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Feature

THE BOOKSELLER



BOOKS FROM SCOTLAND

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THE BOOKSELLER

INTRO

WORDS BY
TOM TIVNAN

Hardly a news flash but the past two years have had a fair few challenges for the Scottish books trade. And yet, given all the stresses and strains—and that the country's pandemic restrictions have probably been the toughest of the four home nations—the literature sector has not only survived but thrived in the past 24 months.

This has been a tremendous, often record-breaking couple of years for some of Scotland's leading publishers such as Canongate and Sandstone while exciting new (ish) lists like Knight Errant Press, Monstrous Regiment and Quindrie Press have entered the scene. In 2021, The Edinburgh International Book Festival returned to a successful hybrid outing in its new home at the Edinburgh College of Art while other festivals like Bloody Scotland and Cymera also pushed the envelope in finding ways of reaching new audiences.

Native son Douglas Stuart won the Booker Prize (and if his follow-up *Young Mungo* isn't at the very least shortlisted this year I will eat my hat), adopted daughter Maggie O'Farrell took home the Women's Prize for Fiction. Meanwhile a plethora of emerging authors have come to the fore across all genres but there has been a particularly noticeable strong wave of new work from children's (Elle McNicoll, Dean Atta) and in speculative fiction (Joma West, Laura Lam and Elizabeth May).

Almost counterintuitively, a raft of new indie bookshops have opened their doors in the past two years. Glasgow now has Outwith Books and Mount Florida Books, while at the other end of the M8 Rare Birds Books and children's specialist Ginger and Pickles have been added to the capital's rich bookselling scene. And Edinburgh is to gain another entry in March as Leith Walk pop-up Argonaut Books is to become a permanent fixture.

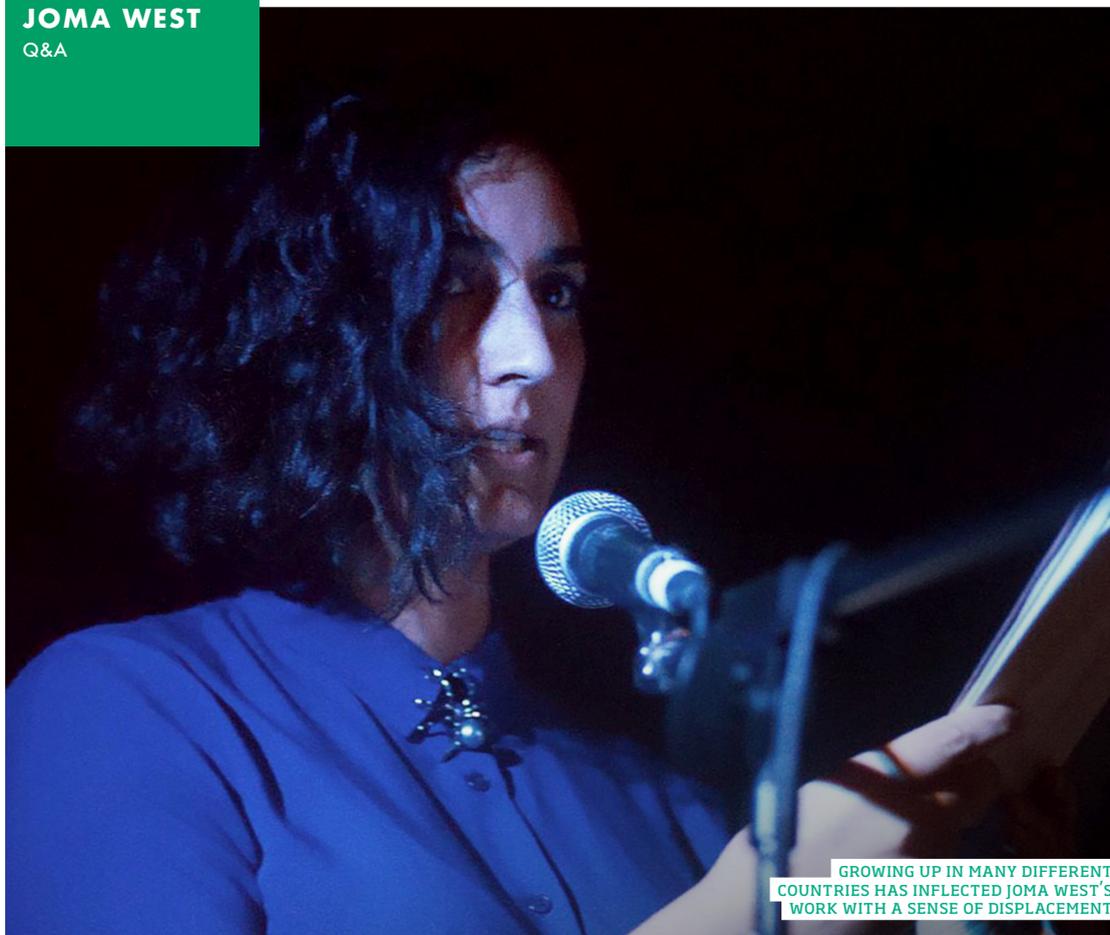
And this is at a time when established Scottish indies—Edinburgh's Golden Hare, St Boswell's Mainstreet Trading Company, The Bookmark in Granttown-on-Spey to take just three examples—have continued to shine.

