



Iridescent Adolescent

Diverse Literary Short Stories



Edited by Andrew McCallum

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INTRODUCTION FOR TEACHERS

The stories in this anthology have been selected based on what they have to offer young readers moving from YA fiction to more adult literary material. In keeping with previous English and Media Centre anthologies, the stories come from all over the world and are written by writers from a range of different backgrounds and ethnicities. What all the stories have in common, we believe, is that they have the potential to engage, enthuse and inspire.

The stories have been selected for use in English classrooms, though we also think that this anthology would sit comfortably on the shelves of your school library, with lots to offer to the casual reader.

When selecting stories for your own classroom use, we would urge you to read them carefully in advance of teaching. Several contain material that requires careful forethought about how to approach it; on occasion, you might consider that a given story is not suitable for one of your classes. In particular, we'd like to draw your attention in advance to some of the content in the following stories:

- 'Tomorrow is Too Far' – mild sexual references; child death
- 'The Typewriter' – one instance of swearing; family bereavement
- 'Playing Metal Gear Solid V' – descriptions of wartime violence and post-war trauma; two instances of swearing
- 'Doing That' – mild sexual references
- 'Amir and George' – traumatic refugee journey, including loss of life; one instance of mild swearing
- 'An Account of the Decline of the Great Auk' – violent slaughter of animals
- 'Great Pucklands' – child death

Teaching materials to accompany these stories will be available at the English and Media Centre's website, www.englishandmedia.co.uk from 2021. This will include suggested routes through the stories, though we would always encourage you to find the best combination of stories for your students.

INTRODUCTION FOR PUPILS

Welcome to another anthology of diverse and literary short stories from the English and Media Centre.

The stories in *Iridescent Adolescent* have been selected to show you the riches contained in writing that comes both from the United Kingdom and from much further afield. By entering into these stories, you can travel from the Northumberland coast to a Caribbean island, from a future planet Earth to a back garden in Nigeria, and from a remote Scottish outpost to war-torn Afghanistan. With the range of settings comes a range of styles and genres. There are examples of horror, suspense, magical realism, science fiction and more.

The diverse range of stories is important and deliberate. One of the writers in this collection, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, presented a 'TED Talk' called 'The dangers of a single story'. She argues that when stories are told only by one group of people, or represent another group of people in a limited, stereotypical way, then this is incredibly harmful to human dignity. In her case she was talking about growing up in Nigeria and not finding anyone who looked like her in the books she read. She explains that when stories are told by all kinds of people, representing people in all kinds of ways, then human dignity can be restored. This collection is offered as a small gesture towards such a restoration of human dignity.

First and foremost, we want you to enjoy the stories by experiencing the worlds they create. Beyond that, we want you to interrogate them in ways that help you see how stories work: how they grab and hold your attention, how they push your thinking in particular directions and how they adapt and manipulate the conventions of storytelling itself. Work like this, we believe, lies at the heart of the English curriculum. As a subject, English should help you to explore and think about how, as humans, we express ourselves in the very medium that makes us human in the first place – language.

We also have the ambitious hope that reading some or all of the stories will transform your experience of the world, at least in some small way. Another writer in the collection, George Saunders, would believe that to be possible. 'When you read a short story,' he says, 'you come out a little more aware and a little more in love with the world around you.' Here's to more awareness; here's to more love!

FOREWORD

PHOEBE ROY

Writers are often asked about why they write, and what stories mean and have meant to them. They have a regrettable tendency to answer that stories provide a means of escape, or allow them to imagine themselves in other worlds and times, or, even more heartbreakingly, that stories are their friends. This kind of talk has always woken my slumbering inner bully, since I believe that it shouldn't be beyond us even now to hope for a world where life is rich and joyful enough without wishing yourself into the pages of a book. Reading need not be about escape or identifying too strongly with what you've read, but should be stripped back to its barest essentials, which is that it is one of life's simplest and free pleasures. I wish that this had been the approach taken to reading short stories when I was at school, rather than the obsessive focus on mark schemes, exams and what the different elements of the story might represent to different readers, as opposed to the deceptively simple question of whether or not we liked them. The moral of this is never to ask a writer anything, and if you must, to disregard the answer.

