

TLC Showcase

SHARON DUGGAL

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Introduction to *Should We Fall Behind*

Should We Fall Behind is my second novel, published in October 2020. It is a story about people who live side by side in a busy city but hardly seem to notice each other until, one day, someone called Jimmy arrives in their midst and things begin to change. Really, it is a book about the stories behind the stories of ordinary people. As a writer, this is what I am interested in - the often hidden stories of people who could be any of us, people we walk past everyday, and the universal human experiences which connect us all regardless of who we are or what our backgrounds are.

This novel follows my debut, *The Handsworth Times* which came out in 2016. Both books are published by independent publisher, Bluemoose Books, and both have benefitted from early input from The Literary Consultancy, who I first came into contact with many years ago when I was just starting out as a writer. At that time, a short story I'd written was a runner-up in a national competition and my prize was a manuscript assessment by TLC reader, Cynthia Rogerson. Cynthia was generous and encouraging in her feedback and it really gave me the confidence to carry on writing at a time when I struggled with self-belief and in trying to justify making writing a priority in my life - both things, I am sure, were closely related. A few years later, I was selected for the Free Reads scheme by New Writing South, which was fantastic. I received some valuable constructive feedback on what later became my first novel, *The Handsworth Times*. The feedback from Rachel Trezise spurred me on to submit to agents and publishers. More recently, thanks to Arts Council funding, I was able to pay directly for a manuscript assessment of the beginning of the first draft of *Should We Fall Behind*, and was lucky to be given some very detailed, incisive feedback from reader, Anna South which helped me to steer the opening chapters of the book. TLC then arranged for me to get some follow up input from Anna, which was incredibly useful and for which I am very grateful.

Over the years, TLC has played a crucial part in my journey as a writer, so much so that I would now consider it part of my process to approach them to get an objective eye on any new work I am serious about.

Extract from *Should We Fall Behind* by Sharon Duggal

1. JIMMY

Jimmy Noone drifted, alone in a cold subway, falling away with the day as it faded to shadow. He dreamt of balloons: sky-blue, bought by his father to mark his third birthday. The balloons were set free, one by one from the bedroom window as Jimmy, holding onto his brother's hand, urged them to float higher and higher over brick terraces into a sea of platinum cloud. Their mother smiled weakly, propped up in bed drinking tea, rubbing heavy eyelids between gulps, mug balanced on her swollen belly. His earliest memories always came unexpectedly. Somewhere above the ground there was a clatter and it echoed loudly, jolting dreams away. He was no longer alone. A woman was slumped opposite, head cocked against an image of a sapphire-blue kingfisher. She was young, even younger than him; just a girl really.

The subway was hidden beneath dull office blocks and a sprawling budget hotel. Its walls painted with fresh murals, bright enough to shock: rainbow lorikeets perched on branches surrounded by hummingbirds dancing across a swimming-pool sky; shades of cyan, turquoise and teal - colours at once both green and blue and not of the drab English city above. The subway led to a municipal car park on the other side of the road. Each morning at seven, Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* played into it from the hotel through a concealed speaker; music arrived on a tang of fried bacon, wafting over the linger of stale piss. The same music played at six in the evening, drowning out the rumble of rush hour as darkness slipped in and everything needed gee-ing up.

When Jimmy told the girl his name, she flinched and pushed her back against the wall.

'Jimmy Noone,' he repeated softly. 'Like midday. Noon with an E. 'N.O.O.N.E.'

She closed her eyes and turned her face away as the music soared. Jimmy reached into his rucksack, pulled out a tattered paperback and pretended to focus on words obscured in murky twilight.

When she spoke it was barely above a whisper. Her voice trembled.

'Did I imagine it?' she said.

'The music?' he shook his head. 'It's real but only plays out a couple of times a day.'

'I don't know if I'm dreaming or not anymore.'

'Me neither,' he replied.

Grimy fluorescent tubes flickered and a smoky light appeared, throwing muted shapes across surfaces. The girl wore a frayed denim jacket, hugged tight around her small frame. Her face was oval: unblemished, wheatish skin not yet the pallid slate-grey of time-served street dwellers.

'I'm Betwa,' she said eventually.

'It's a nice name.' He hadn't heard of it before. He asked about it.

'It's a river in India, near where my mother was born but I've never been there. It confuses people; the name I mean. They want to call me something else, something they understand.'

He liked listening to her. Beneath her reticence he sensed a tiny glint of light: no slurring of words, no bitterness, not yet. She was different from others he'd met on the streets. Something about her made him want to hold his palms up to the world and halt the pull of it before it was too late.

When she spoke again, Betwa said, 'I don't suppose anyone ever asks what Jimmy means?'