At the start of the pandemic the received wisdom was that if any part of the book trade was in real peril it was indie shops. Intriguingly, that has proved to be completely wrong as, apart from Amazon and some massive corporate publishers, indies have come out of the Covid era the strongest through hard work, innovation and, perhaps crucially, being at the heart of communities.

ACCESS ALL AREAS

Another unexpected benefit from the pandemic is that it allowed many to reappraise long-held ways of working. A positive of online events and festivals was that—perhaps for the first time ever—they had been made truly accessible for disabled people. So Scottish disabled writers Julie Farrell and Ever Dundas wanted to ensure this keeps going and conceived the Inklusion Guide to give organisers easy-to-use, best-practice advice for running in person, online and hybrid events that can be accessible for all. It was an idea the industry has obviously been crying out for as Inklusion was able to secure support from the likes of the Edinburgh International Book Festival, Penguin Random House, Hachette and Edinburgh City of Literature to hit its fundraising goal just two months after launch.

All the above is not to gloss over the significant difficulties and real pain of the pandemic. But Scotland's books industry and literature sector has made it through the (hopefully) other side in rude health, which should be roundly applauded.



GROWING UP IN MANY DIFFERENT COUNTRIES HAS INFLECTED JOMA WEST'S WORK WITH A SENSE OF DISPLACEMENT

Joma West is a third-culture writer based in Glasgow whose work straddles both fantasy and science fiction. Her novella, *Wild*, won the 2016 MMU Novella Award, and was published by Sandstone Press.

Caroline Carpenter: Your debut novel, *Face*, is being published by science fiction and fantasy imprint Tordotcom in May. What is it about and what inspired it?

Joma West: *Face* is told from multiple perspectives, all dealing with living in a hyper-connected world where physical touch is taboo and the way others perceive you means everything. While the majority of the characters are high-society figures who are concerned with their social image, there is a story that cuts through the novel—Jake is a servant to one of the most important families in the city. His struggle with his emotions, identity, and his place in society acts as a kind of moral indictment on the rest of the characters.

The first nugget of inspiration came when a friend told me how oversexed they found media and that it was putting them off physical intimacy. It snowballed from there.

CC: You have a two-book deal. What is your second novel about?

JW: My second book, *Shift*, has a completed first

draft but there's a lot of work to do on it yet. It's about family and sacrifice and what you would do if your survival meant the death of someone else.

CC: Your work straddles the fantasy and science fiction genres. What is the speculative fiction scene in Scotland like?

JW: I think it's thriving. A lot of great SFF is coming out of the country and things like Cymera Festival and *Shoreline of Infinity* magazine are really helping put Scotland on the speculative fiction map.

I'm really excited to see T L Huchu's next Edinburgh Nights book and anything by Oliver K Langmead, as well as work from my agency stable mates Angie Spoto, Lyndsey Croal and Cailean Steed. I'm also looking forward to seeing what people like Heather Parry, Eris Young and Ely Percy do next... there are a lot of fantastic writers to keep an eye on.

CC: What are you working on next?

JW: An experimental novel called *The Waiting Room* (supported by Creative Scotland's Open Fund for Individuals). I really want to push myself in terms of mixing writing styles, forms and genres. This is giving me a lot of room to create characters who wouldn't normally share a space together. It's very meta and fantastical.



