



Bernardine Evaristo with Mairi Kidd

MK: Well, Hi, my name is Mairi Kidd and in the normal way of things I'd be in the Mitchell library in Glasgow on stage and saying an enormous Glasgow Welcome to Bernadine Evaristo, author of eight books of prose and poetry, and the winner of the Jerwood prize, the Orange panel prize, and of course, the Booker Prize 2019. Among many other amazing career achievements really in activism and in promoting inclusion and literature. I am Head of Literature at Creative Scotland, and one of the supporters of Aye Write Book festival and hundreds of people were ready with their tickets to come and hear, meet you Bernadine and hear more about *Girl, Woman, Other*. I know they're hugely disappointed not to meet you in the flesh. But it's brilliant to be here with you on the Big Book Weekend, hopefully speaking to many, many more people across the UK who've missed out on the COVID-19 disruption of the Book Festival. So thank you so much for your time today.

BE: You're welcome. It's great. It's great to be here.

MK: I know that we maybe we should pretend we're in Glasgow, and we've got a statue with a cone on it's head. And everybody's being really, really, really friendly. Just really unsettling level.

BE: Yeah.

MK: Could I ask you to kick off by introducing the book to anyone who hasn't yet had the chance to read it?

BE: Well, yes, *Girl, Woman, Other*. It's a what I call a fusion fiction novel, which is a term that I think I coined. So it's slightly experimental. Well, it's actually not just slightly experimental it *is* an experimental novel, but it's very readable, always have to say at that same time. It's a book about 12 primarily black British women and their lives. And so they're all equal protagonists in the story, their aged 19 to 93. The youngest is Yazz, who is a university student who lives in London and is at university in Norwich. And the oldest is Hattie, who is a 93 year old farmer who lives in England. And then I have various characters of every age range in between, and the women are a mixture of classes and cultural backgrounds and sexualities, and immigration, experiences, and occupations. And, yeah, and they're kind of origins are in the UK and other places, but also in the black world. So in Africa, and the Caribbean, and the novel kind of looks at each woman's individual life. They all have



a chapter each, but they're all interconnected. So the book is also about the ways in which their lives overlap.

MK: They all seem incredibly real, these characters. Can I ask where they came from, how they evolved as characters?

BE: They, er, come from my imagination, but they also come from my experience of the world. You know, I have been around a long time, I'm 60 years old. And I have known many, many people in my life. And in this sense, these 12 primarily black British women. One is non binary. So I often call them "Womxn" which includes trans non binary characters. They, they're kind of like composites of people that I've known and come across, mixed in with my imagination. There's only one character who is in any way autobiographical, and that is Amma, and Amma was loosely based on my younger self. And, you know, perhaps one or two of the characters are sort of more closely based on people that I've known more specifically. So for example, Yazz, who I mentioned earlier who is the 19 year old student is kind of loosely based on one of my god daughters when she was that age, she's not so young anymore.

And so yeah, that's, that's how they emerge, I find that when I start writing a book, and I have the characters in my mind, at some stage, they emerge in my mind. In this book, I did not start with 12 characters I started with one and one led to another led to another led to another and it was a very organic process. That the act of writing, the process of writing the characters means that they then start to emerge. And I, you know, they're not fully formed in my mind before I put pen to paper, metaphorically speaking. So yeah, so those are some of the things swilling around in terms of how I create characters.