Short stories are by their nature perfect, gem-like and self-contained examples of whatever the author intended them to be – the form means there's no room for wandering plots or extra characters, or page after page of description, but instead gives greater room for experimentation. If you want to write them, you should also read them, and writing them is the best possible way of getting the most out of reading them. No-one need ever see them if you don't want – the first I ever wrote was about a child who gets trapped inside a giant crystal inhabited by priests and priestesses wearing robes in the different colours of the rainbow, which I

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wrote in a school exercise book when I was seven. I believe the story ended with the child being obliged to officiate at an execution, but the exact contents will go with me to my grave. Since then, I have written hundreds, from fairy tales to ghost stories, from stories about mob money laundering operations to the love story that won me my first literary award, all in different styles and for different audiences. Most are only for me and not for the public at all – some I have written as gifts for people, which no-one enjoys because they rightly prefer proper presents, some as experiments which haven't completely worked, some as ideas for novels which don't have enough to them but come to life when I've imposed limits of space and scope on them. Of all of these, the one of which I am most proud is 'Iridescent Adolescent', which is the story that features in this anthology. It is my only published work for young adults, and the only one about a girl who is, like myself, from a biracial Indian and Jewish family. It is not about me, or my own family, but it felt the most tender and personal to write, as well as the most important. It was originally part of a collection of YA writing by black and ethnic minority writers, after it had been noticed by the publisher that writing for children and teenagers tends to be by white authors; the theme of the collection was 'change', which my co-authors made inventive and unusual interpretations of. I, by contrast, like a hyper-literal child, wrote about a girl whose thirteenth birthday awakens an inherited tendency of the women in her family to turn into giant mythical sea birds. The aim for that collection was to be diverse, and that is the aim here too, whether in terms of the author or characters' race, religion or class or the form, shape or language of the story itself. Amongst them, Barbara Jenkins' 'Something from Nothing' is written in vernacular, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's 'Tomorrow is too Far' is a memoir-style piece on grief and childhood summers spent in Nigeria, Caroline Hadilaksono's 'The Last Woman on Earth' is a graphic novel, or to be more precise a graphic short story. We have a numbered account of a dying planet in the manner of a verse from a religious text from Margaret Atwood, and a gender-

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flipped water nymph from Rebecca Boroson. In ‘Playing Metal Gear Solid V: Phantom Pain’, Afghan author Jamil Jan Kochai explores what it might be like if you were able to wander off the prescribed course in a video game; George Saunders’ ‘Sticks’, about a man’s memory of an eccentricity of his father’s is only two paragraphs long. Diversity and plurality in fiction is not meant to invite the reader to try on other people’s coats, but to offer a greater number of perspectives and visions of what it means to be alive; it is to observe people discovering their own coats in long-forgotten cupboards and wearing them for us. The purpose of this anthology, in its diversity of style and content, is to remind its reader that to read widely, outside of the strictures and demands of exams and mark schemes, is an enriching and joyful endeavour on its own. I am honoured to be a part of it.

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PHOEBE ROY



After working for a short time in academic publishing, **Phoebe Roy** decided to focus on writing. 'Iridescent Adolescent' was selected for inclusion in *A Change is Gonna Come*, an anthology of stories for young adults that gives creative space to those who have historically had their thoughts, ideas and experiences oppressed.

When the first feather came, two months after her thirteenth birthday, Nathalie plucked it out and laid it in the treasure box she kept on the big dresser in her bedroom. The box was made of silky dark wood and, apart from the feather, it contained four things. She had a little velvet bag with her baby teeth inside, that she had kept because she used to think she might be able to do a spell with them, and she had one photograph from her parents' wedding, that had 'Mazel Tov, Carmel and Arnab' written across the bottom in pink cursive letters. She also had the note Josh Franklin had written wishing her a happy birthday and finally she had the necklace, a gift from her great-aunt, Auntie Apphia in America. The feather was only about five centimetres long and in dim light its vanes looked brown, but when the sun bounced off it, it shone bronze.

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The necklace from her great aunt wasn't really the sort of thing she'd buy for herself – it was gold and filigreed with a gem at the centre. If you looked closely, you could see that what appeared to be a pattern of twisted twigs clawed around the gem was actually a tangle of clasped skeletal hands and wings. It made her feel peculiar when she looked at it, and the stone winked and warmed in her hand as she cupped it there. When Carmel saw it, she had raised her eyebrows and opened her mouth as if she were about to speak, but then shook her head and said nothing.

