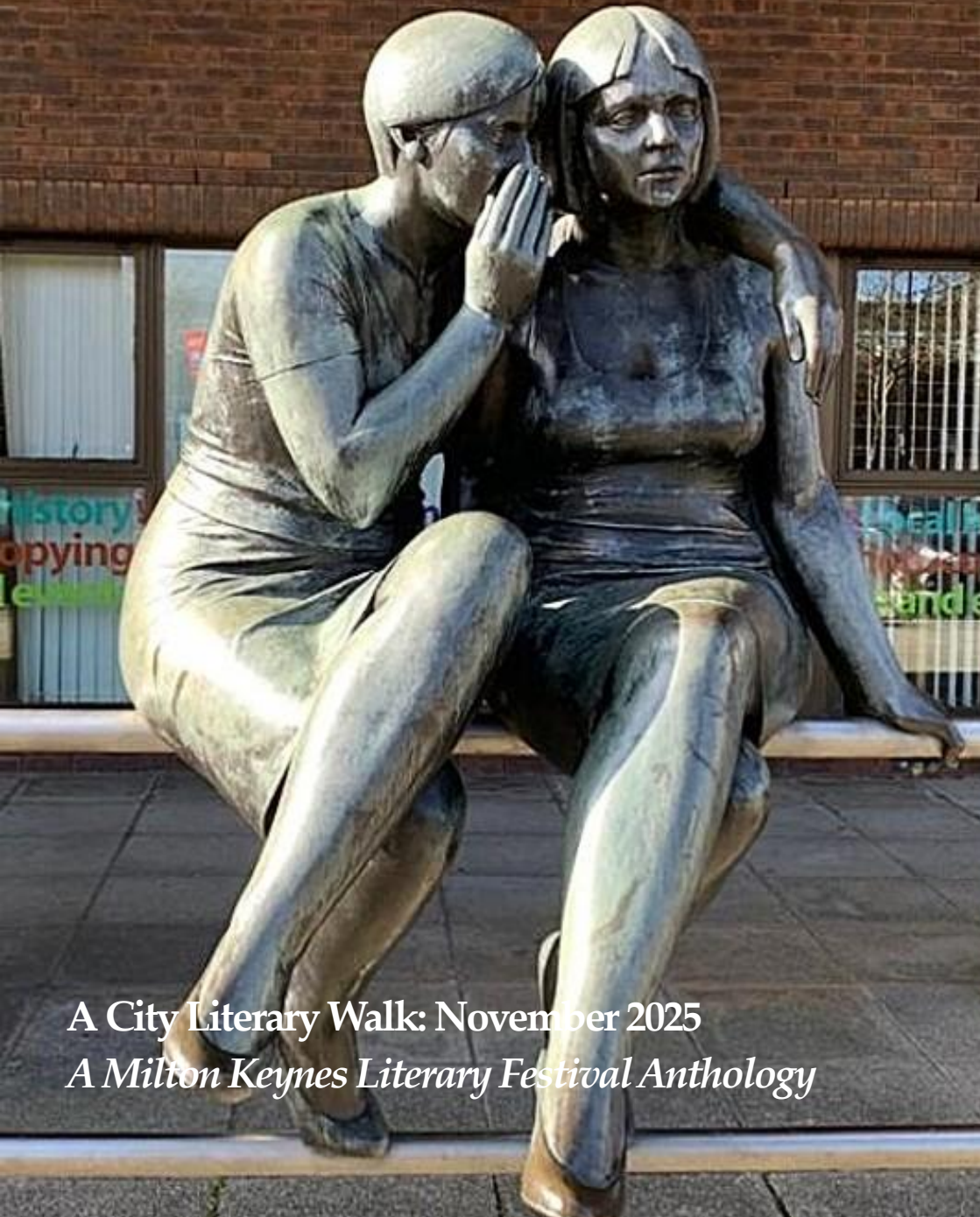


MinK#5.2



A City Literary Walk: November 2025
A Milton Keynes Literary Festival Anthology



A City Literary Walk: 2 November 2025
A Milton Keynes Literary Festival Anthology
MinK#5.2

First published in Great Britain by Arts Gateway MK 2025

Selection and introduction © Arts Gateway MK 2025

Cover photograph © Flora Rees 2023

Poems and flash fiction © individual authors 2025

All rights reserved. No reproduction, copy or transmission of this publication may be made without written permission of the author/s and editors.



