

Transcript: Race and Reviewing in the UK - The Ledbury Poetry Critics - Prof Sandeep Parmar

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00:00:16,100 --> 00:00:22,783
(distant sound of piano playing)

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00:00:24,000 --> 00:00:25,399
Hi, my name is Sandeep Parmar.

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00:00:25,399 --> 00:00:27,899
I'm the project lead for Ledbury Poetry Critics.

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00:00:28,266 --> 00:00:29,983
I'm an Asian woman in my 40s.

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00:00:29,983 --> 00:00:30,933
With long brown hair

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00:00:30,933 --> 00:00:32,850
and my pronouns are she and her.

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00:00:34,299 --> 00:00:37,566
So I'm primarily an academic, but I'm also a poet.

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00:00:37,983 --> 00:00:41,100
And in addition to that,
I write poetry reviews, so I'm a critic.

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00:00:41,833 --> 00:00:45,583
And that's really that combination
of thinking around race, particularly

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00:00:45,583 --> 00:00:48,083

and poetry and English across the world

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00:00:48,083 --> 00:00:51,000

is the reason why I wanted to set up this programme,

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00:00:51,000 --> 00:00:53,250

which I co-founded in 2017

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00:00:53,916 --> 00:00:56,700

(sound of animated chatter)

14

00:00:57,533 --> 00:00:59,166

Hello, my name is Chloe Garner.

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00:00:59,166 --> 00:01:02,049

I'm the director of Ledbury Poetry Festival.

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00:01:02,616 --> 00:01:05,116

I'm a white woman in my late forties.

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00:01:05,116 --> 00:01:10,116

I have shortish brown hair, glasses, a black dress.

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00:01:10,416 --> 00:01:12,883

And my pronouns are she/her.

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00:01:12,883 --> 00:01:18,383

As the director of Ledbury
Poetry Festival for about 16 years...

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00:01:18,383 --> 00:01:24,083

my role in the festival is to
programme events and I also do the fundraising,

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00:01:24,083 --> 00:01:26,549

the schools work, community work

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00:01:26,549 --> 00:01:29,283

and various projects that we run all year round.

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00:01:29,616 --> 00:01:32,400

(sound of animated chatter)

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00:01:32,700 --> 00:01:37,566

Sandeep Parmar won our second collection prize,

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00:01:37,566 --> 00:01:41,849

so it's called the Ledbury Munthe
Poetry Prize for second collections.

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00:01:42,000 --> 00:01:44,349

(sound of animated chatter)

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00:01:44,583 --> 00:01:51,650

And she wanted to donate her prize winnings,
she said, to found a Ledbury Critics Programme.

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00:01:51,650 --> 00:01:53,733

So the project is known as Ledbury Poetry Critics.

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00:01:53,733 --> 00:01:57,533

We started off in the first year with

the title Ledbury Emerging Poetry Critics,

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00:01:57,533 --> 00:02:03,200

and then we decided that emerging in itself was
the sort of label that one could never really emerge from.

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00:02:03,200 --> 00:02:05,099

Hello, my name is Alycia.

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00:02:05,099 --> 00:02:06,883

I'm a South Asian woman with long, dark hair,

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00:02:06,883 --> 00:02:08,733

which is tied up in a ponytail.

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00:02:08,733 --> 00:02:11,066

I'm wearing a blue jacket with gold embroidery

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00:02:11,066 --> 00:02:13,033

and my pronouns are she/her.

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00:02:13,033 --> 00:02:17,500

So my practise is poetry,
but also obviously poetry criticism.

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00:02:18,400 --> 00:02:23,300

There's kind of this joke that
writing is a really solitary sort of endeavour,

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00:02:23,300 --> 00:02:30,550

but I think for writers of colour in the UK, it can feel really
alienating and really isolating if it's difficult to find each other.

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00:02:30,550 --> 00:02:33,033

So today we're at Good Enough College,

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00:02:33,766 --> 00:02:35,650

which is in central London,

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00:02:36,050 --> 00:02:40,633

and it's a place where we're
hosting our annual Ledbury Critics residency.

