



TLC SHOWCASE

Seema McArdle

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Introduction to *The Golden Goblet* by Seema McArdle

My earliest memory of writing stories is seven-year-old me, sitting in a cold attic with a protective grille on the window. I shared this home – a rickety building the council would eventually knock down – with my family, from the late 1970s to the early 1990s. We lived above our South Asian food business, in the impoverished West End of Newcastle upon Tyne where racism and crime was rife. This is where I discovered the pleasure of reading and writing stories, revelling in the escapism they provided. Yet all the books I read, in and out of school, were written by White authors and had only White characters in them. And all the stories I wrote only had White characters.

I'd effectively ghosted myself.

Even at university, while studying Medieval and Victorian British history, no People of Colour were mentioned. In fact, it was only when I became an auntie and a Primary teacher, reading more inclusive picture books, that I realised what I'd missed out on and more importantly, who I'd erased. Seeing children react with joy and excitement to characters that looked like them made me want to write stories once again. However, this time, I'd include people that looked like me and the real world.

Writing helped me explore my identity, escaping previous stereotypes that had been thrust upon me, from East and West alike. I was finally able to see Britain's rich and diverse history through a more inclusive lens and celebrate those who'd paved the way for me.

I grew interested in John Blanke after reading Dr Miranda Kauffman's book, *Black Tudors* and exploring *The John Blanke Project* website by Michael Ohajuru and was thrilled when both historians agreed to speak with me and share their knowledge.

After being awarded an Arts Council England DYCP grant, I contacted TLC to arrange a mentorship with Hannah Sheppard, who I'd already met through a competition I'd been shortlisted for and who'd kindly written a letter of recommendation that helped me win my ACE grant.

During my TLC mentorship journey, I sent six submissions to Hannah for feedback. Yet she also helped me with plotting and recommended Lisa Cron's book, *Story Genius*, which I found very useful. In fact, after I'd sent Hannah two submissions (20k words) I decided to go back to the drawing board, plotting my whole book first, this time.

It felt drastic but totally necessary and my next submission, instead of 10k words, consisted of:

1. My fourteen chapter-breakdown sheets
2. my 'plot sequence' sheet
3. my vision board characters' photos & descriptions
4. my synopsis

This solid groundwork and Hannah's support and perceptive feedback led to me completing my first draft.

I believe TLC and Hannah Sheppard also helped me win a place on the National Centre for Writing Escalator programme 23/24. This led to me being mentored by the fabulous Ashley Hickson-Lovence and completing my second draft, after which I was approached by my wonderful Literary Agent, Kerry Ann Bentley.

I also shared an excerpt from my manuscript at TLC's Industry Day in 2024, where I met talented writers, a Literary Agent, a Publisher and the lovely Joe Sedgwick from TLC.

Hence, I will be using TLC's services again and shouting their praise from the rooftops!

Extract from *The Golden Goblet*

Saira turned to Joe, open-mouthed. She'd already de-coded the first paragraph and couldn't believe it.

'What's up?'

'Wait till you hear this,' she said, her voice trembling.

Dear Saira,

First and foremost, please read this letter before decoding any labels. I'm writing this before I leave for Egypt and if you are reading it, then, I'm sorry to say, I am no longer with you. But this doesn't mean I'm dead...not quite, anyway.

I promised you an adventure and I'm now offering you the adventure of a lifetime that I insist you accept. You see, your grandpa and I belong to a secret Historical Society that time travels and we're hoping you and Joe will join us. But it must remain a secret. I know this sounds fantastical but let me explain.

'Blimey!' said Joe. 'She must've been pulling your leg, right? And I thought your grandpa died last year?'

Saira was stunned. It really was too fantastical, yet she wanted to believe it with all her heart. 'Let me check I've decoded it right and do the rest of the letter. There's loads.'

He nodded and they continued decoding in silence.

But halfway through her letter, with her mouth hanging open, Saira looked at Joe, shaking her head. It was ridiculously unbelievable. But why on earth had Granny-P invented such a *huge* lie? To give Saira some excitement and distract her from Granny-P's death, perhaps?

'What?' said Joe. 'I've decoded mine and checked it three times cos it's *well* weird, like a clue. Listen-'

'No! You need to hear my letter first,' said Saira. 'But I'm only halfway through.'

Joe tutted. 'Mine's only short, bossy-boots. Listen-'

'Waaaaait!' said Saira, her fingers grasping and tugging at the goblet.

She had to stop Joe saying the words on the goblet's label, while he was holding it.

'You don't understaaand! Give it to me, first! *Don't* say the words-'

But Joe was having none of it and talked over her.

'Find and stop the poisoner to save two innocent lives.'

As the last word left Joe's lips, a cold air swished across the attic.

He gave Saira his bug-eyed look and she stared back, terrified, as a blinding white light perforated the air with a huge bang.