A part of the
Arts Gateway MK
family.



Funded by

MK **Milton Keynes**
City Council

Map and Key

	Location	Story/Poem
1	MK Central Library	<i>Whisper among the Books</i>
2	Meeting Circle, outside Marks and Spencer	<i>Dead Zone</i>
3	Midsummer Place clock	<i>Midsummer Monolith</i>
4	Outside McDonalds	<i>The Mids</i>
5	Middleton Hall, centre:mk	<i>Strawberry Ice Dream</i>
6	Outside MK Gallery	<i>Beyond the Page</i>
7	The Events Plateau, Campbell Park	<i>Pride</i>
8	MK Rose	<i>A Lily at the Rose</i>
9	Outside Hotel La Tour	<i>MK Fortean</i>
10	MK Central Library	<i>Home is Where the Books Are</i>



INTRODUCTION

If writing is an act of either empathy (looking at the world through the eyes of the author's characters) or of testimony (showing others how the world looks from their point of view), reading is an act of revelation.

Reading has been described as mind-broadening and as a form of travel – both of which are ways describing how it can feel to see the familiar from a fresh perspective. Or how it might feel to walk a mile or two in someone else's shoes.

A **City Literary Walk** takes that idea literally. A guided tour of ten locations in Central Milton Keynes, it changes the camera angle that places that the reader may have experienced countless times before – or perhaps not even noticed or pondered.

This booklet accompanies a literal walk on 2 November 2025, where the pieces will be read in situ for those that join us. The pieces will also be available to both read and to listen to in the **Raising Voices StoryMap**, launching in late 2025 and mapping stories and poems inspired by locations across the city, and subsequently in a **SoundWalk** that will be available to listen to in the freely downloadable *Echoes* app.

Friends, Milton Keynesians and countrymen, lend us your ears – and your feet – and walk with us a while.

MK Lit Fest

**a fabulous festival of books, words, writers and ideas
that celebrates everything literary, bookish or wordy**

CONTENTS

Whisper Among the Books

Christopher Phillips

Dead Zone

Toby Shrimpton

Midsummer Monolith

Clare Read

The Mids

Sarah Davies

Strawberry Ice Dream

Phil Sky

Beyond the Page

Chris Allen

Pride

Lucy Holton

A Lily at the Rose

Steph Lay

MK Fortean

Graham R Sherwood

Home is Where the Books Are

Nadia Partyka

Whisper
Among the
Books
Christopher
Phillips

Our new City
Where talk is gritty, we preen pretty, sometimes
witty
A new voice
We want to know what we don't know, more's the
pity
Sometimes we shout, listen never, left with no
choice
We are cool, just go with the flow
Plastic cows rake in the dough
We sit on the railing, hands cupped in a whisper
Saying did he kiss her?
No, no, that's my sister
Sitting in front of the Library, lots of mystery
Tales, imagination, 1984
We won prizes, real top drawer
Today, in 2023, no one clambers or whispers back
There isn't even a plaque, just a nark selling smack
We are just too big, too blind to value our art
It was a special sculpture, The Whisper, the cat's
whisker
A place in our hearts, our new voice, a new City
starts.
The girls still whisper, polite but who cares tongue
twisters

Dead Zone

Toby Shrimpton

Milton Keynes, a wonderous, new city. Until it wasn't.

The whole city turned into a dead zone. The inhabitants disappeared. However, a few brave souls still venture into the city to find treasure. This is the tale of one of those adventures. The tale of Ligart Ironheart.

