



MinK#6.1

**Raising Voices:
The Voices of Milton Keynes**

*A Milton Keynes
Literary Festival Anthology*



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First published in Great Britain by Arts Gateway MK 2026

Selection and introduction © Arts Gateway MK 2026

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INTRODUCTION

MK Lit Fest has always striven to encourage and develop writers Tomorrow's readers will, after all, need new stories and poems to read. Supporting the city's creativity means more than just disseminating it: it means nurturing the locally grown.

From the very beginning, we've included **writing workshops** in our event hamper, offering local writers at all stages of their writing development the chance to learn from contemporary practitioners. Since 2020, some of these have happened online, enabling writers from across the world to nurture writers here in Buckinghamshire.

Since 2018, we've also run **Creative Writing Competitions**, judged by practising published authors and with prizes in poetry and prose categories for young and adult writers, and published six **#MinK** anthologies of the winners, highly commended and shortlisted entries. We've run periodic online gatherings featuring our favourite submissions, some of which we have also featured in **literary walks** (with another to follow on 2 May 2026 as part of MK Walking Festival).

A second cohort of 10 writers are about to complete our **Online Writing Workshop course**, each having received detailed feedback from two course facilitators and their fellow students on three submissions.

At our April 2025 festival, we built on all these developments when we launched the **Raising Voices Project**, working to inspire, stimulate and gather original writing from the people of Milton Keynes that has been triggered by specific locations across the city. We're curating these into an online audio-visual **StoryMap**, and gathering subsets of them into **SoundWalks** – audio tours of specific neighbourhoods. This booklet contains some of our favourite recent submissions.

Details of all these and more – including opportunities to submit your writing, links to purchase our catalogue of anthologies and ebooks, details of the Raising Voices Project, and podcasts of past events – are available on the **MK Lit Fest website** at www.mklitfest.org, where you can also sign up for the **Festival email newsletter**. And you can follow us on Facebook, X, Threads, Bluesky or Instagram as @MKLitFest.

MK Lit Fest

books • words • writers • ideas

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**Person of
Interest**

Karen Banfield

He was there again today. He was carrying his lunch in a see-through container, so I could tell it was salad. He didn't look as if he needed to watch his weight: far from it, there wasn't an ounce of fat on him. From what I could tell, anyway, and I had been watching him for a while now. Ever since he started work on the building site opposite.

I've named him Sam. I know I shouldn't spend so much time looking at him, I'm a married woman, I'm not supposed to be fascinated by other men. But then Pete wasn't supposed to.. well, life wasn't supposed to have turned out as it did.

When I first started working from home, I found it really quiet, so I make sure I go out at lunchtime for a walk. I say hello to the dog walkers, to the regulars at the bus stop waiting for the ten past one. I love baking, so every few days I take something over to the workmen and get them to try my latest efforts. I'll chat to them at the same time. Sam ate one of my chocolate flapjacks last week. He said it was lush. It made me feel like a teenager as his eyes had lingered on me. Or as perhaps I'd imagined they had.

I thought I'd treat myself to a cup of my special coffee as I'd finally finished my monthly report. It was full of syrup although, unlike Sam, I do really need to watch what I ate. I am rather too fond of my own cooking. Not that Pete minds. He never notices, but that was part of the problem.

From my office I have a good view of them all working on the site. The houses look so sad, their windowless eyes staring out. There seems to be a constant noise of metal on metal, the same that can be heard in so much of our growing city. I could see the builders talking to each other and laughing. Sam was at the front of a group, waving his hands as if he was telling a joke. I like a man with a sense of humour. Pete doesn't seem to have one.

Then everything changed. A car pulled up and two men got out, grabbing Sam before he had a chance to realise what was going on. I stood up, wanting to shout at them to stop, to leave him alone. Stop telling him his rights and handcuffing him.

Don't take him away. I couldn't comprehend it and ran over the road, hardly checking for traffic, to ask what the police had said.

A tall guy answered that he'd been arrested for murdering his girlfriend. No, surely it was a mistake, not my gorgeous Sam. And then I thought of Pete. Perhaps it was better the devil you know. After all, he'd only forgotten our anniversary. I'll just have to remind him next year.