CHILDREN'S PUBLISHING

WORDS BY
CAROLINE CARPENTER

WINNING FORMULA

Scottish children's fiction has come into the spotlight over the past couple of years, thanks to a raft of award wins and exciting new voices.

Edinburgh-based Barrington Stoke became the first Scottish publisher to receive the CILIP Carnegie Medal in 2020 with Anthony McGowan's *Lark*. This year the company, which specialises in accessible books and is more than two decades old, will publish titles from high-profile authors including Ross Montgomery, Marcus Sedgwick and Anna James. Another long-established indie located in Edinburgh is Floris Books, founded in 1976. The largest children's publisher in Scotland, it publishes a wide range of books for all ages.

Newer Scottish kids publishers include Little Door Books and Cranachan Publishing, both founded in 2016. In the past two years, Oban-based Little Door has extended its publishing range from picture books into board books and chapter books. Based on the Isle of Lewis, Cranachan publishes children's and teen fiction with a Scottish flavour. Last year, it was Highly Commended in the British Book Awards' Small Press of the Year category.



MAISIE CHAN'S SECOND NOVEL IS OUT THIS JUNE



DEAN ATTA WON THE 2020 STONEWALL BOOK AWARD

Scotland has also produced several successful children's authors, including Costa Children's Book Award-winner Brian Conaghan who was born and raised in Coatbridge, North Lanarkshire. Since the release of her 2020 debut, Elle McNicoll has picked up several accolades, including the Blue Peter Book Award and the Waterstones Children's Book Prize. The latest title from McNicoll, *Like A Charm* (Knights Of), is a middle-grade story set in a magical version of Scotland's capital.



AUTHOR ELLE MCNICOLL IS WORKING TO IMPROVE NEURODIVERSE REPRESENTATION IN PUBLISHING

Award-winning author T L Huchu has also recently given his home city a fantastical twist in his first YA novel, *The Library of the Dead* (Pan Macmillan), the start of his dystopian Edinburgh Nights series.

Meanwhile, Dean Atta's 2019 debut YA, *The Black Flamingo* (Hodder Children's Books), won several prizes, including the American Library Association's Stonewall Book Award. His next YA novel in verse, *Only on the Weekends* (HCB, 12th May 2022), is a queer love story set in Scotland. Maisie Chan's work includes *Danny Chung Does Not Do Maths* (Piccadilly Press), currently longlisted for the Branford Boase Award, and facilitating the Bubble Tea Writers Network for UK-based writers of East and Southeast Asian descent.

With organisations and networks such as Scottish Book Trust, Glasgow Children's Writers Group and Children's Books North supporting children's creatives and publishing professionals in Scotland, it is no wonder Chan previously told *The Bookseller* that her move to the country was "one of the best things for my writing career".

Maisie Chan's *Danny Chung Does Not Do Maths* is a warm and witty read that aims to challenge cultural stereotypes. **Dean Atta's *The Black Flamingo*** follows a Black gay teen as he reclaims his identity.



GRAPHIC NOVELS

WORDS BY
TOM TIVNAN

SCOTTISH SPOTLIGHT BOLD MOVES

"Scotland has a really rich culture of comics and has always punched above its weight," says Nyla Ahmad (pictured). The Scottish Books Trust reading communities manager can speak better than most to the country's position in the graphic novel world. Comics form part of her remit in her day job which aims at raising the profile for literature but she has been enmeshed in the Scottish comics scene for over a decade, first at university when she worked at Glasgow's famed Plan B Books comics shop while doing a masters on South Asian representation in graphic novels. She later led a mentoring project at Scottish indie BHP Comics, was chair of the Scottish Independent Comic Book Alliance Awards for three years and currently is on the board of the Glasgow Zine Library and part of the Society of Authors' Comics Creators Network.

Scotland indeed is overrepresented by



THE LOSERS CLUB IS ONE OF FOUR TITLES IN THE BOLD UNIVERSE SERIES

heavyweight comics creators such as Mark Millar, Grant Morrison, Eddie Campbell and Metaphrog (art and life partners John Chalmers and Sandra Marrs). And there is a new generation such as creators John Lees, Maria Stoain and Jules Scheele, plus a vibrant indie publishing scene with the likes of author/illustrator Eve Greenwood's Quindrie Press and Blue Fox, run by husband-and-wife team Simon and Marielle Birks.