The city centre holds the treasure – well, that's the story the travellers say, when they pass through Ligart's encampment. He wonders to himself what this treasure is as he walks through the city. Tall buildings stand in ruins, rusted car bodies litter the streets. Colonies of moss dot the buildings. Then the centre comes into view. Broken and unbroken glass panels line a metal skeleton. The taller bastions dwarf it, yet the centre still seems so big. Hair-like vines flow in the air atop the roof. The door to the building lies open.

Ligart walks into the new world. Midsummer Place lies silent. Litter lines an open area, where once there was an upside-down house. Paths on both sides beckon him closer. Ligart stands, looking each way. He closes his eyes and lets his feet decide which way to go. Right.

Ligart pushes his way through smashed glass doors that lead into a smaller building. Roof lights hang from the ceiling by a few wires, and shop fronts lie empty. Ligart turns right on another junction, then stops. His eyes freeze. A seven-foot tall robot rummages through a bin with is long, blade-like fingers. Ligart slowly walks backwards,

not knowing he's about to hit a bin. It crashes to the ground, sending echoes through the empty halls of the large building. The robot snaps its neck up like an animal and stares at Ligart for a few seconds, its jet-black eyes burning through his soul.

The robot runs. It scrambles across the floor towards Ligart like a hungry beast. It lets out an ear-shattering scream, and Ligart runs. He scampers across debris, not looking back. He hears the scratching of the robot's skeletal metal fingers on the floor as it gets closer to him. Just as the robot is about to reach out with its skinny, ghostly arm, Ligart dives into one of the shops.

He hides behind one of the many knocked-over shelves and hears the robot come into the building. The thing glides through the shelves phantom-like, letting out grunts. Then the noises stop, and so does Ligart's heart.

The robot's eyes lock onto Ligart through a hole in the shelves. It crashes through and Ligart scurries away towards the back door, but something catches his eyes – it's the treasure! As the robot pushes the shelves aside and runs towards Ligart, he snatches the treasure and runs through the door into the open world, locking it behind him. He huffs and puffs whilst the robot bangs against the door, and looks down at his treasure: a postcard of concrete cows.

Midsummer

Monolith

Clare Read

The rocks were meticulously placed; flat smooth stones spiralling skywards into a towering cone. Joseph had never seen anything like it. Certainly not slap bang in Midsummer Place obscuring the crowd-pleasing Frog Bubble Clock.

‘Tall fellow, aren’t you,’ he said, circling the cairn and pinching himself in case he was dreaming. ‘How the hell did you get here?’

Joseph had worked as Head of Security at the shopping centre for seven years: opening up, patrolling the Boulevard in case of trouble, and checking everything was neat and orderly. In all those years he’d never discovered a massive monolith blocking his path.

CCTV footage did not elucidate. Apart from a slight flicker at midnight the cameras showed the centre empty and quiet.

‘Aliens,’ Joseph muttered, laughing anxiously to himself, ‘that’s all that explains it.’

He made several phone calls. Top was the shopping centre management who thought it was a prank until he sent photos. Then a demolition company he hoped would make a swift removal before customers forced to make detours on their shopping journeys made angry complaints. Along with several bemused cleaners, he placed cones around the perimeter and large and urgent signs telling people not to climb. Then he rang his wife,

who he knew would be sipping her early morning cup of tea in bed, the cat at her feet.

‘It’s all on the radio,’ she said.

‘You what?’ said Joseph bemused.

‘Piles of stones, sprung up on each of the four roundabouts nearest The Centre.’

‘By piles, how big are we talking?’

‘Well, a few feet.’

‘They’ve got nothing on this.’

When he returned to the spectacle, a crowd had formed. Retail assistants, coffee cups in hand, were stood either gawping or taking photos. He overheard at least two trying to sell their stories to the *Daily Mail*. He attempted to shoo them on, but he wasn’t their boss and had no jurisdiction.

‘Bound to be Druids on Midsummer’s Day,’ he heard one of them say. ‘Ancient lay lines, ain’t it.’

‘I reckon its Banksy.’

‘It’s some sort of stunt, anyway.’

‘Costly,’ was all Joseph could mutter.

