

'If you don't understand, ask questions. If you're uncomfortable about asking questions, say you are uncomfortable about asking questions and then ask anyway. It's easy to tell when a question is coming from a good place. Then listen some more. Sometimes people just want to feel heard. Here's to possibilities of friendship and connection and understanding.'

**From *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie**

**Jemma Guerrier Managing Director, Katie Clarke Director of Literature and Anita Marsland Chair Co-Statement: The Reader's Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Commitment - updated in September 2023**

The Reader believes that everyone should have the opportunity to experience the power of literature to survive and live well. From our twenty-year history, we know that the power of Shared Reading can help build connection between people from diverse backgrounds and grow our ability to think in different ways and better understand different experiences and perspectives.

Whilst inclusion is integral to our work, we know that we can do more to make our belief that Shared Reading can be for everyone a reality.

Over the last 3 years, The Reader's conscious commitment to diversity and inclusion has grown. In particular, we want to help ensure that racism is eliminated from the world and we feel we have a small but vital part to play in that change.

Our Equity, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) work, including our commitment to addressing racism and racial diversity, covers all aspects of our organisation's work, focuses on how we ensure that:

- Our ways of working treat people fairly and enable everyone to participate.
- We can be more representative of our communities – considering our Board, staff, volunteers and participants in our work.
- Everyone coming to the Reader feels that they 'belong'.
- Great literature from writers with diverse backgrounds and experiences is enjoyed across our settings and programming

In particular, over the next 3 years, we aim to increase the representation of black, Asian and ethnic minority communities in our staff team, volunteers and participants in our work by 50%

We recognise that creating meaningful and lasting change is ongoing and complex work, which requires us to have conversations that feel difficult for many of us and to raise questions that we might not yet know the answers to. But this will not deter us from our commitment to building a diverse and inclusive Shared Reading movement, and ensuring that all our employees, volunteers and participants feel welcome and safe, and are treated with fairness and respect regardless of race, age, sex or gender, disability, sexual orientation, social class, religion and belief.

We have embedded Equity, Diversity and Inclusion in our next 3 year business plan across all aspects of our delivery, reach and how The Reader is run. Accountability for EDI is through our responsible Director (Geetha Rabindrakumar, Director of Partnerships, Communities and Impact) with regular reporting to our Board of Trustees, and targets set to increase the racial diversity of our staff, volunteers and participants.

## Our progress in 2022/23 towards achieving these goals is outlined below:

- We saw an increase in the proportion of job applicants and volunteers recruited from ethnic minority backgrounds. Based on our annual staff and volunteer survey in March 2023, 8% of our current staff and 19% of new volunteers who joined us in 2022/23 were from a Black, Asian or ethnic minority background.
- Four staff equalities networks (for people who identify as LGBTQIA+, for people from minority backgrounds, for those who identify as or support someone who is neurodiverse, and focused on gender) ran for a pilot period of 6 months and continue to offer a valued space for colleagues. Following recommendations from the neurodiversity staff network, neurodiversity training was provided for managers by our partner The Brain Charity.
- We continued to focus on diversity in the literature we read and produced anthologies and support sessions to promote use of diverse texts by our Reader Leaders who run Shared Reading groups. The 2022/23 Light and Darkness Bookshelf included *Red Dust Road* by Jackie Kay, *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* by Alice Walker.
- We worked with Hannah Chukwu, editor of Penguin's Black Britain: Writing Back, who curated a programme strand at Gravity Festival, hosting readings and conversations with black British writers. Reading and talking with these writers opened up new and wide-ranging conversations about mental health, race, class, the criminal justice system, identity, displacement and more, and inspired Gravity audiences to read more literature by writers of colour.
- We explored the history of our home, the Mansion House at Calderstones Park, through our "Diverse Connections" project funded by National Heritage Lottery Fund, researching the history and connections of the past owners to the trans-Atlantic slave trade. This research was carried out by volunteer community curators, with the support of Laurence Westgaph, a historian and specialist in black British History. Whilst this research didn't find any direct connections to the slave trade, it illustrates the complex and nuanced family history as well as wider context of the times.
- We continued our organisation-wide Shared Reading project <https://www.thereader.org.uk/shared-reading-against-racism-how-can-we-use-shared-reading-to-open-up-a-conversation-on-racism/> ("Just Us"), focused on reading literature by black writers to help facilitate meaningful conversations and change around race and racism. We shared this work and ran several "Shared Reading against Racism" sessions during the Liverpool Against Racism festival in April 2022. As one participant reflected afterwards "*literature and reading can open doors and change perspectives*".
- Ultimately, our goal is that communities that may be marginalised and are more likely to experience health inequalities are able to benefit from the power of Shared Reading. Groups set up in partnership with Borderlands in Bristol and Our Liverpool, working with asylum seekers and refugees, the Croydon BME Forum in London, Keyring in Doncaster (supporting people with learning disabilities) and Bradbury Fields in

Liverpool (supporting blind and partially sighted people) all demonstrate that Shared Reading really is for everyone.

**Looking forward, in 2023/24 our key priorities are:**

- Develop a core EDI training offer for all staff and continue to create internal space for reflection, learning, support and challenge around EDI through our staff equalities networks, staff Diversity Advocates Group, and embedding Shared Reading of literature by writers who are people of colour into all our staff Think Days and in teams.
- Continue to attract more people from black, Asian and ethnic minority backgrounds to work at The Reader, and to consider how we can make this work more focused on reach communities where we have no representation. Implementing improvements around our recruitment communications and building more diverse recruitment networks will support this aim, as well as testing different ways to receive applications for jobs, including through video.
- To articulate principles for Shared Reading practice in relation to issues around race and racism (and related EDI issues) that can arise in literature and in group discussions to ensure that our Shared Reading groups are welcoming, inclusive and impactful for people from all communities and backgrounds, and to start to implement this in our training for Reader Leaders.
- Following the research carried out in 22/23 to explore the history of the Mansion House, we are working with an artist to produce an exhibit to illustrate the research on site, which will be launched later this year.
- Working with partners and volunteers with diverse backgrounds and experiences to learn and improve our approach to inclusion in Shared Reading services, and increasing our reach to communities that experience health inequalities is ongoing. This year, we will have a continued focus on supporting Reader Leaders who run Shared Reading groups for people for whom English is an other language, and are exploring how we can make our work more accessible for people with visual impairments.

If you have any comments, questions or suggestions for this work, please contact Geetha Rabindrakumar, Director of Partnerships, Communities and Impact on [geetharabindrakumar@thereader.org.uk](mailto:geetharabindrakumar@thereader.org.uk)