



**Carolyn Jess-Cooke**

How can technological solutions adopted during the coronavirus outbreak foster a greater sense of connectivity in the literary world post-pandemic?

## Online opportunities

**T**he Covid-19 pandemic will change life as we know it. It will change how we work, shop, eat and travel. It will change what we read, radically altering how we interpret not just dystopian tropes but also relationships. It will change how we communicate and socialise.

One thing I am absolutely sure this global crisis will change is how we engage with literature.

In early March this year, I was beginning to panic about the news that coronavirus had made its way to British shores. I cancelled some of my own author events, and some that I had planned to attend as an audience member were also cancelled. On 13th March, I tweeted that it would be a good idea to have a literature festival that was entirely online. It had a big response, and I figured I would hold some events via Zoom, which is the platform I've been using for a couple of years to run the Distance Learning MLitt in Creative Writing at the University of Glasgow. I created a Google Doc and cascaded it to interested writers, to which they added their proposed event with a date and time. Paper Nations contacted me, and within a few days I was partnering with it to run what I had decided to call the Stay-At-Home! Literary Festival.

### Twitter traction

By the time I had created the festival Twitter account, more than 100 authors had signed up to do readings, workshops, panels and Q&As. The virus was officially recognised as a pandemic. A lot of authors had books coming out right when they needed to be out shouting about them. So the festival was, in a way, offering a means to promote new books as well as creating connectivity between readers.

The Prime Minister implemented a national lockdown on 23rd March, and told us all to "stay at home"—four days before Stay-At-Home! Festival was due to start.

Stay-At-Home! Festival involves more than 200 authors and 130 events over 16 days, from 27th March to 11th

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April. The viral profiling of the festival has enabled me to programme established authors such as Maggie O'Farrell, C L Taylor and Ann Patchett, as well as emerging writers (some as young as nine years old). There is a showcase section on the website, open-mic nights and seven writing residencies. There is zero budget: I built the website for free, the Zoom platform for live online events was free, and a team of dedicated volunteers help with admin, PR, tech issues and moderating sessions. It has been a mammoth, exhausting and exhilarating challenge—not least because I'm running it while working full-time with four young children at home.

However, I'm not done yet. I have a bigger plan for the festival beyond this pandemic. I want Stay-At-Home! Festival to mitigate the challenges that we are all facing right now, such as loneliness and lockdown, but I'm deeply conscious of those people who face ongoing challenges that prevent them from engaging with literary events: money, accessibility (including caring responsibilities) and—this most crucially—not feeling that they belong to literary communities. I know many people who would never dream of attending a literary event because they don't feel comfortable in the kind of environment that typically involves an author on a stage in an auspicious venue. My background is Northern Irish council-estate, dole-office working-class, and I have always been conscious of—and worked extremely hard to overcome—the class issues that permeate literary culture.

### Virtues of virtual

I am not saying that we should stop doing face-to-face literary events. I am saying that we need more accessible, eco-friendly and innovative approaches to them. An online festival like Stay-At-Home! Festival provides a uniquely levelled audience experience. Interacting with an author who is sitting in their kitchen or spare room is massively different to encountering an author on a stage in a lovely, but possibly intimidating, cultural venue.

During this project I have been keen to encourage authors to embrace the intimacy, immediacy and even the informality fostered by an online platform like Zoom, and I believe this has worked well to draw down certain barriers. A community has been created. It is this sense of community—the democratisation of literature—that I feel is key to engaging, and building, audiences.

I am persuaded that this festival and the many others like it herald the beginning of smarter and radically experimental ways of connecting authors and readers both during and post-Covid-19. Already, feedback indicates that audiences are being reached that had felt excluded before, and I plan to make sure this vital work continues.



Carolyn Jess-Cooke's most recent novel, *The Blame Game*, is a psychological thriller that traces the shockwaves of tragedy that happened 22 years ago in the Swiss Alps as they ripple through a family. *The Nesting*, her next title, is slated for release in September, published by HarperCollins.