At 10am, workmen arrived conspicuous in high vis, whistling through their teeth. Employees, early morning shoppers, and crowds drawn by news reports were too fond to see it unceremoniously dismantled. Fearful of the mood turning, and at

management request, Joseph extracted an exorbitant quote and sent the men on their way.

By the time his shift ended, despite the large-fonted signs, the stones shone from people touching them hoping for fertility, virility, good luck, and prosperity. Three faith groups had arrived in robes and sung. A vicar had blessed it. The cairn was trending on all social media platforms. Management were contemplating taking ownership.

The next morning Joseph opened The Centre, apprehensive at what he might find. More towers? An altar? A sacrifice? Instead, he found nothing, not even gravel on the shiny floor.

The Mids

Sarah Davies

The boy in McDonald's with his school text,
(a Midsummer Night's dream),
gets to the part where someone's dad
turns into an ass, and laughs.
Sprites attend him – here's Peaseblossom,
Cobweb,
Moth, and Mustardseed,
drifting on vape smoke past Five Guys
and he hides away his book.

There's 'Puck' badly sprayed on the belly of the
underpass –
drivers don't understand his name now –
folklore is folklore if only for the people,
and no imagined realm of ether.

There is the place where the film broke down
as we watched *Midsommar* – remember,
just after the first death?
And we wandered down the fire exit
to the theatre's sinister,
the evening silent and suspended motes of air
as we waited to resume the ritual,
the night so warm.

And this is the thought I have now,
foot sore on a Haussmann boulevard,
slightly drunk on sweetish apples –
of the alignment of those streets with trees,
no person-tree higher than the elms,
no city unless a city in the forest, Walker said –

*no person if not a tree
whose blossom is green white.*

All litter and money and words,
intoxicating with nothing but promise –
like the boy in McDonald's with the primer,
dreaming unknowing the truth of Summer.

Strawberry Ice Dream

Phil Sky

It'd been a while since I'd invested in any new dreams, and there's only so many times I could ride a white furry dragon across a magical land. The store was a new one – Strawberry Ice Dream: For a better sleep, stop counting sheep. Squeezed into Middleton Hall, its pink and white storefront sat between Bespoke Nose and Pete's Traditional Old-Fashioned Hoverboards.

"Can I help you, sir?" The girl looked up from her tablet and smiled.

I've always been bad at shopping, but without an updated brain scan, it's hard to order dreams online. The code behind one person's perfect Martian hike might be experienced by another as having the bottom half of your leg chewed off by a triceratops. At college, I'd learned this the hard way, and I still can't see a portrait of Henry VIII without shuddering.

"Well, I keep having the same recurring dream."

The girl nodded.

"Have you considered something involving riding a white furry dragon across a magical land?"

Perhaps she recognised my pained expression.

"Hmmm... a red furry dragon?"

I shook my head. "You know, if you're looking for something different, research has shown that if we dream of our collective past, we actually become more mindful of the present."

She tapped her fingers and turned her tablet towards me. It showed a busy painting, yet somehow I found it soothed me.

“Fionnuala Boyd,” the girl was saying. “Fiction, Non-fiction and Reference.”

Three dreamlike figures – a girl and two boys, their eyes averted – basked in spring-fresh sunlight, appearing both part of and separate from the world around them.

“When was this painted?”

“Long ago, before the pandemic or the dome. This was how they dreamed of our city; by painting it because they didn’t have dream organs.”

The painting exuded a sunny pioneer’s optimism of a world born fresh and new, where reflective windows merged with freshly levelled roads, clouds like cotton wool and water like glass.

“Did people really swim in the lake?”

The girl shrugged. “Who knows what they really did. I mean, not to put you off, but people used to sell clothing in these shops. People would come in, try stuff on, in little cubicles next to each other.”

I shuddered.

“But it wasn’t all bad – and a lot of our customers love this dream.”

Out of interest, I asked, “What else do you have in this genre?”

The girl chewed at her bottom lip.

“Well, there’s one about concrete cows, but that’s really for a much more specific customer. I mean, if you think...?”

“Oh no,” I said quickly, shaking my head. “I think I’d rather start with the Boyd.”