MK: One of the things I thought was really spectacular in the book was the way that you play with the external perceptions others have of characters and then the interior life of the character and their lived experience. And I found you had some fun with that, I think particularly with mothers and daughters, but other times, there was real poignancy. And there's a real, at times maybe some slightly shocking realisations. And was that was that something that was kind of uppermost in your mind? How Robert Burns once said "would some power the gift tay gie us, to see ourselves as others see us"

BE: Yeah, I think I think that was not my intention. But I was interested in multiple perspectives because the book is about multiples as you you've heard, you know, in so many ways, and I'm extremely interested in people. I'm extremely curious person, shall we say even nosy. I really like to know what's going on with people I like to know about their lives. And, as I've, you know, matured over the course of my life. I



find it fascinating the ways in which we see ourselves and often will justify our behaviours as opposed to the way in which we are perceived by other people. And often there is this, sort of, chasm between the two. And in writing this book, I found that it lends itself to humour because you're introduced to a character. Say for example, Amma, who I mentioned, you know, she's a theatre director, she's about my age, she's a lesbian. She's lived this very alternative politicised life ever since she was a teenager. And you know, her daughter Yazz, is always pulling the rug from underneath her pomposity and also showing the ways in which her mother, which she considers her mother to be a hypocrite and for her behaviour to contradict her beliefs. And I think this is what we're all kind of guilty of, if you want to put it that way, or party to, that we're all kind of, you know, complicated, complex, contradictory. You know, we've don't always act in everyone else's best interests. And we don't always act in our own best interests. And those are some of the things that I put into my characters.

MK: In order to achieve some of that reflection, and the humour and the kind of the power of it, you've plotted it so brilliantly and so intricately. So sometimes that the, the links between characters are really deep. Sometimes they're not revealed for long periods, but sometimes they're quite glancing. How on earth did you go about plotting something that was so intricate?

BE: It's, that's really interesting. The use of the word plotting, because some people would say this was a plotless book, because it isn't plotted in the traditional sense of a plot. And I'm not a writer who generally thinks of plot what I think about is structure. How am I going to structure this book to maximum effect so that the reader, you have to have structure in order for the reader to keep on reading. But what happened and what emerged through the novel through me telling all these stories, and then then being some way inter-connected was that it's actually become a book that you could arguably say, has many, many plots, you know, the surface plots, and then they're the undercurrent, on, you know, the plots that are the undercurrent. And then there are plots relative to other characters, because even though there are 12 primary characters, there are also quite a few other characters who sort of peripheral to the story in some ways. So it's, it was really what I was thinking, I wasn't thinking plot, because I don't start with plot. And it's not something that really interests or drives me. I start with, you know, in this case, with this novel, with the characters, with the connections, and then having this intrinsic sense that I need to have all kinds of tensions in this book in order for it to work. And, you know, I teach Creative Writing You know, I'm professor of creative writing at Brunel University London (plug for the university). I keep forgetting that this is like a live event and I can be a bit more relaxed to the camera like I'm going to be on television or something. Yeah, I can be more relaxed. Yeah, so what was I going to say? So,



you know, I teach creative writing. And the thing that I'm passionate about, about are characters, characters, you know, characters, human beings, interest me, fascinate me, deeply. Whereas plot is always going to be secondary to that. And I know that's not the case with other writers, especially writers of particular genres such as thriller, or crime fiction, for example. They are, the plot has to be absolutely embedded in the concept of the novel. But I don't find it interesting and I'm also a writer who's very interested in language. My background was in poetry and theatre, but my dramatic writing was always dramatic poetry. My first book was a poetry book. Subsequently two verse novels. So language is really important to me, the rhythm of my sentences, my words choice, the... just the ways in which I might be able to enrich language without going over the top. So, for me, it's language, it's character. And then that thing called plot, or structure is kind of, comes along with it and has to be part of it. But it doesn't, in my mind, dominate.

MK: I wonder too, if I could ask you about the diaspora that the novel reflects? And listening to you talk about structure. It does still, it feels driven by a sort of almost an idea of a larger character, which is that diaspora. And I was really taken by that idea maybe that you could grow up a few miles away from someone and move to a whole different country and then meet them, and that your life then is entwined with theirs. I have a friend in Lewis in the Western Isles whose grandparents did that they emigrated from literally next door villages and got married in Chicago. And, is that diaspora community, something that motivates you and drives you?

