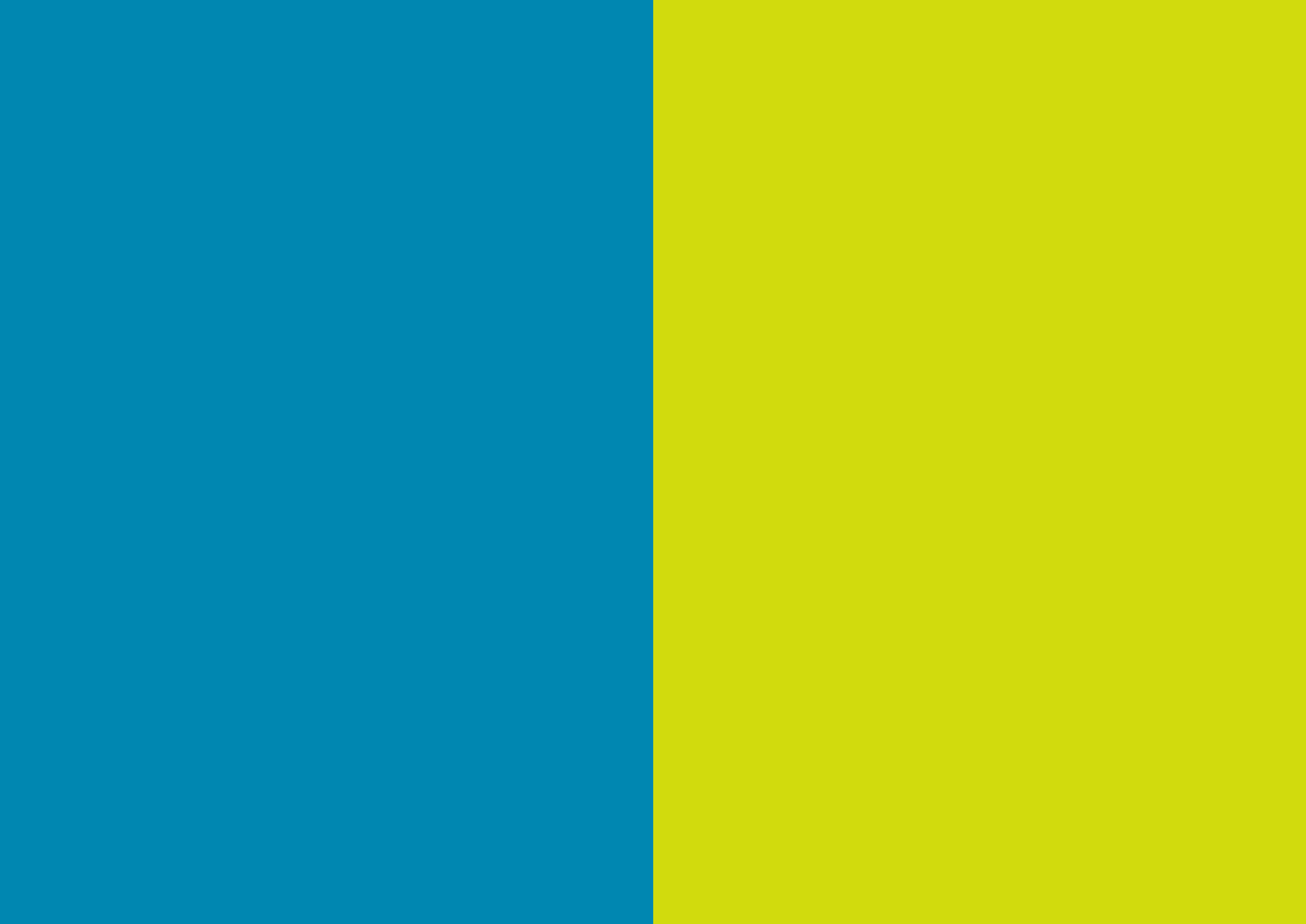
**Sue Bastone**, former chair at School Library Association

**Tim Judge**, Head of School Programmes at the NLT

**#MyTwistOnATale**









A collection of the winning stories and poems from the **My Twist on a Tale 2022 writing competition**, written by children and young people across the United Kingdom.

The stories and poems within were selected by our judges for their exceptional writing and creativity, for their interpretation of the theme 'Represent!', and for how they reflect the writer's own experiences of modern life.

**#MyTwistOnATale**



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