

Kit de Waal

President, Master, Graduates and Graduands, Guests, and Colleagues:

Today it is my great honour to welcome the distinguished author Kit de Waal to a Fellowship at Birkbeck.

Kit de Waal will be known to many in this room. She is a best-seller author of novels, short stories, anthologies, and radio dramas. In 2014 and 2015, she won the Bridport Flash Fiction Prize and in 2014, the SI Leeds Literary Reader's Choice Prize. Her novel My Name is Leon is a Times and International bestseller and winner of the Kerry Group Irish Novel of the Year in 2016. The audio version of the book is voiced by Lenny Henry.

She is also an inspiration to millions of budding writers who weren't born clutching a golden pen or with access to a Woolfian "room of her own". While I was reading de Waal's work, my mind kept returning to the poetry of Georgia Douglas Johnson, who published her first book of poems, The Heart of a Woman in 1918, on the eve of the Harlem awakening. One of her poems reflects on a question that De Waal has also addressed in prose. The final stanza reads:

The heart of a woman falls back with the night,
And enters some alien cage in its plight,
And tries to forget it has dreamed of the stars
While it breaks, breaks, breaks on the sheltering bars.

Today, as when Johnson was writing, we hear a lot about widening opportunities, equality of expression. But where are all the working-class writers? Where are those talented writers who dream of the stars but still feel like they are required to enter an alien cage against which they flail in vain?

In an article De Waal published in The Guardian only a couple of months ago, she recalled her early life. “Writing as a career?”, she asked:

That never entered my head. The only writers I knew were dead. And apart from Enid Blyton, they were dead men. And white. And posh. Even when I began to read widely in my 20s, it was still a case of: if you can’t see it, you can’t be it. No one from my background – poor, black and Irish – wrote books. It just wasn’t an option.

Kit de Waal’s remarkable writing career really only began when she started writing at the age of 45.

Who is Kit de Waal? She was born Mandy Theresa O’Loughlin in inner city Birmingham to an Irish mother (Shelia O’Loughlin, née Doyle), who was a foster carer, registered child minder and auxiliary nurse. Her father was Arthur Desmond O’Loughlin, an African-Caribbean bus driver from St. Kitts. Her parents were Jehovah’s Witnesses and she was one of five children. The only reading material at home were the Bible and her father’s News of the World. She first voluntarily read a novel at the age of 22 – this was Tom Sharpe’s Riotous Assembly.

It was very much an Irish upbringing, listening to rebel songs, and belonging to the Irish Community Centre (where they were the only Black children) and the West Indian Social Club (where they were the only white children). She went to Waverley grammar school in Birmingham but when she admitted in her “Career’s Essay” that she wanted to become a journalist, she was told that “Secretary” was more like it. She left school at 16 and took up a variety of jobs: massage therapist, waitress, backing singer. She worked as an administrator in the Divorce Registry and as a secretary at the Crown Prosecution Service. She was a legal executive with criminal law solicitors. She has advised local authorities and voluntary bodies on children in care, mixed parentage children, and older BME people. She has sat as an independent member of an adoption panel. She has written a training manual on adoption and foster care. Indeed, she has two adopted children. To relax, she plays tennis, knits, watches black-and-white film noir, bakes and – no surprise here – reads. Increasingly, she

turned to writing. She was a founding member of both the Oxford Narrative Group and Leather Lane Writers. She did an MA in Creative Writing.

Although My Name is Leon is the book she is most famous for, it was not her first attempt to set pen to paper. She tried her hand writing a gangster novel and then one about a Norwegian madman, for example. But it was My Name is Leon that drew readers towards her. For those of you who haven't read the book, it is a heart-breaking story of brotherly love, between the mixed-race Leon and his white brother Jake who are separated in foster care in the early 1980s, during a time of race riots and the Royal Wedding. The story is incredibly sad, but there are lighter moments: Leon's joy when riding his bike too fast, his passion for Curly Wurlys, and his plans to rescue his brother and mother. The typescript of the book was offered to the literary agent Jo Unwin who, after a six-way bidding frenzy, sold it to Penguin. She became a name recognized.

Her second novel is even more heart-breaking. The Trick to Time is about a 60-year-old doll-maker called Mona – except it is about much more than that. It is about love, the Birmingham pub bombings of 1974, anti-Irish racism, and age. I don't want to give away the plot, but it is partly about exile, bereavement, and time. The "Trick to Time" of the title is that time can expand or contract at will.

Remember what she said in that Guardian article? "if you can't see it, you can't be it." Kit de Waal ensures that readers (posh white male ones; poor black female ones) "see" their own and other lives reflected in fiction. It is this passion for getting diverse voices heard that drives her life. She is aware of the hurdles that working-class writers face, so has joined together with Unbound and regional writing development organisations to edit a collection of essays and poems written by working-class writers: the project also involves mentoring and supporting new writers. The result is Common People, which has recently been published.

She gives back to others. Most notably, some of the money she received as an advance of her novel My Name is Leon (Penguin), she donated to create a scholarship to the MA in Creative Writing in the Department of English and Humanities here at Birkbeck. The MA is

convened by Julia Bell, herself a wonderful writer and curator of [In Yer Ear](#), a platform for writers of diverse backgrounds. This MA is one of the most prestigious in the UK. Thanks to de Waal, the Kit de Waal Creative Writing scholarship is dedicated to supporting a budding writer from a low-income household or other marginalized backgrounds. The scholarship not only includes the fee for two years of part-time study but also a generous travel bursary to allow the recipient to travel into London for classes (an attempt to get beyond the London-centric nature of these things), vouchers to buy books on the reading list, and computer equipment. In its first year, there were 138 applicants, and the first of these scholarships was awarded to the young Birmingham poet Stephen Morrison-Burke. The scholarship attracted other donations to the MA in Creative Writing, which has enabled it to fund other scholarships. Why is this so important? The MA in Creative Writing is unique in the UK. In a field that is heavily biased toward middle class and Oxbridge students, this MA is truly diverse. It has built on its successes to build trust in the community, assured that everyone gets the best possible teaching. As Kit de Waal advises other writers, if you want to be a good writer, you need to work. For every hour you devote to writing, you spend two hours reading others people's work. Writing is not a gift that only geniuses or those who belong to a particular class or education possess. The trick is to read, write, rewrite, and then revise again and again.

Speaking to Kit de Waal's friends and colleagues, time and again I was told that she is a force of nature; a brilliant example of what can be achieved; an accomplished teacher; a person known for her enthusiasm, warmth, and openness. She believes that writers have a duty to "tell the truth... if you are writing about a group of people of any vulnerability", she maintained, "make sure you represent them compassionately, honestly and with integrity". Being a truthful writer means escaping that "alien cage" that Georgia Johnson wrote about as long ago as 1918. Kit de Waal leads the way for others from similar backgrounds to her own, who often chafed under the constrictions of physical and psychological space necessary to create art. She understands how power relations operate in everyday life. She helps others to "dream of the stars". For these reasons, and a great many others as well, we are proud to formally welcome her as a Fellow of our College.