The RSL elects
40 new Fellows under the age of 40

On 27 June 2018 the RSL is introducing
40 new Fellows under the age of 40

Bola Agbaje, Jenn Ashworth, Laura Bates, Jay Bernard,
Emily Berry, Hannah Berry, Lucy Caldwell, Sophie Collins,
Inua Ellams, Lara Feigel, Edmund Gordon, James Graham,
Rosalind Harvey, Daisy Hay, Rachel Hewitt, Ella Hickson,
Sarah Howe, Robert Icke, Lucy Kirkwood, Sabrina Mahfouz,
Kei Miller, Nadifa Mohamed, Helen Mort, Barney Norris,
Irenosen Okojie, Chibundu Onuzo, Vinay Patel, Sarah Perry,
Lucy Prebble, Ross Raisin, Gwendoline Riley, Amy Sackville,
Sunjeev Sahota, Warsan Shire, Deborah Smith, Polly Stenham,
Sara Taylor, Adam Thirlwell, Eley Williams, Evie Wyld.

The RSL will be hosting the announcement evening at
The British Library, 96 Euston Road, London NW1 2DB at 6.30pm.

Press should contact Annette Brook, Communications Manager:
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The RSL celebrates not only the United Kingdom’s diverse literary heritage but also the best in contemporary English language writing in Britain. The 40 Under 40 initiative honours the achievements of Britain’s younger writers, and introduces a new generation of writers to the Society’s existing Fellowship of over 500.

In Autumn 2017, a specially convened panel of RSL Fellows considered recommendations and writing samples submitted by literary agents, publishers, arts organisations, writer development agencies, theatres, and writers. After the panel made a group nomination to the RSL Council and Vice-Presidents, the forty new Fellows were elected.

Our nominating panel was: Tahmima Anam, Lisa Appignanesi, Helen Edmundson, Bernardine Evaristo, Lavinia Greenlaw, Alexandra Harris, David Hare, Blake Morrison, Daljit Nagra, Ali Smith and Sarah Waters. The panel was chaired by Kamila Shamsie.

The RSL is delighted by the diversity of writers* elected and the diversity of literary forms their writing represents. The 40 Under 40 Fellows are:

- 73% female  
- 30% BAME**
- 25% theatre writers (2.8% RSL Fellowship before 40 Under 40)
- 22.5% poets (12% RSL Fellowship before 40 Under 40)
- 5% translators (0.6% RSL Fellowship before 40 Under 40)

*These statistics were generated from publicly available data  
** Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic

The 40 Under 40 announcement was attended by HRH The Duchess of Cornwall. The Society is honoured and thrilled that this will be The Duchess's first public appearance as the Society's new Patron.

Further quotes from Panel, Council and new Fellows available on request.

The RSL President and one of our Vice-Presidents say:

‘We want the pulse of the RSL to keep time with the efflorescing, irrepressible, bold expressiveness of what writers are writing now, and we share a passionate commitment to what literature can do. Some of the writers will be using T S Eliot’s pen when they sign the Roll book. In one of his poems, Eliot asked, “What place is this, what land, what quarter of the globe?” Literature in the UK, in all its exciting diversity of method, material, and voice, can take us some way to an answer. I salute the RSL Council’s decision to elect these writers Fellows, and I certainly am proud and happy to introduce them here today.’

Marina Warner, President

‘The RSL’s unique in standing up for literature in English – but literature isn’t just the past, it’s a living tradition that needs continual refreshment by new writers writing in new ways, and by new readers. That’s why it’s so exciting to be welcoming 40 new Fellows under 40 today. Getting my Fellowship meant a lot to me, and I hope it will to them, too.’