**Elegy for a
Bookshop**
Jerard Bretts

Jeff looks through the chain-link fence. In the litter-filled car park, weeds have pushed through the asphalt. Graffiti covers the shuttered shopfront and dirty gray walls like a rash – pink, blue and black daubs he can't make sense of. Perforated steel sheets have been nailed over the tall windows. Above the shopfront is a large empty bracket, where the word BORDERS was once displayed in big shiny silver letters, and below that, in smaller italics, *Paperchase*.

'Think of it as the equivalent of seven stab wounds to the abdomen,' the surgeon had suggested, with a smile, after the operation. 'So, you must take your recovery slowly. We'll discuss the results in a month. See if further treatment's necessary.' Jeff's pleased that, after three weeks, he's able to extend his daily walk as far as the railway station. But why has he only just noticed what's become of this site? *Because I've never made time for anything except work*, he thinks. *Cycling from home to the station and back by the quickest route*. He'd found time to see a doctor, though, thank God. Not that he believes in any God.

He's always loved bookshops – portals into new worlds. Twenty years ago, on those weekends when he had custody of the kids, they spent long lazy winter Saturday afternoons at Borders. Fagin's, Cranfield's, and Ottakar's at Centre:MK – they had all disappeared. But this gleaming three-storey superstore – a cornucopia of books, magazines and CDs – seemed different. It was going to defy the rise of online shopping. It was 2006 and the world seemed awash with money.

He was lucky, in those days, to find a parking space.

The three of them climbed the stairs to the coffee shop first. Alan, the eldest, wanted an Americano like his dad, while Sylvie asked for an Iced Mocha. Then they'd browse the shelves, knowing at the end of the afternoon he would buy each of them a book. It felt safe there. He could relax with a Jack Reacher or a magazine.

'Stop right there!'

He was with Alan, choosing magazines near the entrance. He saw a security guard grab the arm of a gangly teenaged boy. Jeff had noticed the boy in the store before, sitting absorbed, reading in an armchair. Always science books.

There was something stuffed under the boy's jacket. The guard triumphantly pulled it out.

'Do something, Dad,' Alan whispered. 'He goes to my school.'

'It's okay,' Jeff said. 'He's with me.'

The guard handed Jeff the book, shrugged his shoulders, and walked away. Jeff still remembers the teenager's bewildered expression – and the dark key-hole shaped mark on the iris of his left eye.

He never saw the boy in the store again.

When did it close? 2009?

Jeff remembers the anaesthetist saying, 'You *will* wake up.' The anaesthetist's face had loomed over him. There'd been a dark key-hole shaped mark on the iris of his left eye. Then everything went black.

But, of course, Jeff woke up. He's awake now.

Tom + Trina
Becky Cooling

From back when I was still being pushed around in a pram, having not quite learnt all my letters, the second I first read your names, you've always fascinated me, forever leaving me wondering, 'What happened?'

You burnt your names into a bus-shelter panel, one of many couples proclaiming your connection to the world and graffitiing the mystery of who you were into my mind. Desperate to solve it, I became a storyteller to myself, the tales I created about you evolving as I grew up and changed.

At five, I turned you into a pair of fairy-tale folk, conjoined with love for eternity. By the time I was seven, you became eighteen-year-old lovers in the midst of a beautiful wedding with tiny flower girls, much like me, spreading petals at your feet as you sauntered down the church aisle hand in hand, rainbows streaming in through stained glass. I considered eighteen grown-up then: now I realise just how young I made you.

When my world locked down, I worried for you, scared that one or both of you would perish from the unfathomable virus flying around, adding to the terrifying statistics that kept me inside far longer than regulations dictated. My trips past the bus stop dwindled as I avoided any place where other people were. You faded from my mind into the street furniture, abandoned like the adjacent phone box.

I only thought about you once during the next three years; at fifteen, I figured with my teenage understanding that your relationship had been brief. That you probably broke up before the white and caramel coloured-etchings had set. You might not even recognise each other now.

You certainly don't realise how much your writing changed me, how it sparked my desire to know the final chapter. When I didn't, it taught me to write the ending myself.

One day, as I came home from college, I saw workers removing the old panels from the bus stop, replacing them

with pristine new ones. Realising that your demise was imminent, I took a photo of you on my phone so I will never forget you completely.

