

ORIGINAL SKIN
EDITED BY YVONNE BRISSETT AND AVA MING

INTRODUCTION

When we were first invited to edit 'Original Skin' the main element of the project that appealed to us was the opportunity to mentor an unpublished writer. The idea of being able to share our skills, experience and passion for writing with new writers, excited us.

The fact that other established writers were just as keen to come on board and work closely with raw talent, to help get writers from a beginners level to being published for the first time, highlighted the level of commitment and support within the West Midlands to developing and promoting new writing talent.

The idea behind this brand new initiative from Birmingham Libraries was to give Black and Asian writers a platform to get their work read and heard and most importantly to be published. Unpublished Birmingham writers submitted short stories for development under the guidance of experienced writers in a mentor/mentee role.

Although each mentee was classified as a new writer, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that they were new voices, as nearly all of them had been writing for a while. The beauty of Original Skin is that it simply gave them their first chance to be presented to the public, in a supportive environment.

This anthology is a true labour of love. It has been in the making for over two years, since July 2005 when Birmingham Libraries first put the call out for established writers to come forward. The following summer July 2006 was the period that the two of us actually sat down with Birmingham Libraries and went through all the submissions. We selected new writers based on the quality of the writing and the extent to which we felt they could develop from a mentoring process. Then we paired each writer up with a mentor, based on a variety of factors. Considerations ranged from shared cultural identity and background to a genuine interest in the same art forms to similar life experiences. It was our commitment to seek to pair individuals up who we felt could best learn from each other and grow together. Once we had decided on the pairings we invited all the writers to a meeting to give everyone a chance to meet and discuss our shared vision for the anthology.

For ten months from October 2006 to July 2007, the mentoring process took place. Each pair met regularly for several sessions in wine bars, community centres, libraries fast food joints and at home. The new writers bravely submitted their own stories and ideas for critique and re-working with the aim of producing work that could hold its own in today's market. The tables were soon strewn with papers, pens and reference books, as ideas flowed and lively debate ensued over character and plot developments, dialogue and narrative as writer's discovered their voice and how to stay true to that whilst writing for an audience.

For mentors the process of sharing their knowledge sparked their own creativity, producing unexpected benefits such as seeing the path of writing in a new and more vibrant light.

For mentees, the experience of being challenged to rethink ideas, characters, dialogue and storylines, gave them a clear insight into the writer's journey, the crucial steps we all have to take towards realising our dreams of being published.

This unique, innovative concept was proving to be an extremely positive experience for both mentors and mentees.

As the anthology began to take shape, themes revolving around the title 'Original Skin' became prevalent. The title throws up notions of 'what's real' and 'what's not' and many of the vibrant stories in this rich collection are a true reflection of that. Refreshing, innovative and inspiring, the words jump off these pages as themes around originality in today's contemporary society are explored. From western influences on eastern culture to misleading others with fake identities, to unrequited love, a wide range of this literature tackles authenticity.

The stories also draw on the theme of the past coming back to haunt us as we find many characters trying to deal with the skeletons in their closet.

In an engaging and compelling style, both new and established writers in Original Skin tackle the dark side of human nature. Vivid imagery of violent crime, murder and abuse does not go amiss, whilst mental health, fraud and other criminal activity finds its place on these pages. Simultaneously themes such as love, beauty, grace, integrity and forgiveness provide a poignant contrast.

All the time, the question of originality is being thrown up time and time again, often amidst references around race, culture, identity, motivation, victimisation and consequences.

We are not aware that this mentor/mentee approach to an anthology has ever been explored before in a UK or worldwide anthology. As such we commend Birmingham Libraries for such an innovative idea and are extremely proud to be part of such a unique initiative. We have dedicated a section of Original Skin to comments and quotes from both mentors and mentees on how the process worked for them and it is there that you will be able to gain more of an insight into both the new and established writers in this collection and find out just exactly how this anthology really took shape behind the scenes. We hope these personal testimonies will inspire, empower and encourage all writers everywhere to keep pen to paper.

Various people have been involved in making this book happen and shown a commitment to developing new writing talent within the West Midlands region. We want to take a moment to thank everyone who has supported this project along the way. Within this collection you will find a bonus story from one such person, our special guest writer, Kavita Bhanot, who has been heavily involved in this project from day one. It's fantastic to see the new writer's stories shine alongside hers and all the other more experienced writers. We also had Joel Lane contributing to the anthology as guest editor on Zulfiqar Ali's story, so our thanks to him to adding to this great collection of stories from the city.

All the stories in this book, each in their own unique way portray the stuff of life, relationships, love, jealousy, hate, anger, rejection, happiness, success, triumph and many more themes as characters embark on emotional journeys.

Thought- provoking by nature, each story touches on life in a way that we hope will touch you as you read this fresh, new, exciting, collection.

Yvonne Brissett and Ava Ming
Editors: Original Skin
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