Maggie Gee, Vice-President
The RSL Council says:
‘In search of excellence and having taken recommendations from the literature world, our multi-faceted and brilliant selection panel of Fellows has come up with a striking array of exceptional talent. Here are a cohort of young writers from a wide variety of backgrounds. They bestride a variety of literary forms and their work stretches the limits of convention. We know these young writers will invigorate the Society’s ranks as it approaches its 200th birthday. We also know they will infuse society as a whole with their flair and brio, their literary artistry and the passion of their ideas.’ Lisa Appignanesi, Chair

‘The RSL is progressive and forward-looking, and the 40 Under 40 initiative truly honours the diversity of writers working in Britain today, and redresses the imbalances of yesteryear. I’m particularly excited that we selected so many women and BAME writers on the basis of their outstanding talent; writers whose voices will not only invigorate the RSL but who represent the fantastic new energies in literature today.’ Bernadine Evaristo, Vice-Chair

The 40 Under 40 panel says:
‘The most gratifying part of the 40 Under 40 selection process for the whole judging panel was the number of truly excellent writers to whom we were introduced. We were each also pleased to be able to champion writers who we already rated highly. Our primary concern was literary merit – though we were also conscious of needing a variety of forms represented among the new Fellows. As it turned out, we didn’t have to worry very much about diversity of form – or any other kind of questions of representation – because the conversations around merit led us quite naturally to choose a wide variety of writers. All you need to do is put everyone in a room together and allow their work to speak for itself. It’s a matter of great pleasure – and rightness – that the RSL has brought into its Fellowship such a stellar group of writers.’ Kamila Shamsie, Chair of panel

‘There is a marked renaissance in British theatre writing, coming from the young, from women and from a diversity of backgrounds. The Royal Society of Literature is right to recognise both the vitality of the medium, and its new character.’ David Hare

‘There’s a wealth of young literary talent in Britain and I enjoyed being part of a process to identify and honour some of our key writers under 40. For much of its history the RSL has been overwhelmingly white, male, metropolitan and middle-class. But literary culture is changing rapidly and our choices reflect that. It was also good to be able to highlight the wide range of forms in which young writers are now working.’ Blake Morrison

‘This is a golden age for the diversity of voices in British poetry. Never before have we heard such an eclectic range of sounds on our isles, and there has never been a more urgent time for the RSL to shine a light on the exciting young poets who are bringing fresh subjects into technically dazzling verse.’ Daljit Nagra

‘40 Under 40 is a list full of life, a revivifier for any reader anywhere near this vitally representative revelation of what’s happening in writing right now in the UK, a curtain-raiser for the next decades of the RSL, and a chance to celebrate the place where generation and regeneration come together to make a vision of thought, form and practice that’s truly contemporary.’ Ali Smith

‘I’ve always felt extremely proud of being a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature; the 40 Under 40 project makes me feel even prouder, because it renders the Fellowship so much more reflective of the fantastic diversity of writers to be found in the UK today. It has been a pleasure and a privilege to play a part in their celebration.’ Sarah Waters
The 40 Under 40 Fellows say:

‘Writing can be a very lonely endeavour and there is nothing more encouraging and uplifting than the support of your peers. It is a huge honour to become a Fellow of the RSL, because it means joining the ranks of many of my personal heroes. And at a time when libraries and literacy are under threat, I’m thrilled to become a part of an organisation that promotes the joy and the accessibility of literature.’ Laura Bates

‘It is good to be part of a very long tradition of writers, and to be invited at such an early stage. It’s a good opportunity to grow.’ Jay Bernard

‘When I left primary school in 1992, I was presented with a copy of The Mill on the Floss by teachers who were convinced I’d be a writer. I don’t know if any of us would have imagined that one day I’d be writing my name alongside famous writers with George Eliot’s own pen. It is a great honour to be elected to the RSL as one of the 40 Under 40 Fellows; an honour which belongs too to the teachers, libraries and house full of books which encouraged me at such an early age and set me on my way.’ Lucy Caldwell

‘It is a privilege to join such an august institution, and to sign my name in a Roll Book containing the names of so many of my own literary heroines and heroes. I am especially proud to be joining the RSL as it diversifies its Fellowship, and to be part of such an exciting new generation of Fellows.’ Daisy Hay