You're gone now. Removed and recycled. The bus stop panels are yet to attract new names.

I never knew either of you. I'll never know what really happened to you, but because you defaced public property, you spoil the area and helped me to become who I am.

**Down from the
Country**
Anita Gayton

She gritted her teeth and fixed her determined look. It had to be done. January was the top month for friends and family birthdays, and she must go shopping where there was some possibility of finding a suitable gift. She was from the sticks, a one-horse town where only nail bars, betting shops and Turkish barbers exist. Well, there were charity shops, but you couldn't rely on those to come up with the goods - literally.

So, it was off to MK. She was braced for the road system and the parking. All she had to do was to go round and round until she saw signs for Central MK and then park in a red zone. Obviously, the red zone was the most expensive but at least she knew that once she had finished shopping she could go out of a centre door and her car would be there, as long as she had memorised the door number. She was sweating profusely before she had even arrived but she was resolute. She was not a stupid woman. She could do it.

It was all working marvellously. It was early, there were parking spaces, and she had that app on her phone which made paying for parking so much easier. To be fair, it wasn't as straightforward as her son had led her to believe as the app sometimes couldn't identify her location, and neither could she. Anyway, she was now parked, paid, in the centre and feeling smug. She knew she could go in any direction and she would find John Lewis. Bingo. Oh, she was doing so well. Past women's clothing and into gifts and kitchenware. And there was the escalator. Marvellous, it usually took her much longer than that. She was on a roll.

She went up it. There was another one, so she went up that. Things were going great. She hadn't actually bought anything, but she was wandering successfully around the shop. Ah, the café. Well, let's have a cup of tea and a cake to celebrate. Perhaps an early lunch too. She didn't get out very often.

It was perhaps the heady mix of complacency and cake that led to her guard dropping when she left the café. She

just needed to find the down escalator but, as was their wont, they had hidden it again. She had noticed this before about John Lewis, probably a ploy to keep people in the shop. She was exhausted. Finally, she spotted it. Just keep going down, she said to herself. But even when she was down she couldn't find the exit door, had no shopping, and was aimlessly wandering.

Oh, the rug and carpet department. So lovely and quiet, and such soft rugs. She knelt down to feel a beautiful oriental rug. Then she lay down to feel it a bit better. She closed her eyes, and thought that gifts from charity shops would do just fine.

Quiet Places

Merit Gogo-Fyneface

I like it better here, away from the world that never stops. Away from the chaos of trains packed with sweltering bodies, passengers first pressed like sardines and then released in a rush, scattering like ants toward another day measured in coffee cups and quiet desperation. Everyone feigning urgency, as if stillness will expose something softer beneath, not befitting a fast-paced place full of red buses.

Bletchley feels like home. Quiet, but not without its demands, the kind that ask for wiser choices and slower steps. The streets are held together by people who seem to prefer calm over conquest. It snows here too. The trains are half-empty. The blue buses arrive late, if at all. And when they do, for the want of anything timely, someone strolls in on Bus 4 and keeps me five more minutes away from where I should be, making payments in large notes and needing coins.

When I ask for more - for something sharper, louder - they point me toward the city centre: glass towers, crowded pavements, the version of life my colleagues return to by the sixth day, as if rest were only ever temporary.

So, I walk instead. Past roundabouts that repeat themselves like questions I haven't answered. I look for a zebra crossing that never quite appears. And somewhere between the waiting and the walking, I realise I still like it here, where I can clearly hear myself think.

**Swimming in
the Blue
Lagoon**
Stephen Goodlad

Swimming is an endorphin rush
that thunderbolts my body apart like a prism
until, with strength of mind, the body resets
limb by limb, toe by toe. Fingertips touch,
callouses cracking, joints readjusting. The pulmonary
rhythm
normalises: my lungs forage for oxygen to nourish
my blood. A cold embrace ensures no regrets
and buoys my head above the flood.

A mist altar cloth, below which two swans trail my wake,
and a priestly heron sermonises from a frosty perch.
JEEZUS, Oh God! we blaspheme, immersing in the deep,
dark lake.

Baptised from sleep I awaken in my church,
besmirched by life, a thirst to satiate.
Muscles, sinews, tendon on bones, lurch,
and fracture like clay as sunlight mistakes
the shimmering of reeds for the glistening lake.