BE: Yeah, I mean, the African diaspora is, is what I write about, you know, in lots of different ways. That doesn't mean to say I don't write about other characters, I don't have other characters, white characters and so on. I do. But I'm deeply interested in the African diaspora. And you know, to write a novel, with so many characters based in the UK, I couldn't just make it as a British Caribbean story, or British African story or even just a black British story. My background is, I'm half English and half Nigerian, with Brazilian roots but also Irish and German, on both sides of my family. So, I'm very much the embodiment of multicultural Britain. I've grown up in this country, you know, I grew up in a place called Woolwich, which when I was coming of age, you know, when I was a child was actually completely white. Now it's a very, very multicultural part of the city. And I've mixed all my adult life with people from the African diaspora, and, and people who are the children or grandchildren of immigrants from all over the place. My life has been a very multicultural life. And that is part of the story of growing up in London, especially most of it being sort of quite near the centre, and in some of the very sort of culturally diverse districts. And as a black British writer, I'm very interested in black British stories, because I feel that we have over generally been overlooked. You know, there have been lots of African novels that have come out over the last 20 years, and



African American novels have been huge globally for a very long time now, but actually, black British novels there aren't that many of us, but in writing a black British story, I have to also connect to the Caribbean and Africa at least to those two places, and that's what I've done with this book. So you will get characters who are, you know, they have their origins in places in Africa, characters who have their origins in places in the Caribbean. And also, as well as elsewhere, because some of them are mixed race. and so some of them have got Asian in them, as well as characters who are British born and perhaps go back generations. So, like, there may be it was a great grandparent who came from Africa and settled here, because I also wanted to look at Black British history, which is something that's been a occupation of mine for a very long time as a writer, because we have actually been here for a very long time in this in this country. You know, my, my novel, *The Emperor's Babe* about a black girl growing up in Roman London nearly 2000 years ago, was as far back as I've gone with that, and I'd love to go further back actually. So, so all of these things are uppermost in my mind as I'm writing the book, not that I wanted the book to represent black British women's experience, because no single work, as we know, can represent any kind of community or wider demographic. But I wanted to expand the representation of who we are in this country. And that meant engaging with the diaspora in lots of different ways. I said at the beginning that some of the characters are immigrants, so that's true, some of them are immigrants, but many of them are not. And I also wanted to make that point that, you know, as I said, about the sort of Roman, you know, black people in Roman Britain, in my book *The Emperor's Babe*, you know, we are deeply rooted in this country going back hundreds of years. And if you look at the Romans actually thousands of years, and that's if there's a point I'm making, that was also what I wanted to make with a couple of the characters who are older and one of whom is deceased, a 19th century character. So it really was to sort of explode any kind of reductive ideas that people might have about who we are in this country. And I explode it in lots of different ways, not just with their different cultural origins and their distance from the country of origin of whichever parent came from Africa or the Caribbean, or even Asia. But also through their sexuality, through the different classes that they are, that they come, you know, class is very fluid in our society today. So, you know, some of them may come from very humble beginnings, but they certainly move beyond that. And occupations, you know, black women and work, whoever talks about that -we don't. So, I wanted like to have a spread of occupations that would be conceivable in terms of their interrelationships with each other.

MK: That seems very much also to chime with the way that the book explores sexuality and one of my I think one of my favourite, tiny little, almost, almost throw away, but of course nothing in a book is ever throw away. It's all in there. And it's all been chosen. But there's a lovely reference when Lennox, Shirley's husband, talks



about his great aunt Myrtle and her partner, I think, was Gabrielle. And that as a child he's found these photographs of them with monocles and smoking cigars, wearing riding jackets and plus-fours. And, and as a child, he thought, well, that, you know, that they were dressed up with some kind of fancy dress party. I think that it that brings some two of the things that we've been talking about together, the idea that we've underserved, the idea that, you know, we were always here, that that has been underserved. And that literary history has underserved so many people. And but additionally, that all the characters in the novel are guilty of that to a degree too, and it's because it reminds me of that point that the young can be quite bold in their own modernity and forget that older people and people in the past lived in their *own* modernity and might have to challenged that modernity too. So was that again, something that you were kind of keen to play with and to, to explore?

