

The Branford Boase Award



STRICTLY EMBARGOED UNTIL 19.30 THURSDAY 13 JULY 2023

**Uplifting coming of age story filled with songs named
outstanding debut novel for young people**

**Christine Pillainayagam wins the 2023 Branford Boase Award for
*Ellie Pillai Is Brown***

#BranfordBoaseAward #BBA23 www.branfordboaseaward.org.uk
[Images available for download](#)

Thursday 13 July 2023: **Christine Pillainayagam** is the winner of the **2023 Branford Boase Award** for the year's outstanding debut novel for young people for her funny, song-filled, second-generation coming of age story **Ellie Pillai is Brown**. The **Branford Boase Award** is unique in honouring editor as well as author and Christine shares the win with her editor, Leah Thaxton, of Faber & Faber.

The book tells the story of teenager Ellie, who is trying to work out who she is. She loves music and, unbeknown to her parents, who wouldn't approve, is doing drama GCSE. Add first love into the mix, and things get very complicated indeed. Ellie writes songs to describe what she's going through, the addition of QR codes throughout the book allow readers to listen to them.

Christine Pillainayagam describes her book as "*a classic coming of age story with the added layer of colour*" and says the idea came from some of her own experiences growing up as a second-generation immigrant in a majority white community: "Ellie's a British teenager growing up with all the classic teenage woes, but she's also caught between two cultures, dealing with family grief and a sense that she doesn't really belong anywhere."

Conversations with her son about race and identity also prompted Christine to write. "Going to bookshops to try and find material to help me support the conversations I was having with him, I didn't see Black and Brown stories on the shelves, particularly ones

that focused on joy. It made me want to sit down and write a story for me at 15. Something that would have made me feel seen and understood, that talked about what I was facing with humour but didn't shy away from the more challenging issues."

On winning the **Branford Boase Award**, she says, "A few years ago, an editor I admired was nominated for the **Branford Boase Award**. At the time, I had a rough manuscript, no agent and nothing close to a book deal. To win this award (my very first!) is so surreal, and so hugely important to me, because it validates that stories like mine belong, bringing a mirror to readers who may feel they've never seen themselves before. I'm so delighted to share this with my brilliant editor Leah, who not only took a chance on me as a first-time writer but gave me the courage to tell the story I needed, without compromise. I think I can officially call myself a writer now!"

Leah Thaxton says: "When I first read Christine's novel I pinched myself – it couldn't *possibly* be a debut; or this thought-provoking and funny. Christine is the voice of a generation. My journey with **Ellie Pillai is Brown** has been an honour and a blast – because Christine is the real deal and gorgeous with it too. She writes for readers who absurdly haven't yet seen themselves in novels - what marks her out as exceptional is that she does so with such style, intelligence and charm, citing universal truths that have stayed with me and all who read her novels long after reading. She has the ability to nail character in a sentence, and to write dialogue that sings. I'm just so happy to have been along for the ride. Thank you for the honour of this award but the credit is all Christine's, it honestly is. (But I'll take the praise, anything to hang on to her coattails!)."

Maisie Chan, who won the 2022 **Branford Boase Award** for **Danny Chung Does Not Do Maths** and was a judge this year, says, "**Ellie Pillai is Brown** is a wonderfully lyrical book about the messy teenage years told with humour and pathos. Ellie is a character you want to root for and hug. It is an expertly crafted book that looks at first love, identity and grief."

Her fellow judge, **Sajeda Amir**, English teacher and KS3 coordinator at Levenshulme High School for girls in Manchester says, "When I read **Ellie Pillai is Brown**, I felt like I was seeing my 16-year-old self in the pages of the book. Whilst I was growing up, I never read a book that featured someone that looked like me and Christine has created an inclusive book in which the main character allows us to be seen and understood. The writing is humorous, poignant and lyrical and whilst the coming of age story is at the forefront of the novel, Christine deals with culture and the trials and tribulations that come with being a second-generation immigrant with care and sensitivity. The soundtrack is a lovely, additional bonus too, the cherry on top of the cake!"

Julia Eccleshare, Chair of the judges and co-founder of the **Branford Boase Award** adds, "Children's books, like everything else, are changing very fast and the latest threat from technology is much in everyone's minds. But some things remain constant: the desire to create the best stories for children is one of them. The **BBA** has a past that grew out of

sadness. Its foundations are a tribute to the great work of an author and an editor who together made wonderful books. Its legacy is tonight at this celebration of the winners of the **2023 Branford Boase Award**, two gifted and creative individuals, a writer and her editor, are a brilliant embodiment of the commitment all of us in this room have to continue to create the best stories for children and young adults.”

The 2023 winners of the **Branford Boase Award** were announced by Maisie Chan on Thursday 13 July at a ceremony at **CLPE**, Webber Street, London SE1 8QW. Christine Pillainayagam receives a cheque for £1,000 and she and Leah Thaxton both receive engraved trophies.

The **Branford Boase Award** is delivered in partnership with the [Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society \(ALCS\)](#) and supported by Walker Books.