There's always a fear, a what if? What is beneath?
The mind plays games with dryland belief,
as though the water has hidden teeth.
But then the calm, the camomile effect
that strokes the brow and says 'Hush now,
your body is strong, your mind is not wrecked.
Take it easy, everything is in tune: be lulled by the balm of
the Blue Lagoon'.

The Wild Rose

Amy Hewitt

I was fourteen when I first saw a dead body. Not in the way you're thinking, either: an elderly relative, laid gently in an open casket, sanitised and sterilised. 'Oh, at least she had a good innings. That's not death, not really. That's the part of it society wants us to see. The carefully curated, pre-watershed acceptable face of life's inevitable conclusion.

But death isn't like that. It's raw, it's unapologetic. It can be ugly, but sometimes... sometimes it can be beautiful. That's how this one was. How she was. I can still picture her so vividly.

It was cold, just at the beginning of February. There was frost on the trees; the steps to the towpath were slippery. My parents didn't like me walking by the canal on my own, but I loved the stillness. I could almost pretend I was in our little Yorkshire village – not the city they had uprooted us to. I still resent them for that.

My breath misted in the air as I approached the Bradwell aqueduct. It was early enough that the road below was silent, the only sound my own footsteps on the concrete. I paused to lean over the railing. The structure was still new, completed just two years ago to allow for the latest of the grid roads. I didn't understand it at the time: surely it would be easier for the road to go over the canal. But, here we are, one thousand seven hundred tons of concrete later.

There were no boats on the aqueduct, so I had a clear view along the length of the canal. Towards the far end I could see what looked like a white sheet, snagged on the opposite path and partially submerged in the still water. It was only when I drew closer that I realised what I was looking at.

The white sheet was a dress – no, not a wedding dress. Nothing so dramatic. A simple shift dress, not unlike a nightgown, with delicate blue embroidery around the neckline. I couldn't see the hem; weighed down by the saturated fabric, only her head and shoulders were fully visible.

Her hair was strawberry blonde, hints of copper catching the morning light as it drifted in a halo around her pale face. There was a dusting of freckles across her nose and her cheeks, the only colour on that icy skin. Her lips were slightly parted, the corners tilted in an almost-smile. It made her look wistful, her closed eyes giving the impression of slumber.

I gazed at her beautiful face, mesmerized. Perfect and peaceful. I felt connected to her in a way I couldn't comprehend. A girl out of place, a Rose Connelly without her willow garden.

The sudden roar of a car speeding below me snapped me back to myself, the strains of a half-remembered ballad echoing in my head.

**The Sequoia
Cathedral**
Ralph Keats

It is time to be a tree.
Time to leave this broken world
no human hand can mend.
I'll take up nature's therapy:
be silent, still and

send down roots so strong and deep,
no catastrophe can breach,
or hateful speech may reach
But what kind of tree?
No, not that ornamental cherry:

so beloved of the block-paved many
made mute by pink.
And never that gnarled old cooker; too
scabby and raddled to even think,
and much too pigeon-crabby.

An acer might do, but not
if condemned to a pot
And that willow, so soothing and healing
and gently appealing:
yet too lachrymose, and too squat.

I'll go instead to the library,
with that monumental sequoia close by.
And from an open window,
watch it soar into a feathery cirrus sky;
beyond all book-bound understanding.

A cathedral nature made:
its copper trunk and shelving naves and
transepts; its thrusting spires arrowing
up to heaven.
I will step out and start to climb.

**The Scent of the
City**
Steph Lay

The first thing that I do whenever I visit a new city, once the tiresome business of arrival has been settled and I'm free to take to its streets and walk, is to stop and take a deep breath. Close my eyes and let the scent of the city soak in. I feel it's the best way to get a feel for a place. Now, you might think that Milton Keynes would smell of nothing more than sterile concrete and traffic fumes, but come with me as we start from the station to take a walk and breathe it all in.

Well, there's traffic to smell for sure. The diesel reek from buses coughing into their stops and the petrol clouds drifting from the taxi rank, but the press of commuters we dodge through provides the scentscape here. Warm floral perfumes fight the sharp aldehydes of aftershave, all defeated by the billowing candy floss clouds of the vapors. Their sweet fruitiness makes catching the odd drift of cigarette smoke feel old-fashioned, almost nostalgic.