BE: Absolutely, absolutely. It's so important because a lot of, you know, we know how history is told and recorded. And the stories of the majority are actually *excluded* from the telling of history. I mean, how many books and films and television series do we need to consume about the royal family, or about the aristocracy, who are a tiny percentage of this population. The majority of people in history were working class, for example. Those are the stories really we should be exploring. And when it comes to race, or sexuality, it's the same, you know, we're written out of history. And it's always what it's usually people such as myself, people who want to see ourselves reflected in the culture, who do the work of excavating the history. And that's kind of what I think I'm doing as a writer in general. Obviously, that's not transparent, perhaps. But that's, my remit, it's to bring those stories to life and back to life and that history to life. And so the sort of queer history of Britain is one that's not very well known at all, let alone a black queer history. So even me writing the character of Amma, who's a lesbian, and coming through, you know, part of this really sort of active lesbian multicultural community of the 80s is excavating history for people who were born in 2000. Because for them, that was 20 years before they were born. That's ancient history. And they won't find very easily any record of that. I'm not an archivist. I'm not a historian. If I was, that would be my project, would be to bring that aspect of 1980s counter cultural history alive, but because I'm a creative writer, I did that through Amma. And at the point when I wrote Amma I was very aware that there was a new generation of young women out there. And especially lots of young women of colour were British. And were coming into their own, coming of age, very vocal, really adept at using social media, and but without seemingly any knowledge of our history. And I found it really quite infuriating. And they would often reference African American feminist history, but they wouldn't even think to look at the history in this country. So, so that job that archaeological creative job is part of the fun of being a writer because I'm not just a writer who writes for the sake of it. And you know, I don't just come up with an idea and think, Okay, I'm going to write that. I'm a



very political writer. I'm writing I'm writing presence into absence. I'm writing the stories and the histories that aren't there. I do play around with it, you know, I have created alternate universes for two of my books. So I'm not some kind of po faced, serious writer. There's a lot of humour in my work. But, that is the tool that you know, creative writing, fiction, writing verse fiction, whatever are the tools at my disposal to bring those kinds of stories out there to a wider audience and readership.

MK: I was interested in terms of how you, I think in the book have brought out stories that perhaps have been, well, I think so many of the stories have been undertold, as you say, but there are there are challenges too, I think I have never read a book before that looks at domestic violence or perhaps domestic violence is well, no, it's not too strong a term, but gaslighting and coercive control in same sex relationships. And that was fascinating to me, particularly that in the story in which that theme is drawn out there's such an interest between a sort of principled life and the reality of that principled life. Was that something that you felt was a weight on you? Or are you free as a storyteller to essentially go anywhere that you want to go,

BE: I feel completely free to go anywhere I want to go. And I'm also very interested in exploding all kinds of myths and stereotypes. And, you know, the idea that women to women relationships, you know, lesbian relationships are somehow morally superior to other kinds of relationships is a myth, you know, so entertaining the idea that, you know, emotional manipulation, domestic violence, all the kinds of things that might happen in a heterosexual relationship can also happen in a homosexual relationship. And so that was I was that's what I was exploring with Dominique and her partner Nzynga. But at the same time as writing this, I did have, you know, some reservations about it, because I thought, hmm, so I've got these this novel and there are, you know, women on the queer spectrum. Maybe about a third of them are, and then the rest of them are straight women. But I am exploring a negative, a toxic relationship, which is a lesbian relationship. And are people going to be offended by that? Now, I don't generally listen to those voices. And I didn't listen to that voice. But I have to acknowledge it was there for a while. But then I thought, No, no, no, this is my job as a writer, it's to write the uncomfortable truths it's to write about the things that aren't spoken about. It's to explore all aspects of relationships that many people experience, but we don't have a vocabulary for or are unable to articulate it. And it's also to, my job as a writer is to create characters who are flawed. I know that's a cliché for anyone teaching creative writing that's a cliché 'flawed characters, flawed characters', but that is the truth of it. So I will push my characters as far as they need to go in service of the story I want to tell about them without making them so dislikeable that characters you know, sorry, it's so dislikeable that readers will completely be completely repelled by them. Because I want the reader to experience is our humanity. And our humanity comes with all