The girl smiled.

“Of course. Ummm... for fifty credits extra we could add some blue furry dragons?”

“No, no, I’m done with the dragons.”

“Of course, we have to ask.” The girl slid her finger across the screen. “And how would you like to pay today? Barcode or implant?”

**Beyond the
Page**

Chris Allen

Beyond the page,
outside the art gallery,
a man sits on the street
asking for change.
In a city up for sale,
ignored by crowds,
waiting for a benevolent ghost
to show he's worth it:
can turn the page
and write his own story.

Pride

Lucy Holton

The walls were built high around the kingdom,
tall enough to overcome a siege of hate.
Inside, the barriers begin to come down,
and the true me begins to come out.

My face painted like a dragon,
I'm surrounded by so many queens.
I walk through the pavilion and somehow
I feel like this place is made for me.

Bodies under the kaleidoscope marquee,
triumphant voices chorusing Celine.
We're singing proudly as one that, yes,
our hearts will go on and on.

Here we are, stumbling soldiers,
and we're coming back to camp.
Our wounds bleeding glitter,
holding one another under the disco ball.

I can be vulnerable here,
show you all my battle scars,
and you will paint them in neon
then ask if I want to dance.

Under the late September sun,
we will all shine on.

**A Lily at the
Rose**
Steph Lay

It must have rained in the night, before the temperature plummeted and skimmed the shining surface of the rose memorial with a slickening of ice.

She takes her time, stepping carefully onto the tiles in case the concentric curves swirling away from her prove treacherous underfoot. She huddles deeper into her winter coat, but it hangs too loose on her now, billowing in the January wind that scours the park, little protection against its teeth. She's shivering but her steps are steady as she makes her first circuit around the edge, watching the sunlight glint and sparkle from every pillar. Once back at the spot where she started, she takes a deep breath and begins again, tightening the circle this time, spiralling inwards. Her right hand lightly touches the pillars she passes, as if to collect every date and commit their events to memory. Her left hand is clenched tight around a white lily, her fingers chilled to match its bone-white shade.

A year ago today. The morning had been just this bright, but had felt leaden with shadows that only they could see. They'd come to fill the heavy moments before setting off for the hospital, for the looming appointment that was stealing all the light from the day, threatening to rob all the hope from their hearts. A year ago today, he'd still been there to hold her hand against the cold, and she remembered feeling his heartbeat through that solid, reassuring point of contact. She'd wondered if he could feel hers too, could tell from its panic-fast beat that the brave face she was putting on was just

that, a façade. She had talked too much, too fast, too brightly.

‘Look, you never know, they might say there’s something they can do. Survival rates are getting better, there are new treatments all the time. These days, more people your age die *with* cancer than from it...’

As soon as it was out of her mouth, she’d wished she hadn’t said the word. She saw the pillars anew as they walked past every date, and she couldn’t help wondering...when the next World Water Day rolled around in March, would he be in the middle of treatment? Would he see Concrete Cow Day in September? She’d shaken the thought away. Of course he would. The world couldn’t be that cruel.

But of course, the world could. He made it as far as World Hospice Day in October, but by November and World Computing Day, he was gone. With that same inevitability, she realises that her steps have carried her to the very centre of the rose. She bends to place her own tribute there, in that central spot that bears no date, where she can pretend it might be possible to step outside of time, back into the days they had shared. Her offering lies marble-white on granite. She fears the wind might take it, but its petals merely tremble as she turns and walks away alone.

