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Sarah Cleave, Publishing Manager at Comma Press, talks to NBG

Interview with **Julia Herrele**

The Backstory

'Our aim has always been to put the short story at the heart of narrative culture', says Sarah Cleave, publishing manager at Comma Press. 'The form has so much to offer in terms of style, shape, structure and technique.'

Manchester-based indie publishing house Comma Press has been around since 2003, when it was initially formed as an incorporated artists' group. Building on founder, publisher and CEO Ra Page's *Manchester Stories* series, Comma began to develop its list with a collection of short story booklets followed by a series of book-length anthologies. Since then, the house has been hard at work bringing the best British and international short stories to English-language readers. The broad spectrum ranges from interdisciplinary collaborations with scientists, social historians and refugees to user-led apps that allow writers, publishers and avid readers of the short story to share, discuss and promote new writing.

The Northern Fiction Alliance

But Comma's efforts to foster diverse storytelling don't stop there. In the summer of last year, they co-founded the Northern Fiction Alliance (NFA). The NFA is a collaborative project of nine indie publishers from the North of England, with Comma, Peepal Tree Press, And Other Stories, and Dead Ink at its core. The collective aims to

showcase and sell the work of exciting and diverse authors to help build Britain's literary identity and to demonstrate the creativity and quality of British publishing in the North. 'It's common knowledge that the publishing industry is rather London-centric and, as a publisher based in the North, geographical and social bias can have its challenges', says Cleave. The NFA is actively trying to address this imbalance. According to Cleave, the biggest strengths of Northern publishing are its energy, its drive, and a slightly maverick outlook which enables the publishing of outstanding books. Due to recent additional funding by Arts Council England, Comma will be able to continue and expand the work of the NFA as a cultural catalyst.

The List

Authenticity, purposefulness and collaboration are at the core of Comma's publishing endeavours. 'I feel very privileged to work for a genuinely progressive publishing house that is unafraid to take risks', says Cleave. 'Ra Page has opened my eyes to what publishing can and should be: daring, collaborative and always with purpose.' Comma publish eight to ten books per year. The goal at the heart of their commissioning process is to provide a platform for short stories, and to identify cutting-edge, often marginalised, voices from around the world. Comma also finds and nurtures homegrown talent through creative writing courses, as well as themed

commissions, pushing writers to step outside their comfort zones. Another of Comma's objectives is to use the political power of the short story to address pressing issues of today. For example, next year's translation activity will focus on publishing works from the Muslim-majority countries affected by Trump's travel ban.

Translation

Comma's translation imprint was founded in 2007 and has since become the home of short story anthologies and single-author collections from across the globe. Short stories translate well: the situations they describe are often more universal than a novel, and yet they don't adhere to their original language as stubbornly, making them very suitable for translation. 'About half of our output these days is from overseas', says Cleave. 'We've built up long-term relationships with authors and translators from around the world, and believe that the short story is uniquely placed to cross borders, be these cultural or linguistic.'

Comma will be very busy this coming season, in particular with the NFA: the association has just announced their first roadshow in Manchester for September, and will also be present at this year's Frankfurt Book Fair.

Comma Press will be at stand A113 in Hall 6.2 at the Frankfurt Book Fair. commapress.co.uk