kinds of complications and behaviour and misbehaviour, and agendas and motivations and all kinds of things that make us human. So in a sense, what I'm saying is to be human is to be all of these things that you see in the novel. If I were to create an idealised set of characters, nobody would read the book, well they'd be bored to tears. So, you know, nobody is idealised or mythologized, and certainly the lesbian characters are not. And I think that makes them more perhaps more accessible and perhaps more relatable to people because they see their humanity.

MK: Can I ask a nosy question? You said before that you're motivated at times by nosiness. And thinking about particularly that storyline in the novel, there's a bit of reference later Dominique finds out some of what might have happened or a bit of the backstory, just a bit. And that made me wonder, were there any stories either peripheral characters, you know, some of the enormous characters in the novel we don't really see internally, we see their effects on others. Were there any characters that you would have wanted to take further? Did you excise anything that you kind of that was painful to you when you were editing?

BE: Yeah, not not because it was painful. But because they didn't, they took me away from the idea of 12 narratives. So you know, as a writer, I've got to be very disciplined. And once I've decided this is the character whose story I'm telling in that moment, I have to make sure that the whole chapter, you know whether it's Yazz, Carole, Shirley, Hattie Amma, whoever, that the whole chapter services their narrative. And of course, there are, as you say, lots and lots of characters coming and going who are not protagonists. They're not one of the 12 co protagonists. And one of them is Roland, actually, Roland is, you know, very old good friend of Amma.s. He's a theatre, sorry, he's not a theatre director. *She's* a theatre director. He's a professor at a university. He's a writer. He's very successful, and he fathered her daughter as an arrangement. Yazz. And I found Roland lots of fun to write because he's very pompous and unself-aware. And yeah, just, yeah, characters who make me laugh, I tend to really enjoy writing them. And that may sound strange again, like, What do you mean? The character makes you laugh? You're writing the character. But yes, I am writing the character, but they still make me laugh. I guess I'm laughing at my own kind of creation, you know. And Roland was one of those characters who entertained me a lot. And I do know people a bit like Roland, you know.

MK: I once spoke to an author who said to me that she had become, sort of, so at home with a character that she kind of expected to bump into them places. That it was as though they existed and she wrote in her own world, so it was still the one day they would bump into each other in the supermarket and they jumped off the page.



BE: Yes, that's really crazy, though. She's crazy. Not quite like that. But they do - They do take on a life of their own. So I had to nip Roland in the bud. In fact, I did give him his section when I sent the manuscript initially to my publisher, and then they pointed it out to me. Actually Rowland skews the balance of this being a novel about 12 primarily black British women. So, so his story had to be cut right back. And that was quite painful to do because I thought I liked him as a creation. But I do get attached to my characters. Not so much with this novel, but definitely my last one, Mr Loverman. 74 year old gay Caribbean man and his partner and lover, Morris, married, children, grandchildren, you know, everything kicks off because he's been in the closet, closet gay for 50 years. He is the protagonist, you know, he is the main figure and I really got inside him as a writer and it was huge fun to write and I kind of felt sorry when I had to, you know, put him down and say okay, that's it now your story is finished. And the same with Zuleika. The girl who grows up in Roman London in the Emperor's babe, I was really invested in her as a character. And I was quite upset when, no spoilers, but when the ending happens. Because it was like, Okay, that's it now. So yeah, they do take a life of their own. And maybe that is because I began as an actor. You know, I was an actor from the age of 12. I was at the Youth Theatre, and I trained at drama school for three years. And then I wrote for theatre and acted at the same time, which I think is a very special thing, you know, to perform your own words. So I was writing but also performing my own words at the same time. And what I've come to realise is that my work has a very performative quality. And I think that's because I kind of approach characterization in a similar way to approach acting, you know, I try to become my characters, and to write them from the inside.