September flipped into October that night; the change in the air was palpable. Jimmy wondered how the year could almost be gone already, how time could slip away without consequence. He didn't like that it moved on so swiftly while his life was mired, stuck in a kind of sinkhole, dragging only downwards. The rain didn't touch them that night but the cold did. It was hard for anyone to get warm with concrete next to bone; even in a sleeping bag bones are cold. He knew it was the same for the girl: she was slight, like a teenager, snappable. He wanted to tell her he wasn't much

different: layers of clothing made him seem bulky and he was tall but he was just as fragile.

She fell asleep quickly and he watched, trying hard to keep his own eyes open. Her hair was shoulder-length, the same charred-wood colour as his own. It fell gently across her cheek. When he slept, dreams were sporadic, like Nan's old cine film. Soft fingers stroked his pitted skin, brushing away tobacco strands from the beard which obscured his face and made him into someone else, someone older. The dream fingers belonged to his mother. He tried to grasp them but the moment flitted away, onto the next frame. He woke, bereft, longing to feel heat from another body, warm breath on his skin. Across the subway, the girl slept leaning into her rucksack, arms clasped around her knees. Jimmy touched his hair, spat on his fingers and tried to tame the wildness of it.

In the morning, Betwa agreed to walk with him up to the brown river which divided the city.

'Don't be on your own, not if you can help it,' he said, and she followed him out into the day.

At first she was quiet so he rambled on about finding the subway a few weeks earlier.

'I wanted it for myself but I knew that couldn't happen; there were already empty bottles and bits of cardboard when I arrived.'

A stream of drifters passed through. Most disappeared as suddenly as they appeared; he was always glad when they'd gone. He told her about the man called Alan who spoke with slobber trickling from his scaly lips. He mimicked the man's broad accent.

Fuck you, Jimmy. You think others haven't been here before? You're not the first bugger to think he's found a special place just for him but out here we're all family, right?' This is no place for a selfish cunt. You don't wanna be here alone, lad.'

He recognised the traces of fear in the girl's eyes when he talked about Alan so he changed the subject to things he'd learnt about the music in the subway: how it was

sometimes like thunder, sometimes like sleet. It was, he said, written almost four hundred years ago by a sickly composer for the poverty-stricken orphans he worked with.

Betwa said, 'I've never heard of music in an underpass,' and Jimmy thought she sounded even younger than she was.

He told her about a bloke called Ringo who went into a frenzy when the music began. *It's the fucking DWP theme tune. They're playing it to torture us*, Ringo said. Jimmy knew he'd heard it before, in shopping centre lifts and clinical waiting rooms but somewhere else too and it was only when Ringo kicked off he remembered holding the phone while his nan strutted off to make a cup of tea. *You hang on there for me Jimmy lad*, she'd said. *They keep you waiting for hours with that awful music screeching at you. I can't stand it. It breaks your spirit, so it does. They'd do anything to stop you from claiming what's yours. Poor man that Vivaldi fella, us all hating him because of them using his music like that.*

Sometime later, in the warmth of the local library, Jimmy learnt the irony of it: Vivaldi died a pauper, more in common with the benefit claimants than the over-paid PR consultants and civil servants in wood-panelled offices selecting music for the hold.

'But what about the underpass?' Betwa said, so he described the hotel guests in shiny shoes who shuffled through with trolley suitcases, pretending not to see the people at their feet. Some of those guests complained about the stench and the Swamp Thing-look of them and one morning the police arrived earlier than the music.

'I woke up with a boot in my face,' Jimmy said.

He'd returned to the subway soon after the police left and stood at the entrance while a man in an orange boiler suit jet-sprayed the stink away, drowning out the sound of Vivaldi's *Spring* with the whoosh of water.

'Something keeps drawing me back,' he said.

He knew he shouldn't get too attached to a place but the subway with its birds and its music was the closest he'd been to comfort since his brother Ant left him alone with their father.

About the Writer

Sharon Duggal grew up in Handsworth, Birmingham as part of a large Indian family. She is the author of the critically-acclaimed debut novel *The Handsworth Times* (2016) which was The Morning Star's 'Fiction Book of the Year 2016' and Brighton City Reads 2017. Her short stories appear in various anthologies including *The Book of Birmingham* and *Love Bites: Fiction Inspired by Pete Shelley and Buzzcocks*. Her second novel, *Should We Fall Behind* is published by Bluemoose Books, October, 2020.



Alongside writing, Sharon is part of the team at literature development organisation, New Writing South where she supports aspiring and emerging writers to develop their practice, particularly those whose stories and voices are under-represented by mainstream publishing. She has an MPhil in Creative Writing from the University of Sussex and regularly delivers workshops and talks on creative writing.

Sharon is also one half of The Ruben and Sharon Show, the UK's only regular radio show with a mum and son presenter team, which plays out live on Brighton's Radio Reverb every week.

For more information about Sharon and her work, visit sharonduggal.com and follow her on Twitter [@MsSDuggal](https://twitter.com/MsSDuggal).