For further information please contact Andrea Reece on 07807893369 or andrea.reece@zen.co.uk

Notes to Editors:

Founded in 2000, the **Branford Boase Award** was set up in memory of award-winning author Henrietta Branford and her editor Wendy Boase of Walker Books, who both died in 1999, and is unique in honouring editor as well as author. It is regarded as one of the most important awards in children's books and has an impressive record in picking out star authors at the start of their careers. Previous winners include Meg Rosoff, Liz Hyder, Marcus Sedgwick, M.G. Leonard and Frances Hardinge. Winning editors include JK Rowling's editor Barry Cunningham, Philip Pullman's editor David Fickling and Fiona Kennedy, publisher of Michelle Paver, Marcus Sedgwick and Sally Gardner.

The shortlisted authors may have published other books in another genre – e.g. poetry or a picture book – but eligibility for the prize requires that this is their first children's novel. As well as encouraging publishers to find and promote new writers, the Award sets out to alert readers of all ages to the work of interesting newcomers.

The Award is the joint idea of Julia Eccleshare MBE and Anne Marley MBE. Julia is the director of the Hay Festival children's programme. Anne was Head of Children's, Youth & Schools Services for Hampshire Library & Information Service for many years and helped to found Authors Aloud UK, an author booking agency.

This year's judges are Maisie Chan, author and winner of the **2022 Branford Boase Award**; critic and writer Joanne Owen; Darren Matthews, Primary Advisory Teacher at the **Centre for Literacy in Primary Education**; and Sajeda Amir, English teacher and KS3 coordinator at Levenshulme High School, Manchester. The judging panel is chaired by Julia Eccleshare, children's director of the Hay Festival.

Christine Pillainayagam was born in Norwich, grew up in Sheringham and attended school in Holt and Norwich. She now lives in Faversham in Kent. She is a writer and retail strategist. A mild obsession with The Beatles and the desire to write a story that reflected her own experiences growing up as a first-generation immigrant led her to put that love of music and words into a book. **Ellie Pillai is Brown** features songs written by the protagonist, Ellie, and they are available to listen to via QR codes in the book. **Ellie Pillai is Brown** was shortlisted for the Waterstones Children's Book Award and the Jhalak Children's and YA Prize. The sequel, **Ellie Pillai is (almost) in Love** is out now.

Leah Thaxton is Publisher at Faber & Faber Children's Books and co-founder of the FAB prize, which foregrounds unrepresented authors and illustrators of colour. She writes books under the pen name Katie Blackburn.

The complete list of titles on the 2023 shortlist are:

The Bones of Me by Kel Duckhouse, edited by Harriet Birkinshaw (Flying Eye Books)

The Eternal Return of Clara Hart by Louise Finch, edited by Siobhán Parkinson (Little Island Books)

Seed by Caryl Lewis, edited by Sarah Hughes, illustrated by George Ermos (Macmillan Children's Books)

Rebel Skies by Ann Sei Lin, edited by Gráinne Clear (Walker Books)

The Cats We Meet Along the Way by Nadia Mikail, edited by Bella Pearson (Guppy Books)

Ellie Pillai is Brown by Christine Pillainayagam, edited by Leah Thaxton (Faber & Faber)

The Haunting of Tyrese Walker by J P Rose, edited by Chloe Thackur (Andersen Press)

The Map of Leaves by Yarrow Townsend, edited by Rachel Leyshon (Chicken House)

Running alongside the Branford Boase Award, the **Henrietta Branford Writing Competition** encourages writing talent in under 18s.

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About the Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society



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The Authors' Licensing and Collecting Society (ALCS) is a not-for-profit organisation started by writers for the benefit of all types of writers. Owned by its members, ALCS collects money due for secondary uses of writers' work.

It is designed to support authors and their creativity; ensure they receive fair payment and see their rights are respected. It promotes and teaches the principles of copyright and campaigns for a fair deal. It represents over 120,000 members, and since 1977 has paid over £650million to writers.

For more information visit alcs.co.uk

About Walker Books

The **Walker Books Group** is one of the world's leading independent publishers of books and content for children. This vibrant international group includes **Walker Books UK**, London; **Candlewick Press**, Somerville, Massachusetts; and **Walker Books Australia**, based in Sydney and Auckland.

Renowned for its truly original publishing and outstanding quality, the **Walker Books Group** is home to books for readers of all ages. Award-winning authors and illustrators for the group include National Ambassador for Children's Literature, Kate DiCamillo, M.T Anderson, Patrick Ness, and Jon Klassen, and major brands for the group are **Maisy**, **Guess How Much I Love You**, **Tilly and Friends**, the widely acclaimed **Judy Moody** and the bestselling **Where's Wally/Where's Waldo**.

For more information about the award, including a full list of past winners, and the Henrietta Branford Writing Competition visit www.branfordboaseaward.org.uk.

Or contact Andrea Reece on 07807893369 or andrea.reece@zen.co.uk

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