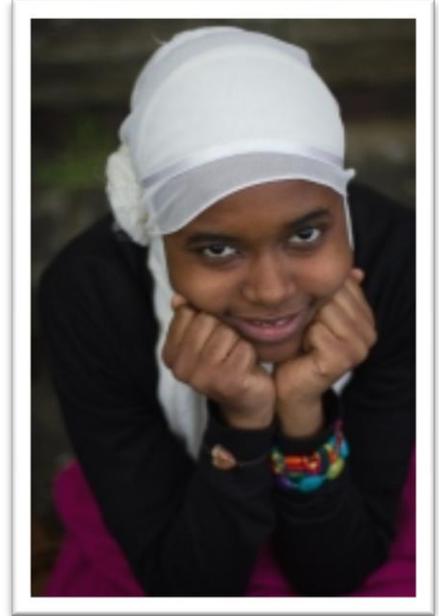


Azfa's Story

I've always wondered how words began. Trying to picture the precise moment, when the caveman opened his rotten mouth, to express something other than a coarse syllable, leads me to wonder when and how words impacted my life.

Coming from a culturally rich background, I have many stories to tell. As a refugee, my mind is packed with memories of Africa, and being raised in Glasgow means I have a strong Scottish identity. However, the power that stories can have came to me through my father's mesmerising ways of storytelling. I was captivated by his dramatic performances and almost poetical narrations that swayed my mind from the poverty I was witnessing outside my bedroom window, to a strange, more comfortable land that seemed oddly familiar. But this is where my stories, memories, pains, joys and laughter stayed. Locked in a box entitled *the past*, buried underneath the sand on a far-away land where my parents felt was a much safer place, and encouraged me to move forward, and pursue an academic, scientific career.



But when I joined First Story in 2011, our writer-in-residence Kate Clanchy had found the key to my past, and was willing to travel with me all the way to an unknown land to unlock my box of memories. Until this day, I have never been so grateful for anything in my life, as I am for First Story.

To you, this organisation may just be a writing charity, but to me it is so much more. First Story has changed my life. It has transformed me from an insecure, lost, quiet, sixteen-year-old refugee, completely embarrassed about every aspect of her identity, to a confident, defiant, ambitious, proud Scottish-African Muslim woman, who is determined to shape her future, and make life better for those around her. It has made me realise that I am significant, and that my voice is important in this world.

First Story's aim is to foster creativity, literacy and talent, which is all fairly capable through people's generous donations. But to young people like myself, having a platform where we can share our writing and express ourselves; learning that we don't have to be doctors in order to make a significant change to people's lives; discovering that if we shout loud enough, then our voices will be heard, and we don't have to resort to violence. That is priceless.

A couple of years ago I would have never thought that I could be someone in life. That my writing would be published in the *New Statesman* magazine. That I would go to the First Story writing residential and meet a person called *Blessing* whose story and past experiences would become the driving force for my future.

If I had the chance to thank the person who donated the money to provide me with the gift of writing, I would thank them with all my heart. Writing is the only thing in the world that makes me happy. It helps me to understand and connect the scattered jigsaws to the puzzle we call life, and makes me determined to help those who want to make the world a more peaceful place.