We'll head straight up towards the centre and, once enveloped by the underpass, there's the scorched-rubber-herbal burn of skunk – and oh, mind your footing there! Someone must have had one too many last night, and decorated the pavement with their dinner. We'll be glad of the cleaner air as we emerge and head up the hill, past the hotel, past bars and office buildings, catching the fresh-pine scent of new wood drifting across from that housing block that always seems to be under renovation before passing the Turkish restaurant, aromatic smoke from roasting meat momentarily infusing the air with the essence of the best summer barbecues.

We'll trot quickly on through Midsummer Place: we're here for scents, not shopping. Out the other side, and we'll weave through the crowds into the market where heavy incense from the clothing stalls gives way to the wet seaside slap of fresh fish, startling in this land-locked place. We'll let that carry us onwards beyond the new hotel reaching up to touch the clouds, its fresh linens and cocktail spritz wafting somewhere high overhead, before

crossing the bridge into Campbell Park. We'll take a turn around the rose and pause for a quiet moment in the centre where a profusion of bouquets have been laid in remembrance. We'll breathe in those mingled hothouse fragrances, crushed chrysanthemum petals and the funeral breath of lilies filling the stillness.

Respects duly paid, and we're nearly at the end now, we'll stride out towards the light pyramid up ahead. The wind freshens here, swirling in from the turbines dotting the far horizon and bringing with it the scents of clean, green growing things, of warm earth, of open land. Here, at this bright beacon, our backs to the city and our faces to the expanse of countryside beyond, we'll take great deep lungfuls and know that this contrast between the urban and the open really is the essence of this complex, fascinating and fragrant city.

**The Cathedral of
Trees**

Isobel Richards

The trees once bore witness
To our youthful smiles:
Hand in warm hand,
Under leaf-shielded sun.

The trees held our vows
Between hornbeam walls:
Fervent, unblest
In the wind-stirred nave

The trees heard him cough,
Then falter, then fade:
Hand in frail hand,
The cedars a shroud.

Once again, I am called
To the evergreen tower and
Loving tears flow
In the cathedral of trees.

Xscape Room

Graham R

Sherwood

from the air, it seems
giant swine might well
inhabit there –
a silver curved corrugated
hood, with one foot firmly
sunken into the mud –
but no porcine lethargy is
found within judging by the
incessant raucous din
as myriad ant-like people
scurry to-and-fro, to frolic
down a man-made hill of snow,
in sheer ecstasy they emit
ecstatic toboggan squeals
and refuel after on soft drinks,
beer and fast-food meals –
it's a leisure palace, a wild
exciting winter ride,
a cool two degrees below
bright sunshine outside

bowling*Casey Stewart*

i am not a girl of strength
can't quite get the swing right
and the bumpers are still up
at twenty-one - i know, i know,
but in such clumsiness i'm having fun

over and over again
the room bursts open with neon
lights, music, mixed machine noise
wide eyes wander to stuffed toys
that i really don't need
the lane is alight
somebody i love scores a strike
my tongue slushy blue
and my childish smile wide
i don't think about what's happening outside
i'm just here
with pleasures as simple as a poem

**The Art of
Fracture and
Repair**

Sue Turbett

Every Tuesday at 9.30am, we gather on the slipway and strip to our swimsuits with the lack of inhibition that emerges naturally from close friendships. There's Linda, who dreamed of being a ballerina but ended up in pension finance. Meena, who told us she lived in Syria and we all felt sorry for her, until she explained it was the name of her house. There's Jean, who writes poetry by day and picks-and-packs at the Avon warehouse by night, and Anne, a chef at Wagamama whose menopause patches have never really hit the spot.

We are Primark and Prada, waxed and hairy, claim benefits and work in the C-suite, and we pray to many gods. But none of that matters, because when we plunge into the cold, fast flowing water, after a sharp intake of breath, a unifying calmness envelops us and we surrender to a glorious rush of endorphins. We swim, float, and chat. We talk about caring for elderly parents, ask just how many more coffee shops do we need on the High Street, and ponder why there has to be another bloody upgrade on the phone? Our bodies turn pink as raw salmon and everything we say makes us laugh or sigh or tut as one.

