



Credit: Yasmin Alibhai-Brown

“I’d never written a word”

Yasmin Alibhai-Brown: pioneer of her own version of journalism

Luke Severn

Self proclaimed “leftie, liberal, anti-racist, feminist Muslim” Yasmin Alibhai-Brown is a force to be reckoned with within British media. Talking about her career as a journalist and life as a Muslim woman in the UK, she often smiles when reminiscing on parts of her life. Speaking from her London home, sitting comfortably in front of a poster advertising one her many books, she candidly chats about her life and career.

Diminished

In 1972, Yasmin came to the UK to study a postgraduate degree in Literature at Oxford University. She had received a scholarship from the prestigious institution. Universities such as Oxford have been under a watchful eye over recent years due to allegations of racism and prejudice, especially towards those not from a distinguished white background.

Yasmin defied this and pressed on with her educational career. Speaking of her time at Oxford Yasmin professed: “I hated it so much, it took away my spirit and it took away my confidence”. She goes on to say:

“It diminished me for 10 years after that, I had to rebuild myself.”

Yasmin went on to teach English to refugees, Europeans and women from poorer backgrounds. She explains that “it wasn’t the work I wanted to do, but I knew it well”.

“What I wanted was burning away” she confessed. At the age of 37, she decided that she wanted to be a journalist. Stating that though this was a risk due to 37 being “an old age to start” - she still persevered.

Persevere and Pioneer

“It was quite savage really”. Yasmin said about her first piece. Never one to shy away from controversy, Yasmin wrote a piece that delved into being a migrant in the UK and how British politics had influenced the assisted in the dictatorial takeover of her home country, Uganda. She touched upon how Ugandan muslims were pushed out of the country with nowhere to go and how that affected her take on life.

This was then published in The Guardian with the support of friend Aiden White. “Although it was cheeky” she laughed, “I called up the only person I knew in the industry and said you have to read this”.

Yasmin had called Aiden White, who was working for The Guardian at the time and confessed to him that she had “never written a word”, had no training, no credentials but he must read what she had written.

Barking Editors

Yasmin went onto to get a job at New Society Magazine which she called a “fabulous magazine”.

This would be the job that Yasmin had been yearning for since her painful days at Oxford.

Here the editor taught Yasmin how to write as a journalist. This dream job came to a halt when New Society Magazine was taken over by a different publication, New Statesmen Magazine which Yasmin claims to have “killed New Society, just swallowed it up whole”.

Speaking about her relationship with the new editor at the magazine. She confessed: “I hated him, he was so unkind to women in particular.”

“He was like most editors who were like barking dogs, they never considered the staff”. She scoffed at this and spoke about the culture of editors at the time. This led to Yasmin’s departure from the magazine.

Big Break

Becoming a freelancer in 1990, she began writing for a few different publications. Her “big break” was when she began to write columns regularly for The Independent. Here she stayed writing regular columns for 18 years.

During this time she was awarded Media Personality of the Year (2000) by the Ethnic Multicultural Media Academy. Alibhai-Brown has since gone on to receive various prestigious awards for her writing, one of the more recent being Broadsheet Columnist of the Year at the British Press Awards 2016.



Yasmin speaking at 'Bringing Up Boys' at the Southbank Centre. Credit: Southbank Centre

Race

Being the first woman of colour to write regularly for an established publication in the UK, Yasmin hasn't ever stopped being vocal about her anti-racist views.

She referenced a Christmas party she once attended where she was approached by a fairly left-wing editor, Peter. Without stating his second name, she explained that he told her that she had gotten lucky with the name she acquired after marriage, being Brown. He told her with a foreign name like Alibhai, she'd had gotten nowhere to which she responded: "Gosh, maybe I should have married a Mr. White - then think about where'd I'd be".

Laughing as she told the story she reiterated her perseverance and burning desire to be successful in the career she had thrown herself into. Going into detail about obstacles and oppression she faced as a successful journalist, she stated that she worked "five times harder than anybody else".

She recalled working one of her first jobs where she would go into the office at around midnight and work through to the morning. She was determined to produce perfect work - and that she did. She stated that:

"Bit by bit they started to realise I was really serious."

Ticking Boxes

After winning the Columnist of the Year award in 2016, Yasmin asked "how many boxes have you ticked". Receiving this award was a clear highlight in her career, however she wasn't going to accept it quietly. Yasmin reiterated that "I'm brown, a leftie, old, muslim and a woman". Though she was grateful for the honour, she told others: "remember just how rare this is".

Yasmin has released several books. Her most recent release is

titled 'Ladies Who Punch'. The book features different stories centred around courageous women who have changed history and remoulded our culture.

This reflects explicitly on Yasmin's career thus far. Working, or punching, her way up through the ranks has made her into the pioneering journalist and author she is today.