The feather lay next to the note from Josh Franklin, sparkling slightly as if it knew something. At first the tiny dent it had left just below her collarbone had bled, but it soon healed.

•

After the first feathers appeared, Nathalie began to wake early and ravenous, and would creep downstairs to get something to eat. Once her mother caught her, cramming entire sheets of smoked salmon into her mouth while clutching a box of ladoos under one arm.

She caught the air-bathed smell of her skin whenever she moved, freshly mineral and greenly salty, as if she'd been out all night running through the trees. Her curls streamed down her back and there were new feathers every day. Now she only plucked out the ones that could be seen. When she got out of the bath she turned to face away from the mirror and twisted to see the line of bronze marching down her spine. They lay flat and almost invisible during the day, apart from when something angered her, at which she could feel the feathers standing up. At night, though, they unfurled and rippled when she sat cross-legged and solemn in front of her bedroom mirror. She thought about the sea all the time, and took the note from Josh out of her treasure box and slept with it rolled up tightly and clutched in her palm.

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The hunger was new, because Nathalie used to have to be coaxed to eat. When she was seven her parents had become so worried by it that they spent long hours trying to come up with a way to persuade her to try different food. Carmel shared her concern with her mother, who suggested that they start sending Nathalie to shul on festivals, where there would be lots of different foods for her to try, away from the watchful and anxious eyes of her parents.

‘It’s time she started taking an interest in her heritage anyway,’ said Arnab.

Carmel then suggested that it would be nice for Nathalie to go to the temple with her cousins on her father’s side. She was given delicious things – spiced potatoes and pastries, balls of dough covered in sugar, miniature squares of matzo with a smear of cream cheese and little flutes of salmon – and she would light candles and sing songs with her cousins and aunties and uncles. She thought about how lucky she was to be such a pretty shade of gold; belonging with all of them but different enough that she seemed her own invention. Still she barely ate. She felt oppressed by how solid her bones seemed and kept a collection of fairy pictures, which she looked at every evening under her duvet with a torch. She longed for hollowness.

The same year, her mother asked her how she would like to go and stay with her Auntie Apphia in California for the summer. She knew Apphia was an artist and lived in a house on stilts at the edge of a forest of coastal redwoods. She knew the stream that flowed outside was clean enough to drink from, and that you could see deer and mountain lions out of the wrap-around glass windows. She nodded her head eagerly and looked forward to her adventure. Her father took her shopping to buy her her own special suitcase and a pink leather wallet to put her passport in.

She brandished both these items proudly at the flight attendant, who seated her next to a friendly woman. She thought she would

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be afraid of the plane but she soon found her strongest feeling was boredom, so she got out of her seat and began to lope up and down the aisles, sending moody looks in either direction. She felt someone gently touch her arm and she looked down at the hand first, then up at its owner. It was a kind-looking man who asked where her mother and father were. She raised her eyes to his and his smile died. He gulped and looked away; she felt a strange heat behind her eyeballs, as if they were burning. She continued her prowling.

•

At first, staying at Auntie Apphia's felt strange – there were no set mealtimes or bedtimes, not like at home. Her great-aunt seemed to have countless friends and colleagues who appeared some time in the morning and stayed late into the night. They talked about politics and art and history, but they also talked about what they'd been watching on TV and had friendly rows about which of them would be the most use after an apocalypse. Some of these people were over eighty years old, which to Nathalie may as well have been a thousand; they had all survived apocalypses. They came and went in shifts and their voices filled the house. They pinched Nathalie's cheeks and called her a shaina maideleh; one man asked loudly if this was the schvartze's child. There was a silence, then Apphia ordered him out, explaining afterwards that he had not been invited.

The sea lived in the house's corners and in Apphia's paintings. The canvas she was working on covered the whole of one wall in the studio and showed a cliff in cross-section, so detailed that it made Nathalie's eyes hurt to look at it too closely. In the morning, when her great-aunt came to wake her, she would bring with her a thick salt air, and Nathalie could see damp prints on the stairs. They weren't shaped like human feet but Nathalie couldn't tell exactly what they were.

When she left, her great-aunt hugged her tightly, dropped one kiss on her forehead and gave her a tiny turquoise egg flecked

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with little gold splashes. Nathalie asked if her aunt had painted it because she had never seen such depth and purity of colour in nature. Apphia hesitated before saying that she had.

