

Not just words on a page – the inspiring storytelling of Being Human 2021

What better exemplar could there be for the 2021 [Being Human festival](#) sub-theme of ‘The power of storytelling’ than author, poet and broadcaster Lemn Sissay OBE? Commenting on his 2019 PEN Pinter Prize for writers with an ‘unflinching, unswerving view of the world’, one of the judges said: ‘From his sorrows, he forges beautiful words and a thousand reasons to live and love.’

Lemn Sissay, who has been chancellor of the University of Manchester since 2015, will launch the UK’s annual Being Human celebration of the humanities with festival director Professor Sarah Churchwell at a [special online event](#) on 9 November (6–7pm) that will include his own insights on the importance of the humanities. Now in its eighth year, this multi-city festival is led by the University of London’s School of Advanced Study in partnership with the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the British Academy.

Professor Churchwell said, *“Telling stories is inseparable from being human. Storytelling helps us understand our past and present, as well as imagining our futures, while today, familiar narratives are being challenged all around us. Our festival celebrates the many perspectives from which the human story can be told and understood, opening them up for all to learn about and enjoy.”*

The festival’s overall theme of ‘Renewal’ also chimes with Lemn Sissay’s own painful but inspiring journey of discovery and self-renewal – a man who says that his head is in London, his heart in Manchester and his soul in Addis Ababa. It’s personal, political and extremely powerful and sparks all sorts of links with other storytelling projects.

Like [Stories that move](#) (organised by the University of Birmingham). Does migration have a history? Through their letters, diaries and published accounts of migration, researchers and artists at the Migration Museum will tell the real-life stories of people who moved – or who were forced to move – in the 19th century. Participants can share their own migration stories, create a piece of artwork that will go on display in the museum, and take a guided tour of its current exhibition, Departures.

And what about the story fragments we all carry with no destinations in mind? [The Story Recycling Bank](#) from the University of Wolverhampton is an essential port of call. Got a half-finished poem, or perhaps an abandoned short story? Don’t throw them away – recycle them and pass them on to another writer to use. Find out how from the team at this unique writing project who will invite writers to recycle and renew their material, reflect on the project so far and perform readings of their own recycled works.

Demonstrating that stories don’t just sit alone on pages, the [Hidden stories: from the Caribbean to Great Britain](#) project demonstrates how they can be dressed up, bringing in the sounds, smells and even music and dance steps from the regional culture. The University of Lincoln and Museumand, the UK’s National Caribbean Heritage Museum, present four days (11–14 November) of Caribbean culture on Lincoln’s High Street. Come down to check out the pop-up Caribbean kitchen and

shebeen and enjoy fascinating talks, exciting performances and insightful conversations on Caribbean food and music, and perhaps even learn a few new dance steps.

Other 'Power of storytelling' highlights include:

- [Criminals in the time of Covid](#) (organised by the University of Leicester). A courageous and talented group of artists from one of India's so-called 'criminal tribes', stepped out during the Covid-19 pandemic to document the stories of their communities. This film screening on 15 November will provide an insight into little known stories from Indian culture and current affairs, while exploring the histories and arts of people living at the perilous margins of Indian society.
- [Women's things](#) (organised by the University of Leicester) is a safe and confidential space for women who have lived or are living through menopause, or who are just curious about what it means for them, to share conversations and creative writing over coffee with like-minded people.
- [Patterns of migration: talking textiles](#) (organised by the University Central Lancashire). Participants in these artist-led workshops will reflect on personal and collective stories of belonging, movement, and migration. Drawing on the internationally renowned Gawthorpe Textile Collection and on their favourite textile garments and belongings, local women including refugees and asylum seekers, will explore the multi-sensory verbal and non-verbal qualities of textiles and clothing through crafts, music, storytelling and sound.
- [Unlocking the word hoard](#) (organised by the University of Wolverhampton). Can storytelling help us change the world? Develop the skills needed to break down any story for performance, learn how to adapt old tales for modern audiences, and address the problems inherent in telling stories from the medieval past. Led by Dr Daisy Black, a storyteller and academic who teaches oral storytelling using medieval tales, this workshop is for story lovers aged 13 to 130 who are interested in learning how to spin yarns of their own.
- [Telling stories through textiles and design](#) (organised by Queen Mary University of London). Join artist Alaa Alsaraji at the Museum of the Home to learn how textiles have been used to express identity and cultural pride, and fight oppression. Alaa will also share her approach to creating the museum's 'Our Home, Our Stories' installation which physically weaves people's stories of home into the display.

These are just samples of some of over 200 free public activities taking place across the UK from 11–20 November.

The full Being Human 2021 festival programme is available at <https://beinghumanfestival.org/events>

Find out more about the festival at <https://beinghumanfestival.org/> and follow the latest news on Twitter at [@BeingHumanFest](https://twitter.com/BeingHumanFest).

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Notes to Editors

- 1. Being Human: a festival of the humanities, 11–20 November 2021**
Led by the School of Advanced Study, University of London, in partnership with the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the British Academy, Being Human is a national forum for public engagement with humanities research. The festival highlights the ways in which the humanities can inspire and enrich our everyday lives. For more information, please visit www.beinghumanfestival.org or follow the festival on social media at [@BeingHumanFest](https://twitter.com/BeingHumanFest).
- 2. The School of Advanced Study (SAS)**, University of London, is the UK's national centre for the promotion and support of research in the humanities. SAS and its member institutes offer unparalleled resources, facilities and academic opportunities across a wide range of subject areas for the benefit of the national and international scholarly community. Last year SAS welcomed 996 research fellows and associates, held 1,500 events highlighting the latest research in the humanities, received 31.6 million online visits to its research resources and platforms, and hosted 100,119 visits to its specialist libraries and collections. The School also leads Being Human, the UK's only nationwide festival of the humanities. Find out more at www.sas.ac.uk or follow SAS on Twitter at [@SASNews](https://twitter.com/SASNews).
- 3. The Arts and Humanities Research Council** is part of UK Research and Innovation. We're the UK's largest funder of arts and humanities research and training, investing over £100 million every year. We fund independent researchers in a wide range of subjects, including history, archaeology, digital content, philosophy, languages, design, heritage, area studies, the creative and performing arts, and many more. The research we fund provides social and cultural benefits that contribute to the economic success of the UK, as well as to the culture and welfare of societies around the world. Find out more about us at ahrc.ukri.org, or on Twitter at [@ahrcpress](https://twitter.com/ahrcpress).
- 4. The British Academy** is the UK's national academy for the humanities and social sciences. We mobilise these disciplines to understand the world and shape a brighter future. We invest in researchers and projects across the UK and overseas, engage the public with fresh thinking and debates, and bring together scholars, government, business and civil society to influence policy for the benefit of everyone. www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk [@BritishAcademy](https://twitter.com/BritishAcademy). For further information please contact Sean Canty at the British Academy Press Office on s.canty@thebritishacademy.ac.uk or +44 (0)20 7969 5273.