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00:02:43,616 --> 00:02:48,433

This is a culmination of the latest
cohort, but bringing in the previous two cohorts,

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00:02:48,433 --> 00:02:51,750

all 30 of our critics are getting together for the first time.

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00:02:54,466 --> 00:02:57,266

Because of the pandemic,
there has not been the opportunity to meet,

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00:02:57,266 --> 00:03:01,099

so it's partly about meeting
each other, networking with each other.

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00:03:01,516 --> 00:03:03,333

They're forming this incredible community.

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00:03:04,250 --> 00:03:05,433

Big smiles!

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00:03:05,433 --> 00:03:06,550

I think we are all here!

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00:03:07,266 --> 00:03:08,400

Friendly critics.

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00:03:08,800 --> 00:03:11,949

Okay so we're just going to do about 10 seconds of you looking at the camera.

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00:03:12,883 --> 00:03:15,666

(sound of talking and tea cups)

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00:03:16,933 --> 00:03:19,583

To have workshops and conversations with editors,

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00:03:19,583 --> 00:03:23,849

with critics, thinking about reviewing and translation.

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00:03:23,849 --> 00:03:27,199

and looking at ways of kind of taking critical stances.

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00:03:27,616 --> 00:03:29,966

(sound of animated chatter)

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00:03:30,533 --> 00:03:34,766

You can hear people are, you know, complimenting ... they're reading each other's articles,

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00:03:34,766 --> 00:03:38,066

they're supporting each other, they're celebrating each other's work.

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00:03:38,250 --> 00:03:40,599
(sound of animated chatter)

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00:03:40,666 --> 00:03:43,916
To get back into what literary criticism does best, which is to

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00:03:44,349 --> 00:03:47,416
apply pressure to language and to think about form

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00:03:47,416 --> 00:03:52,933
and to think about all of the other
aspects of poetry and to read it really critically

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00:03:52,933 --> 00:03:56,416
and without a sort of sense of foreignness or otherness,

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00:03:56,416 --> 00:04:00,433
which I think probably oftentimes
white critics were bringing to reading poets of colour.

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00:04:03,849 --> 00:04:06,283
Hello, my name is Dzifa Benson,

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00:04:06,283 --> 00:04:09,816
and I'm a black woman in her early 50s,

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00:04:09,816 --> 00:04:16,766
and I'm wearing a peaked
cap reminiscent of Peaky Blinders

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00:04:16,766 --> 00:04:20,533
and a wide pink leather necklace.

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00:04:20,850 --> 00:04:23,199

I am a poet.

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00:04:23,199 --> 00:04:26,316

I am also dramatist and a journalist.

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00:04:28,933 --> 00:04:34,000

I came in with the first cohort of Ledbury Poetry Critics

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00:04:34,000 --> 00:04:40,316

and by the third cohort,
which came on board about a year ago.

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00:04:40,316 --> 00:04:44,350

I was now, I guess, one of the seniors.

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00:04:47,199 --> 00:04:55,100

Around 2016 there were some statistics that came out
that were compiled by the blogger and critic Dave Coates.

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00:04:55,100 --> 00:05:00,966

And even though I think we were conscious or aware
that there had been some lack of diversity in poetry criticism,

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00:05:00,966 --> 00:05:03,316

we'd never seen the exact numbers.

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00:05:03,316 --> 00:05:05,783

Somebody goes through and counts.

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00:05:05,783 --> 00:05:13,866

And counts heads and makes

comparisons, and breaks it down by, gender, by race.

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00:05:13,866 --> 00:05:18,350

All of that sort of thing. So the evidence is there.

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00:05:20,483 --> 00:05:27,583

There were some appalling examples of mainly white male reviewers ghettoising poets of colour

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00:05:27,583 --> 00:05:35,883

Or using the poet's background or nationality or ethnicity

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00:05:35,883 --> 00:05:44,216

to lead the review, rather than actually looking at what the text of the poetry was doing.

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00:05:47,283 --> 00:05:49,083

It's shaking up the poetry scene.

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00:05:49,083 --> 00:05:53,916

And it's making it something that people feel excited to get involved with,

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00:05:53,916 --> 00:05:56,949

to hear about and want to know about.