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Years after the summer in California, Arnab suggested it would be nice to go on a trip to the seaside for Nathalie's twelfth birthday, which was in March and that year fell on a Saturday. They decided on Brighton because it was the closest to home and because there were cousins they could visit on the way back. As soon as they came within sight of the coast, Nathalie felt like jumping out of the car and tearing down to the beach. She kept herself still by wrapping both arms round her ribcage and tried not to picture herself running into the waves, the foam hissing round her ankles. Carmel didn't say much that day but she kept glancing at the water, leaving Arnab to keep up the conversation.

'Do you fancy a dip, beti?' he asked when they were installed in a cafe full of wrought-iron furniture painted white and with a single rose in a slim glass vase on each table. Nathalie looked up with an eager expression, but then caught the twinkle in his eye and realised he had been teasing. But her mother spoke up.

'I'd like a dip, jaan,' she said.

Nathalie's father laughed and said that both his girls were tougher than him. Then he bet Carmel that she wouldn't have the nerve, calling her *bubbeleh*, as he always did. Carmel shook her husband's hand and laughed, because she was like her own father and never turned down a bet. Arnab and Nathalie joined in the laughter, but then Nathalie saw an air of expectancy settle over her mother. As soon as the bill came, she leaped to her feet.

'Come on, beti-leh,' she said. Taking Nathalie's hand, she began to hurry down to the beach.

They tore off their shoes and socks and ran towards the water, squealing when the chill pebbles touched their toes. Arnab got out

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his camera and took shot after shot of Nathalie and Carmel, hand in hand and ankle-deep in the surf, the waves clinging to their skin like little white lace-frilled socks. In profile, Carmel looked fierce; it was only when she faced you that she appeared softer and prettier. Nathalie had inherited her mother's sharp jawline and Arnab's Roman nose, but her dark red curls were a mystery to them both. A breeze whipped up their hair, and anyone watching closely would have seen the neat necklace of little red dots on the nape of her mother's neck, and the tiny turquoise point piercing through the skin under her right ear, just for a moment, before she lifted a hand and smoothed her hair back down.

•

Six months after Nathalie's thirteenth birthday, a phone rang in a glass house on stilts at the foot of a forest in California, interrupting Apphia's morning painting. Normally she would leave it to ring, because she liked to make the most of the dawn light, but whoever it was kept hanging up and redialling. In the end, she balanced her brush on the edge of a jar of murky green water and went to answer it.

'You said it wouldn't happen to her,' said Carmel, not bothering with a greeting. 'You knew! You knew it would, when you promised it wouldn't.'

'No,' said Apphia, carefully. 'I didn't promise, I said we had no way of knowing until she was older.'

'Then why did you send her the necklace?' Carmel asked.

Apphia could picture Carmel breathing out of her nostrils as she always did when annoyed, like a bull.

'It's just a necklace,' said Apphia gently.

Carmel was silent for a moment or two, then said, 'Her feathers are a different colour to ours.'

'Are they? What colour?'

'They're a sort of... bronze.'

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Apphia was silent for a moment. Then she said, ‘How fascinating. Did you know, for Homer blue and bronze were interchangeable? *The Iliad* is full of references to the bronze sky, so I wonder if –’

‘If I destroyed the necklace, do you think it would reverse the process?’

‘Oh darling, now why would you want to do a thing like that? She is part of a wonderful tradition, she has sisters all over the world...’

Carmel swallowed the lump that had appeared in her throat. ‘I don’t want her to be different,’ she admitted.

‘Caramel,’ said her aunt gently, using her childhood nickname, ‘she’s already different.’

•

From time to time, Nathalie would take the necklace out of her treasure box and put it on. The gem changed colour in different lights and Nathalie was surprised to find that of the few people she trusted enough to show it to, her mother saw it as blue, she saw it as bronze, and her best friend Chloe and her father both thought it was entirely clear, like a piece of quartz. Her great-aunt sent her a parcel, as she often did, and when Nathalie opened it, a peacock feather and a pastel sketch of a peacock fell out.