‘Being elected as a Fellow is without doubt the greatest honour of my writing career so far. I feel privileged to be in such inspiring company.’ Helen Mort

‘Being elected as a Fellow alongside some of my lifelong favourite writers, who inspired so many of my personal and professional adventures and ambitions, is ironically beyond words. An incredible honour that I will treasure forever and use to support others who wish to write.’ Sabrina Mahfouz

‘To be recognised as a part of this body of artists, the voices who will chronicle our age and will be remembered one day as the people who told our stories, is a moving and humbling validation of the work I have been doing over the past decade.’ Barney Norris

‘I’m thrilled to be selected as a Fellow for this important initiative. It’s a wonderful acknowledgment of all the hard work and a real boost to be recognised by some of the country’s most eminent authors.’ Irenosen Okojie

‘Finding out that I was being made a Fellow of the RSL was both completely unexpected and a real thrill. I hope I can use this position to help others feel like this country’s literary heritage is theirs to own, indulge in and play with.’ Vinay Patel

‘So many days spent writing – inventing, deleting, revising, deleting – are exercises in pure fruitlessness. Being made a Fellow of the RSL is a beautiful act of faith from other writers, and makes it easier to believe that all the private fidgeting and frustration will be somehow transformed into something permanent.’ Adam Thirlwell

‘There is something so encouraging about being made a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. It’s the feeling of warmth and support from other writers that feels so special.’ Evie Wyld
NOTES TO EDITORS

The Royal Society of Literature
Founded in 1820, the RSL is Britain’s national charity for the advancement of literature. We act as a voice for the value of literature, engage people in appreciating literature and encourage and honour great writers.

At the RSL’s founding, the Society worked “to excite literary talent and reward literary merit”. Nearly 200 years on, we still aim to meet these ideals, through a growing array of activities (events, awards, our magazine and website, and outreach to schools), as well as through our Fellowship of distinguished writers. We hope that our 40 Under 40 writers, together with all our Fellowship, Fellows long-established and recently elected, will shape the Society’s work as it approaches its bicentenary in 2020.

New Royal Patron
We are delighted that from June 2018 HRH The Duchess of Cornwall will be the RSL’s new Patron. Announcement was made on the morning of Wednesday 27 June. For more information please see announcement press release or contact Annette Brook, annette@rsliterature.org.

Fellowship
Fellowship is at the heart of the RSL; it is a unique honour conferred by writers to writers. The RSL has in 2018 introduced 71 new Fellows, more than four times its usual annual intake. For more on the 31 Fellows introduced on 4 June 2018 please see press release or contact Annette Brook, annette@rsliterature.org.

Council and Fellowship election
The governing Council of the RSL oversees all the Society’s work, and is responsible for electing new Fellows. In the RSL’s usual election procedure, nominations for new Fellows are made by two current Fellows or Honorary Fellows. Nominations are considered by the RSL Vice-Presidents, President and Presidents Emeriti, as well as Council. New Fellows are elected by secret ballot once a year, in November. Unsuccessful nominations remain for consideration at two subsequent elections, before lapsing after the third year of nomination. These writers may be nominated for Fellowship again, and these nominations are entered into the same election procedure.

George Eliot’s pen
New Fellows sign the RSL Roll Book using T. S. Eliot’s fountain pen, Byron’s pen or – new for 2018 – George Eliot’s pen. This year is the first time in the RSL’s history that we have a pen that belonged to a woman writer for our Fellows’ signing in. We are grateful to Jonathan Ouvry – President of the George Eliot Fellowship – and his wife Marjorie Ouvry for loaning this pen to the Society.

The RSL is grateful to the British Library for hosting and supporting the 40 Under 40 announcement event. The British Library is one of the greatest libraries in the world. The scope of its remit, the scale of its operations and the range of its services are without equal. Its collection, which consists of over 150 million items, includes manuscripts, maps, newspapers, magazines, prints and drawings, music scores and patents.