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00:05:56,949 --> 00:06:01,416

So I'm sure that means that then more people will want to read reviews,

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00:06:01,416 --> 00:06:04,899

more people will buy books,

more people will come to festivals.

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00:06:04,899 --> 00:06:08,199

More festivals will start. So it filters out.

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00:06:08,199 --> 00:06:16,649

A lot of the challenges have been people who've been, or publications who've given ...

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00:06:17,116 --> 00:06:19,966

Who have talked the talk then not walked the walk.

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00:06:19,966 --> 00:06:22,550

... so they've said:

'Yes, we're down with this'.

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00:06:22,550 --> 00:06:24,033

'We want this to happen'.

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00:06:24,033 --> 00:06:29,300

But they haven't done anything practical that would make that happen.

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00:06:29,300 --> 00:06:35,383

And so trying to both kind of usher in this group of very capable, very knowledgeable,

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00:06:35,383 --> 00:06:38,483

very kind of interested and invested critics

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00:06:38,483 --> 00:06:42,000

into some of these platforms has been a matter of going to editors and saying,

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00:06:42,000 --> 00:06:45,516

Look, here specifically is where you sit in terms of diversity

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00:06:45,516 --> 00:06:48,350

in terms of your reviews that you publish every year.

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00:06:48,766 --> 00:06:50,683

Here is where we think you could push this.

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00:06:51,250 --> 00:06:55,566

And here are some excellent critics
who are primed to make those changes for you.

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00:06:57,800 --> 00:07:00,766

The best editors that we've
worked with have been grateful and thought

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00:07:00,766 --> 00:07:07,566

here is an opportunity to be a part of
a really important moment in British poetry.

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00:07:07,566 --> 00:07:13,083

We also have a U.S. strand of the
Ledbury Critics and an Irish strand as well.

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00:07:13,083 --> 00:07:16,899

And so kind of creating a
more cohesive community internationally,

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00:07:16,899 --> 00:07:19,083

It's something that's really appealing to us.

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00:07:19,083 --> 00:07:25,966

Now, I think it's time to think about
how is this the model we want to carry on doing?

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00:07:25,966 --> 00:07:29,066

Where it's a mentorship model?

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00:07:29,066 --> 00:07:38,783

Or how do we then make best use
of ourselves as a network or community?

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00:07:38,783 --> 00:07:41,550

You know, so I think this is a thinking time because

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00:07:41,550 --> 00:07:47,033

I think we're on the cusp of
something changing or transforming.

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00:07:47,033 --> 00:07:50,050

Thankfully over the course of the programme,

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00:07:50,050 --> 00:07:53,683

some of our critics have also
gone on to become editors themselves.

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00:07:53,683 --> 00:07:58,666

So one of the critics is now a deputy
editor at The Times in the Arts section.

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00:07:59,283 --> 00:08:02,233

We have critics who are our editors at Poetry London

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00:08:02,233 --> 00:08:05,399
who have done some editing
at various other poetry magazines.

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00:08:05,399 --> 00:08:10,050
And I think that sort of changing of the gatekeepers

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00:08:10,050 --> 00:08:16,333
and a general shift in critical culture is
something that we have been a part of, a really big part of.

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00:08:16,333 --> 00:08:20,066
And people have said:
'Oh, why is there not a scheme like this in film?'

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00:08:20,066 --> 00:08:24,750
You know, criticism or
'Why don't we have something like this in visual art criticism?'

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00:08:24,750 --> 00:08:30,883
So then you're seeing actually people are starting
to say, why is this not happening in a broader sense?

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00:08:30,883 --> 00:08:35,649
I have had young black women come up to me and said:

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00:08:35,649 --> 00:08:39,383
'We see you posting about this and we're really inspired'.

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00:08:39,383 --> 00:08:42,933
And there's nothing that can replace that because,

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00:08:42,933 --> 00:08:49,616

you know, that is evidence on the
ground that what I'm doing is impactful.

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00:08:50,283 --> 00:08:55,516

(sound of laughter and people chatting)