‘My darling Natty,’ it read. ‘Please find enclosed some little curiosities for your treasure box. I know some people think peacock feathers are unlucky but they’re so beautiful that I’m prepared to risk it. I do hope you feel the same. They’re fascinating creatures, peacocks, and the quality of their feathers even more so. Their pigment is brown, but the structural arrangement of the feather’s vanes (those are the pointy bits) make them appear that iridescent colour. Isn’t that wonderful? The way they look is down to what they essentially and objectively *are* – nothing so pedestrian as pigmentation. Just a little tidbit for you, darling. Kisses to Mum and Dad, as always.’

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Nathalie folded up the letter and ran her thumb and forefinger over its folds until they were sharp enough to cut her. She set it down, then held up the peacock feather to one she had pulled from just under her ear – a tiny one, no larger than the joint of her little finger. Turning them over side by side, she could see no link between them. She shrugged and put them both in the box.

•

One night, Carmel and Arnab were lying in bed. Arnab was lying flat on his back with his hands clasped behind his neck. His head was turned slightly to the right, as if he was staring at the vase of dwarf roses on the bedside table.

‘We should stop locking the doors at night,’ he said.

Carmel marked her place with her finger and looked over at him.

‘For Nathalie,’ he continued. ‘If she’s going to start needing to go out every evening.’

‘How did you know?’ asked Carmel after a pause.

Arnab shrugged, almost imperceptibly. ‘She’s started to smell just like you,’ he said. ‘And she’s always hungry. I worry about her trying to come in through the window.’

‘We could give her a key,’ said Carmel, still watching him.

‘That’s a good idea. She could wear it on the necklace, if she started wearing it more,’ he said.

He reached up and kissed Carmel on the cheek, then he crescent-mooned himself up on his left side and closed his eyes. Almost instantly, he fell asleep.

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A thousand years ago, four winged figures stood on the edge of a cliff at sunrise. The cliff overlooked a valley, holding two vast lakes, one on the eastern boundary and one on the west. The cliff

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was banded with rock running in pale red and rose veins, and the rising sun turned the bands to flame. The figures were still, but their wings were outstretched and poised, like drawn swords, and each stood over six feet tall. If you were up on the cliff top with them, you would also have seen a fifth much smaller being, a human child sitting nearby with her knees drawn up. Calm rolled off the child and she showed no fear even as the creatures turned to her, each holding out a jewelled cup. She took each cup and drank deeply, then she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

•

Carmel and Arnab announced they would all be going to see Auntie Apphia over the Easter holidays to celebrate Nathalie's fifteenth birthday. Nathalie was furious at how much fun she'd miss, and her outrage only increased when her parents replied that nothing so important could possibly happen in just a week. Nathalie locked herself in her room but finally emerged, pouting, some time later. She grudgingly admitted she was looking forward to seeing her great-aunt again.

•

Apphia greeted them warmly, with a strange sparkle at the corner of each eye, and immediately set about installing them in the house, which was just as Nathalie remembered it. The endless visitors still came, some bringing with them boys of about her age. As soon as she saw them, she feigned lack of interest and sat herself in their midst reading magazines.

On the last night of their holiday, Arnab woke suddenly to a faintly metallic smell and a sound like faraway chimes. Even though the curtains were closed, the room was full of flat silver light, ironing the perspective from the furniture, and Carmel was nowhere to be seen. Drawing the curtains, he saw a full moon hanging watchfully in the sky as if it expected to be caught in a long-handled net, its craters standing in relief, giving it the look of a great glowing marble. The chimes grew louder and he stumbled

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out of the house, jamming on his shoes as he did so. He could feel his heart high up in his chest as he reached the beach. The sea was molten mercury in the moonlight, the waves crashing down like fistfuls of coins, rudely loud amid the silent night air. Arnab dropped down on to sand as white as sunbleached bones and sat watching the water while he waited.

He didn't have to wait long before one of the waves, turned by the dark into a slab of black jelly, was pierced by a creature bursting through its surface, a feathered turquoise blade with its wings folded behind it. It dived back under the next wave and disappeared. Next came another, also turquoise, which also dived back under the water, and then a third, bronze, which rose high into the sky and spread its wings, silhouetted against the moon. It threw back its head and made three harsh cries. Goose pimples shot through him as the figure beat its wings, once, twice, then folded them behind its shoulders and shot back down into the water, which closed over it like a medal dropped in ink. Even the waves seemed to quiet then, their scalloped edges nudging gently at the sand. Arnab smiled.