DO IT YOURSELF

No question, though, the pandemic has been difficult. Ahmad says: "Those in real life comic-cons and conventions have been missed for creators and indie publishers in particular as they are a place where you sell books direct. But, I have been impressed by the informal and formal networks that have sprung up—the SoA did an event with Creative Scotland for comics creators called In the Frame last year—but also how the creators have been proactive in doing DIY projects and Kickstarter campaigns."

The pandemic was a time for Glasgow-based BHP to "reset and go back to basics" says co-founder Sha Nazir. Part of that included what turns out will be its big project in 2022. Funding from Creative Scotland to run a mentorship scheme for nine young creators from previously underrepresented communities has resulted in Bold Universe, four different interconnected titles. Nazir says: "Strangely, this might not have come out if it weren't for the pandemic. But we were able to find these amazing, emerging writers and artists and come up with a shared superheroes universe from almost unquestionably the most diverse creative team in the UK. It's been fantastic."

ONES TO WATCH



Smithers & Wing Heather Palmer and Kirsty Hunter

The first in writer Palmer and illustrator Hunter's series, based in Edinburgh and centred around the titular wife and wife demon hunter team, launched last year after a successful Kickstarter campaign.



Tamlin Aven Wildsmith

Published by LGBTQ+ micro-press Knight Errant, Wildsmith's debut reimagines the traditional Scottish Borders ballad "Tam Lin" through "a queer and colourful lens".



Sexuality: A Graphic Guide Meg-John Barker and Jules Scheele

Glasgow-based artist Scheele is on a roll, last year releasing their third collaboration around sex and gender with Barker for Icon, plus illustrating "Drag Race UK" season two runner-up Bimini Bon Boulash's *Release the Beast* (Viking).

SOMETHING WICKED THIS WAY COMES

SPECULATIVE FICTION

WORDS BY
CAROLINE CARPENTER

Scottish publishing has long been known for its crime genre and nature writing, and it has also been nurturing a growing speculative fiction scene, which has risen to new heights recently with the emergence of new authors, publishers and events in this space.

Edinburgh's Luna Press Publishing was named Best Independent Press at the British Fantasy Awards 2021 last September. The list, which publishes across speculative fiction, science fiction, fantasy and dark fantasy in fiction and academia, is the brainchild of author Francesca T Barbini. Since launching it in 2015, Barbini has noticed "a growing number of opportunities for speculative authors in Scotland" such as Cymera: Scotland's Festival of Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror Writing, award-winning sci-fi magazine *Shoreline of Infinity* (SoI); and the University of Glasgow's Centre for Fantasy and the Fantastic, billed as the first research centre in the world to focus solely on fantasy. She adds: "The speculative genre has always been part of Scotland's literary history, but I feel as if now we are making a conscious, organised effort to really highlight just how good it is."

Cymera was devised in 2017 by festival enthusiast Ann Landmann and *SoI*'s editor, Noel Chidwick, to address the lack of genre authors at book festivals. Cymera now has charity status, with this year's event scheduled to take place in June in Edinburgh and online. In addition to its quarterly magazine, the SoI Group runs monthly sci-fi cabaret nights in Edinburgh and special events at festivals as well as producing audio content, novels, short story and poetry collections, and comics. Other Scottish platforms for speculative fiction include long-running independent horror review website Ginger Nuts of Horror, which promotes horror fiction, comics, films and other related products.



Panelists Alexandra Christo (left) and Lesley Glaister (right) discuss the mythical creatures and figures in their fantasy at Cymera Festival in June 2019



In 2018, Rebecca Wojturska founded Haunt Publishing to publish diverse and inclusive gothic, horror and dark fiction in all formats and role-playing game publisher Dungeons on a Dime was also launched. In early 2020, spoken word theatre company In The Works and audio production studio Tin Can Audio collaborated on *Folklore*, a loosely connected anthology of Glasgow-set queer audio horror stories. Later that year, Scottish BAME Writers Network launched *Metaphors for a Black Future* workshops with a focus on futurist thinking and practices. The network published the first *Metaphors for a Black Future* zine, edited by the workshops' curator Martha Adonai Williams, last spring.