MK Fortean

Graham R

Sherwood

my city of glass
lies secluded in plain sight,
hiding its avaricious persona
camouflaged behind mirrored
refractions and reflections,

my cuckoo conurbation,
robber baron village devourer
slick consumer of consumers
pell-mell human spa
or hypno-magnetic shangri-la,

my casino of communities
entombed in mummified modernism
preserved under a fickle lens
a confused composite DNA
more helter-skelter than helicoid

my grid mat arterial entity,
that bleeds to oil and polish its
brilliant shimmering dermis
a courageously proud show
carapace, by which I am blinded

Home is
Where the
Books Are

Nadia Partyka

She looks in the mirror, hating her body
Because among her sisters, she is the ugly
duckling.
She wonders what would change if she lost some
weight.
But in another world, she is free.
She stands among goddesses.
She's not too fat or thin
And her looks are a sign of confidence.
He covers his legs, ashamed.
Now all his friends look at him strangely
And he'll never play football again.
But in another world, he is free.
With only wood for a leg, he sails the seas.
He smiles and raises his flag with pride
With his crew as he searches for new land.
She stands before her new school.
Anxiety fills her as she wonders if she'll be hated.
Will she fail all her classes?
But in another world, she is free.
She walks the halls, all eyes on her.
Her boyfriend kisses her for her brains and
kindness
And she never feels anxiety again.
Everyone hates something about themselves.
We all worry we're not good enough.
We all wish to be someone else, to be loved.
But in another world, we are free.
Because home is where the books are.
Because home is where you can be a mess and
make a mess.

Because home is a place where we feel happy and
safe.

Because there is nothing wrong with the way we
are.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Chris Allen works as a psychologist in the NHS. He is also a member of a Milton Keynes writing group and a reading group. He likes motorcycling and had a bit more time to write recently after breaking his leg in an accident. He hopes to avoid further accidents and carry on writing.

Sarah Davies is a northern exile down south and has been writing, on and off, all her life. She has been published in a range of magazines and will one day concentrate enough to put together a collection.

Lucy Holton is a writer who enjoys focusing on hidden histories within her writing. She currently works as a librarian which has allowed her to pursue creative interests such as running writing groups, poetry workshops, and organising author talks.

Steph Lay is a writer, photographer and aspiring parapsychologist who has lived in Milton Keynes since 2002. She is fascinated by the folk horror potential underlying the redways of the city, and is curating a map of its spooky stories which you can read at <http://cityofsecrets.blog>. Her short stories and micro-fictions have been published by MK Lit Fest, *Comma Press* and *Five Minute Lit*.

Nadia Partyka is a passionate reader and young mastermind behind *Amethyst - Time And Time Again*. She's on a mission to defy age limits and shape tomorrow's world with words.

Christopher Phillips is seventy-four years old, living in sheltered housing in Great Holm. He is undertaking a creative writing degree and enjoys poetry, both reading but especially the act of writing. He believes in the creative act to help alleviate the ills of aging.

Clare Read is a writer from Northamptonshire. She works in mental health. She was a finalist of MinK 2023, was shortlisted in MAHA short story competition in 2022, and has been published in online literary journals.

Graham Sherwood is a poetry writer who has lived in Milton Keynes for over forty years. His poetry website forms a diary of sorts, recording day to day events and inspirations that he hopes will one day be useful to his extended family as they grow to adulthood. Graham is also a member of the management team of the nationally recognised **Write Out Loud** poetry portal. www.grahamrichardsherwood.co.uk

Toby Shrimpton has finished his A levels and hopes to go to university to pursue a degree in photography, whilst continuing with his writing.

Phil Sky is a writer of short stories and novels, mostly in the post-apocalyptic and dystopian genre, for YA and adult readers. His debut novel, *A Girl Called Ari*, won the Drunken Druid Book of the Year 2020. Strawberry Ice Dream won the 2020 Mink: City of Dreams flash-fiction grand prize. He lives in Milton Keynes with his wife and son where he's slowly working on his fourth novel.

This pamphlet of stories and poems is one a series of anthologies of the best of local writing that Milton Keynes Literary Festival has curated, edited and published. The complete catalogue is available for purchase online at www.mklitfest.org/mink-anthologies.

The stories and poems contained here also form part of the festival's **Raising Voices** project, collecting and curating poems, short stories and creative non-fiction inspired by places across the city. An online interactive audio-visual StoryMap is being developed, and we welcome submissions from anyone living, working or studying in Beds, Bucks or Northants. For more information, visit www.mklitfest.org/raisingvoicesproject

www.mklitfest.org

@MKLitFest



Part of the Arts Gateway MK family