We swim, we get high, and we giggle.

We are everyone, but we are not men. Our Facebook page extolls the virtues of cold-water swimming and, below the photo of us all grinning in bobble hats and dry robes, it declares 'All welcome!'. It's just that men don't come, and we don't mind that.

Except for this Tuesday. We are in various states of casual undress when our chit-chat stops mid-sentence. A newcomer approaches. A man. There's the briefest of moments when we are still and silent and hold our shape before we fracture. Hands instinctively move, grabbing towels and clutching at half-removed garments to cover cellulite, blotches and sagging tits.

Linda shivers as she remembers celebrating the end of O-levels round the back of the Aquarius Disco with Robbie Turner, swearing to this day that she had said 'No!'. Meena scowls and tuts loudly, cross with herself for falling yet again for a ghoster on Match.com. Jean holds her breath

like she used to when her father pulled back her bed covers and the acrid smell of his breath made her nauseous. And Anne smiles with her mouth but not her eyes, wondering what she's done wrong that her married lover won't leave his wife.

'Hi!' The man sounds apologetic, shuffles his feet, and keeps a respectful distance.

It's not all men, we tell ourselves.

The river sings its burbling song, summoning us. Like fish we reform our shoal but the shape of us is - ever so slightly - altered.

'Hello,' we say, and smile.

'May I join you?' he asks.

Of course, you're welcome!' we say. And we mean it, even though we all know he will bring his mates next week.

We swim. He gets high, and he giggles.

Live in Stony
Sam Upton

With a pint in my hand, and
Summer back in the land,
It's time for Stony Live, bright lights,
And a fringe of fun after the shrubs,
Longer days lead to warmer nights,
Finally we can set the world to rights,
What I love about Stony... is its pubs,
From the Cock to the Bull, to Old Georgie the fool,
A Duke, a Crown, a Fox and the Hound,
The Horse, its Plough and the Stables and Vaults,
So many choices it's hard to decide,
Sure, some have their faults,
But I'd drink in each with pride,
Cider usually or ale, wine or single malts,
Whatever your poison they're sure to provide,
A safe place, a smokescreen,
A haven or somewhere to hide,
Lose yourself in a barn for a dance or a day,
From folk on the green you'll want to stray,
To a Summer Shakespeare serenade,
I'm always dour when the words fade,
Stony Stratford is more than a home,
More than its streets, river and fields,
It's life, flesh, blood and bone,
It's where I met my love and embraced the unknown,
Its people, pubs and a place to call our own.

An Empty Bowl
(Milton Keynes
Bowl, Sept 2020)
Dave Wakeley

The grassy carpark outskirts sit empty, turned back to meadows, groundsmen's petrol trimmers silent as its open-air stage: perimeter footpaths are trodden only by furtive dog-walkers, by solitary scurriers dodging tutting and condemnation. Unscrumped blackberries gather like eager crowds, eyes pressed up against wire fences: exuberant catering franchises waiting patiently for queues that will not form. No cars swish past behind these man-made embankments, wild rabbits amble across the dual carriageways without as much as a side-eyed glance. And in the silence, a song thrush sings for no-one, purely for the joy of its melody, high among the leaves of an unpruned oak.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Karen Banfield has been writing plays and short stories for many years. She has had 17 full length plays performed, with more to come at the Limelight Theatre, Aylesbury. She had stories included in the 2023 and 2025 MinK Anthologies. She has also published two collections of short stories on Kindle and in paperback; *A Little Crime at Bedtime*, and *A Touch of Drama at Bedtime*.

An avid reader of short stories, **Jerard Bretts** lives in Milton Keynes. He completed an MA in Creative Writing in 2019. His recent flash fiction has appeared in *Thin Skin* and in the MinK anthologies *Tales from the City*, *Dreams for Lammas* and *Home*.

Becky Cooling is from Milton Keynes. She uses her writing to explore themes of neurodivergence and her own experiences of being autistic and dyslexic. She juggles writing with college and her other hobbies of painting, pottery, and crochet.

Anita Gayton has always enjoyed writing for her own entertainment. However, in 2024 she published her book, *Staying Alive: My Ride with Ovarian Cancer*. This experience gave her the courage to share her writing with others. She is delighted to be given the opportunity to do so at the Milton Keynes Literary Festival.