Joe and the attic had disappeared, while the floor sucked Saira's body, like water down a plughole.

She tried to scream as she fell, deeper and faster, until a black void swallowed her up.

Raucous shouting and laughter jolted Saira awake as a weird mixture of roast chicken, candle wax and sweat assaulted her nostrils. Blinking rapidly, she tried to make sense of it all, questions tumbling through her mind. Who were all these people dressed in weird costumes, a far cry from the hoodies, jeans and baseball caps she usually wore? Wasn't she just in the attic with Joe? Where was he? And why on earth was someone shaking her arm and calling, *John*?

Her head hurt but she focused on the person shaking her: a young man with shoulder-length brown hair, wearing a blue shirt - that looked like a dress - with a yellow belt and yellow trousers. Maybe she was at a fancy-dress party, but how did she get there? And why was he looking so worried? He seemed to be calling *her* John... unless he was calling for John to come and help her stand.

She decided to reassure him and pushed herself up.

'I'm ok,' she said, her voice sounding far too deep. She coughed to clear her throat, although it didn't feel sore. Her body felt heavier too and when she stood, she was much taller than usual.

Catching a glimpse of her hand, she yelped. 'What the...?' she said, trying to comprehend what she was looking at - a dark brown man's hand! In fact, as she

inspected herself some more, she realised her whole body was a man's body! Patting it, tentatively, in horror, she noticed she was wearing the same funny costume worn by the man who'd called her 'John'. It was thick and stuffy, increasing her sense of claustrophobia.

She took a few deep breaths. This had to be the most realistic dream she'd ever had; there was no other explanation. Or was there? Something flicked through her mind, but she couldn't quite grasp it.

'John, how do you feel? Are you ok?' said the young man, peering into Saira's eyes, concern etched all over his face.

Blinking rapidly, she focussed on the scene around her, more alert now.

She appeared to be in a grand hall, with colourful tapestries covering its walls. String instruments played in the background as the crowd's chatter filled the stuffy air. They looked super rich, wearing bright taffeta and satin costumes, embroidered with lace neck ruffs and wrist cuffs. Strings of pearls, golden girdles, colourful jewels and gold all accessorised women's outfits. Even the young people were dressed funny. Where were their t-shirts, combat trousers and Air Force trainers?

Deciding that it *had* to be a realistic dream about stuff she'd read, she asked the man, 'OK, just tell me, who are you and where are we?'

'What? Do you honestly not remember, John?' he said, rubbing his forehead and eyeing her with concern. 'I don't understand what happened. We were just walking and then you collapsed...although I cannot say how or why.'

'Me neither,' she muttered. 'Seriously though, who am I, who are you, and where are we?'

He sighed. 'You're John and I'm Peter, your best friend, thank you very much. We're both royal trumpeters in Greenwich Palace, and if you don't pull yourself together this is going to look bad - not just for you, for all of us.'

He sounded very upset, and it all seemed far too real.

Suddenly, the memory of what she'd read on the first page of Granny-P's letter flooded back. Then Joe had read that goblet's label, something about a poisoner and two murders?

Her hands flew to her cheeks as she scanned the crowded room. 'Oh no! N-n-n-n-n-no. This can't be happening. I *must* find Joe!'

About the Writer

Seema McArdle is a working-class PunGeordie, born in Newcastle upon Tyne into a Punjabi family.

She holds a BA (hons) in History & Sociology, a PGCE in Primary Education, and a CELTA, and has worked for The Independent, the Serious Fraud Office, the NHS, Norwich University of the Arts, and as a primary teacher for seventeen years. She works at the University of East Anglia, where she is a member of the Race Equality Steering Committee and helped launch South Asian Heritage Month and Wear Red Day. She is an active supporter of *Show Racism the Red Card* charity and a contributor of *The John Blanke Project*: <https://www.johnblanke.com/seema-mcardle.html>



Seema is interested in the fascinating histories of British People of Colour, many of whom remain excluded from our history and story books and her previous work won the Publisher's Prize at FABPrize 2020 and was shortlisted for Penguin's WriteNow 2021.

After being awarded an Arts Council England DYCP grant, she worked with TLC mentor, Hannah Sheppard, drafting the first book in the 'Saira Parker and Joe Butler Investigate' series, THE GOLDEN GOBLET.

THE GOLDEN GOBLET is a middle grade time-slip adventure and the first book in the Saira Parker and Joe Butler Investigate series, featuring a British Asian girl, a white working-class boy and Henry VIII's Black Trumpeter, John Blanke, all of whom Seema identifies with.

She won a place on the National Centre for Writing Escalator programme 23/24 and was mentored by Ashley Hickson-Lovence and is now represented by Literary Agent, Kerry-Ann Bentley.

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