Scotland is also home to many established and emerging speculative fiction authors. Mike Calder, owner of 25-year-old Edinburgh bookshop Transreal Fiction, which sells science fiction, fantasy and related books and merchandise, agrees with Landmann that speculative fiction "seems to be on an up in Scotland at the moment". He expands: "We've always had big names like (the late) Iain Banks and Alasdair Gray, alongside authors such as Ken MacLeod, Charles Stross, Hal Duncan, and Neil Williamson. But there are also newer authors like Laura Lam, Elizabeth May, Caroline Logan and K M McKinley."

SEVENTH HEAVEN

The first volume in Lam and May's feminist space opera duology, *Seven Devils* (published by Gollancz in 2020), was a *Sunday Times* bestseller and its follow-up, *Seven Mercies*, was released last month. The latest title from MacLeod, who is the award-winning author of 18 novels as well as novellas, short stories and poetry, is also a space opera. *Beyond the Hallowed Sky* (Orbit), the first installment in the Lightspeed trilogy, published in November 2021. Earlier that year, Polygon Books published the neo-gothic novel *Bittherhall* by prize-winning Scottish author Helen McClory.

Up-and-coming speculative fiction authors

include Anna Cheung, a gothic-horror poet based in Glasgow, whose debut collection, *Where Decay Sleeps* (Haunt Publishing), was published in October 2021. In the same month, Birlinn brought out *Blood and Gold*, the debut novel from award-winning narrative artist Mara Menzies, who draws on her Kenyan/Scottish cultural heritage to explore contemporary issues through legend, myth and fantasy. In addition, Rachele Atalla's debut speculative fiction novel *The Pharmacist* (Hodder) is due out in May.

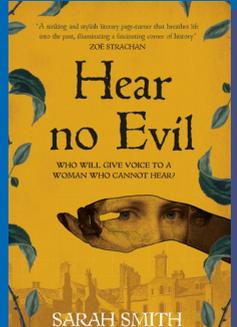
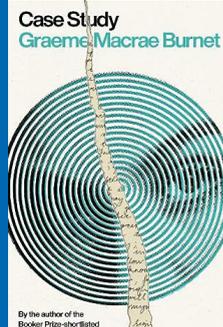
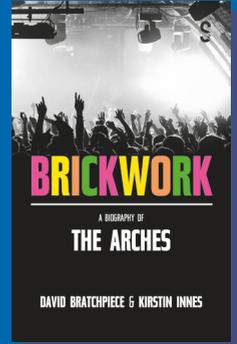
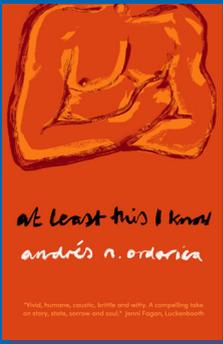
Luna Press has just released novella, *The Queen of the High Fields* by Rhiannon A Grist, a Welsh writer living in Edinburgh, which is pitched as a "folk dark fantasy". Luna Press will also publish Lorraine Wilson's second novel, *The Way The Light Bends*, described as a story of dark fantasy and folklore set in Scotland, this August. Another exciting new speculative fiction voice is Hannah Kaner, a Northumbrian writer who works in Edinburgh. Her debut fantasy novel, *Godkiller*, was pre-empted in 2021 by HarperVoyager and will hit bookshelves in March 2023.

Considering what makes Scottish speculative fiction stand out, Landmann concludes it is "chiefly its liveliness and inventiveness". She cites Leith resident Harry Josephine Giles' science fiction verse novel written in the Orkney dialect, *Deep Wheel Orcadia* (Picador), as an example of this and adds: "I've noticed that more and more books are set in a supernatural or dystopian Scotland, such as T L Huchu's *The Library of the Dead*, C F Barrington's *The WolfMile* and the forthcoming *Ordinary Monsters* by J M Miro."

With so much compelling writing coming out of Scotland, as well as a range of platforms where it can be celebrated, it looks like the country's speculative fiction will only continue to flourish.

Transreal Fiction on Candlemaker Row is Edinburgh's only bookseller specialising in science fiction and fantasy





BOOKS FROM SCOTLAND 2022 HIGHLIGHTS

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