Merit Gogo-Fyneface is a creative writer based in Milton Keynes, with two published novellas. She is currently working on a collection of short stories which explore diverse themes and urban narratives. Most of her writing delves into the complexities of modern life, identity, and culture.

Stephen Goodlad retired from Social Work with an ambition to see more of the world. Six months later, during lockdown, he took up writing instead. His short stories and poems have had minor success with online publications, but he would like to write a compelling novel-length story and then find a copy editor, agent, publisher and publicist. But in the real world, he fills his spare time as a swim coach and volunteer with Citizens Advice.

Amy Hewitt can usually be found running tabletop RPGs at the Milton Keynes Roleplaying Games Club, or working at the National Film and Sci-Fi Museum. She studied Creative Writing at university before switching to Television Production, and is returning to writing after a long break.

Ralph Keats is a perennially-young pensioner living in leafy Stony Stratford and still hopelessly addicted to writing poems, stories and songs. He first fetched up in MK (then just a name) 53 years ago when his former employer, the Open University, was merely a couple of sheds in a field. He's had stuff published by *Pen Pusher*, *Sentinel Literary Quarterly*, *Milton Keynesia* and the incomparable *MK Lit Fest*. Hanging on to the sides of the handcart.

Steph Lay is a writer, researcher and storyteller based in Milton Keynes. Her project **City of Secrets** explores the hidden histories, folklore and uncanny possibilities of the new city, gathering local stories of the unexplained and asking what might lie beneath its familiar surfaces. Behind the scenes, she also works with Peter Laws on the YouTube channel *Into The Fog*, helping to curate true paranormal experiences sent in by viewers and creating atmospheric artwork to bring those stories to life. Together, her work is rooted in a fascination with place, memory, mystery and the stories that make the everyday feel suddenly strange.

<https://cityofsecrets.blog> | <https://www.youtube.com/@IntoTheFog>

Isobel Richards has lived near Milton Keynes since 2006 and has always enjoyed writing. MK Lit Fest's 2024 *Tales from the City* theme inspired her to return to writing poetry after a long break. She was also pleased to have pieces included in the *Dreams for Lammas*, *Never Mind the Baubles*, and *Dreams for Beltane* events and ebooks. She was shortlisted in the 2025 Chiltern Arts Poetry Competition.

Graham R Sherwood has lived and worked in Milton Keynes for forty years. He manages the profile section and helps moderate entries on the **Write Out Loud** poetry website, and publishes his own work at <https://grahamrichardsherwood.co.uk/>.

Casey Stewart is a twenty-year-old poet from Bedford who writes to help with her mental health. Her poetry journey started out with her penning poems for school and funerals, which has since evolved into her attending local writing workshops and earning recognition in local competitions. She was the winner of The Bedford Competition's Bedford Poets' Prize 2024.

Following a long career directing BBC news and current affairs television programmes, then running her own video production business, **Sue Turbett's** debut novel, *Eagle Sister*, was published in 2024. Sue is now working on her second novel, based loosely on the life of her great aunt. When she's not writing, she can be found hill walking, running, volunteering, knitting, cold water swimming, and learning Irish.

Sam Upton (he/they) is the Milton Keynes poetry slam champion as well as the 7th Bard of Northampton and the 8th Bard of Stony Stratford. A spoken word poet who writes about love, life and the moments that define. They regularly perform at Scribal Gathering in Stony Stratford and open mics across Milton Keynes.

Dave Wakely has worked as a musician, university administrator, librarian, learning materials author and editor in cities across Europe. His writing has been shortlisted for the Manchester Fiction and the Cambridge and Bath Short Story awards, and his stories and poems have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies. Online Programme Manager for Milton Keynes Literary Festival, he lives in Buckinghamshire with his husband.

Launched at our April 2025 Festival, the **Raising Voices** project is collecting and curating poems, short stories and creative non-fiction writing about, inspired by or set in specific locations across our city. The selected submissions are published in an online interactive **StoryMap**, where visitors can read the pieces, hear them read (mostly by their authors), identify their locations on an interactive map, and in many cases see accompanying photographs of illustrations. Submissions remain open.

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