

# UNDISCOVERED VOICES 2012

## MALORIE BLACKMAN

For most authors, writing isn't so much a profession as a compulsion. It's not hyperbole to state that authors tend to be driven souls, and we have to be. Authors who have their initial literary offering taken on by the first agent or publisher they send it to are rare indeed. Most of us serve an apprenticeship consisting of criticism and rejection. It is this apprenticeship which sorts the wheat from the chaff, and not just in terms of talent. I used to belong to a number of writing workshops, each of which I found invaluable, but I was constantly bewildered to see writers of great talent who would give up after their second or third rejection, after which we'd never see them at the workshop again. Becoming a published writer isn't just about talent, it's about perseverance and tenacity. It's about belief in oneself and one's voice. The first piece of advice I offer when asked for any hints and tips regarding becoming a writer is: 'Write from the heart. Write what you care about.' If the writer cares about their subject matter, this will shine through to the reader, and readers deserve no less. One of the final pieces of advice I offer is, 'DON'T GIVE UP!'

So why write? Is it a need to share ideas, to communicate, or simply to connect with others? Whatever the reason, writing gives us an excellent way to share not just a vision but our voice. It is each author's individual voice that makes their stories unique. I would encourage all would-be writers to develop their own voice, their own style – and never stop trying to develop that voice. Never be afraid to take risks with your writing. The stories that have worked best for me are the ones where I took risks with the subject matter or the style of writing. The first story I ever had published was a short story in a collection such as this. Not only did it provide a welcome boost to my self confidence after receiving rejection letter after rejection letter, but it spurred me on to continue with my writing, no matter what the setbacks.

That's why a publication such as *Undiscovered Voices* is so invaluable. Every year I'm amazed and thrilled by the range of stories in this anthology, but I truly believe that this year will prove to be a vintage year. The quality of the writing is outstanding. And this anthology presents not just self-contained short stories but stories which represent the first few chapters of new, exciting novels. The range and quality of the stories make each and every one of them a 'must-read'.

The writers represented in this anthology should be proud and rightly so of their achievement. Each story contains that 'moreish' quality so essential in good writing. I know each author in this anthology can only go from strength to strength.

**MALORIE BLACKMAN** is a novelist, scriptwriter and playwright, with over 50 books to her name, including the best-selling *Noughts & Crosses*, *Pig-Heart Boy* which was turned into a BAFTA-winning serial, *Hacker* and *Boys Don't Cry*.

# UNDISCOVERED VOICES 2012

## NICK SHARRATT

Congratulations to the illustrators whose work you'll find in this anthology. I've been drawing for a living for nearly 30 years now and I remember vividly the elation at seeing my first published illustrations. (I still get a huge buzz when the latest book project arrives in the post in printed form.)

I recall too how important those first printed pieces were as stepping stones in my career. They went straight into the portfolio and gave me the extra confidence needed in the search for work.

It took me a good while to carve a little niche for myself in the world of children's books and plenty of years were spent going round with the folio, gratefully seizing any job that might come my way as a result. I started off with tiny black and white drawings for give-away listings magazines, then worked my way through periodicals on every subject from accountancy to yoga. I did lots and lots of stuff for corporate and educational publishers and eventually I ended up in children's books.

Along the way I learnt that persistence and professionalism were as important for me as talent, so even on the toughest briefs, when seemingly impossible-to-illustrate subject matter was combined with an excruciatingly tight deadline, I somehow managed to get the job done and deliver on time. My confidence increased with every accepted piece of artwork and, wonderfully, the longer I illustrate the more I enjoy it. Even though I still get butterflies at the start of something new, I still have a list of things I find head-bangingly difficult to draw and I still fret that if I have more than a day or two away from the studio I am going to forget how to do it.

So best of luck to all the writers and illustrators in *Undiscovered Voices* and congratulations too to SCBWI and Working Partners for bringing about such a brilliant showcase for emerging talent.

**NICK SHARRATT** graduated from St Martin's School of Art in 1984 and has been working as a freelance illustrator since then. He has illustrated over 200 children's books and has worked with authors including Jacqueline Wilson, Julia Donaldson, Michael Rosen and Giles Andreae, in addition to producing his own books. He has won numerous national and regional book awards and was official illustrator for World Book Day 2006.

# UNDISCOVERED VOICES 2010

## MELVIN BURGESS

Perhaps the most wonderful thing about writing books, and certainly the most wonderful about reading new voices for books, is the sense of how hugely prolific and adventurous imaginative fiction in this country is. Making movies costs so much; they are rarely about anything except shoring up the demographic, confirming a vision we already have. TV, too, costs the earth, and with advertising revenues going down the pan, broadcasters are more reluctant than ever to lift a finger unless they can be promised a large audience. Only with books can you take a chance on a dream. Everything else is the art of the possible. Only books try the impossible – only books try to throw a lasso around the moon.

The sheer abundance, the variety and scale of imaginative exploration in stories, is reflected in this collection. Politics, fantasy, sci-fi, personal relationships; addiction, running away, finding yourself – you name it, it's here. Surely this is why books are still such a force in our imaginations and our understanding. The ability to explore fictionally is available to us all. You don't need a team to write a book, you don't need to be rich – you just need to have something to say and the ability to say it. In books, everything and anything is possible. A fictional exploration can reveal a great deal about ourselves and the world around us – and sometimes we discover that those impossible dreams have more truth in them than we ever imagined.

That, of course, does not mean that getting published is easy – still less, making a living out of it. Despite that huge abundance, it's a hard thing to do. It took me years from the desire, when I was nineteen, to the event, when I was well over thirty. My first publication was in an anthology like this, a book published by the London Magazine, which gave so many writers a launch pad back in the 1980s. Shortly after, my first book was accepted – a big day in my life. Overnight, I was turned from a wannabe to a can-do. The publication of this anthology is a huge encouragement and a step forward to the writers of the future portrayed in its pages. Naturally they will be looking forward to landing their first commercial contract, and for many of them it's clear the wait will not be that long.

For those looking forward to getting published, I'd like to offer a simple piece of advice: never give up. I've seen so many people wanting to write over the years, and the ones who succeed are not necessarily those with the great brains or huge skills – it's those who simply keep at it. Writing professionally is a difficult thing to do, but not because you have to be enormously clever. It's difficult because you have to become enormously accomplished. In this sense, it's like learning an instrument or a language; you have to practise. Keep reading, and above all keep writing, and you will get there in the end.

**MELVIN BURGESS** is an award-winning author of children's books, including *Bloodtide*, *Junk*, *Doing It*, *Sara's Face* and *Nicholas Dane*.

# UNDISCOVERED VOICES 2008

DAVID ALMOND

It starts with need, passion, a good deal of mystification. Something (what?) drives us. It says, 'Write! Get to that desk! Stay at that desk! Keep writing! Don't stop! Write better!' So we write and sometimes we write something that makes us say, 'Yes, that's not bad. That's the kind of thing I want to do.' And we're satisfied for a fragile fleeting moment. But then we write things that are hopeless, that make us feel just stupid. 'That's not what I meant! Look how utterly useless I am!' And we rip it up and walk away, but somehow we find ourselves at the desk again, pen in hand, notebook open, computer switched on, cursor flashing awaiting the next word. We keep on writing. We try again. We try again. And the pages accumulate. And we dare to start to send things out into the world, to publishers and magazines and agents, and back they start to come, all the rejections, thudding down onto the doormat. 'Oh, no! It's true. I am hopeless. I'll never ever be published!' But do we stop? Do we heck! The thing (what?) shoves us back to the desk. Take no notice! Write! Keep writing! Write better! And through it all, through all the doubts and humiliations, we have to open up a little space inside ourselves in which a little fragment of ourselves can sit still and whisper, 'It's OK.'

Write because you love it. Stay calm. Don't get angry. Don't get bitter. Believe in yourself. Write your own words, your own visions. The doubters are wrong. One day, the right person at the right moment will read your work and say, 'Aha!'

All writers, unless they're very fortunate, know how difficult it is to get noticed, to become 'discovered'. I became an 'overnight success' (I clapped when I read the review that said it) after almost twenty years: stories in obscure little magazines; a couple of story collections published by a tiny northeastern press; a novel rejected by every single UK publisher; a couple of dozen readers who loved my work; a part of me that said it all would work out well; and another part that simply didn't give a damn. I wrote because I loved to write, and I'd keep on writing no matter how much recognition I received.

An important thing to know is that the world of publishers and agents that can seem so distant, so elusive, so impenetrable isn't really so. They, too, know how difficult it is. After all, they spend their days rejecting manuscripts; they gaze wearily at their ever-mounting slush piles. But they also know that there will be magical moments when the manuscript arrives from an unknown name that stops them in their tracks, that makes them say, 'Aha!' And a new writer is suddenly discovered. It happens, and it keeps on happening.

It's wonderful to have this brilliant anthology of work by 'undiscovered' writers, and to have it going out into the world. Congratulations to those selected, and to those who received an honorary mention. And fingers crossed that the 'Aha!' moment follows. To those who didn't quite make it this time, remember that voice: 'Stay calm. Write. One day, the right person at the right moment...'

And now to the words, the stories, the visions.

DAVID ALMOND is an award-winning author of children's books, including *Skellig*, *Kit's Wilderness*, *The Fire-Eaters* and *Clay*.

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