MK: That might be an opportunity to ask if you would like to read something from the book? I would love to hear.

BE: Yes, I can. What would you like? Let me just go and get a copy. Okay.

MK: I would like to, I think I would like to ask about hearing a bit of Bummi's story

BE: So a lot of people are attached to Bummi actually,

MK: I was. I think also I found I was, I was sad for her that she found something at one point that she doesn't get to keep. And yeah, I think the bit that stuck with me as a really wistful sadness.

BE: Yes, yes.



BE: Okay, so I'll just read from the beginning of Bummi's section. So Bummi is, she's a Nigerian immigrant. She's the mother of Carole, who so she's a Nigerian immigrant. She lives in Peckham in southeast London, which is sort of multicultural, was a very working class part of London. Now becoming gentrified. Her husband dies when he's quite young, and she raises her daughter alone. She's a cleaner. Carole, her daughter, is mentored at school by a teacher called Shirley who also has her own section and ends up at Oxford, and then becomes a banker.

“Bummi did not foresee the long term negative impact of her daughter going to the famous University for rich people, especially when she returned home after her first term wailing that she could not go back because she did not belong there. Were upon Bummi applied a tissue or two to her daughter's eyes and cheeks and asked her outright and forthrightly “Carole, have I raised a fighter or a quitter, you must return to the university and get your degree by hook or by crook. Or I cannot vouch for the consequences of my actions.”

Bummi did not subsequently expect Carole to return home after her second term speaking out of her nose, like there was a sneeze trapped up it, instead of using the powerful vibrations of her Nigerian vocal power, all the while looking haughtily around their cosy little flat as if it was now a flea pit. Did she think her Mamma did not notice the external manifestation of her internal mind.

Eh , eh , you do not raise the child without becoming an expert in the nonverbal signals. They think you are too stupid to see. That first summer Carole, sorry. That first summer holiday, Carole worked in Marks and Spencer in Lewisham, not to start paying off her student debt, like a responsible adult, but to buy clothes from those expensive fashion shops called Oasis and Zara, instead of getting bargains at New Look and Peacock. In her second year, she barely came home at all. And by her final year, she was spending weekends and holidays at her friend Rosie's family manor in the countryside which had more rooms than a housing estate, she said, “It's simply divine Mother”. Simply divine Mother, was she being ironical? When Bummi watched her daughter collect her degree at graduation, tears streamed down her face so heavily. It was like rain lashing a car window without the windscreen wipers. She wished Augustine was here to witness their little girl making it. She also wished Carole had come home to continue celebrations with the pots of bush stew Bummi had cooked specially, hoping that now her daughter had graduated, she would return to her real culture, and even eat with her hands again, instead of side glancing her Mamma for doing so, as if she was a savage from the jungle.



Before she got back on the train back to London, Bummi impressed upon Carole for the umpteenth time, that now she had to acquire a high flying job, and then a respectable Nigerian husband. In order to give her grandchildren.”

I'll leave it there. It's very strange reading while I'm at home. I'm tripping over it because my mind is still kind of like in home mode.

MK: Yeah, I understand. It is a novel. You mentioned your background in theatre and it's a novel that, it's got a real love for theatre in it because Amma is such, in some ways is the heart of those narratives or because we meet her first she feels like our guide in some ways. And I want to ask you are you hopeful for theatre coming out of this situation? The COVID measures seem, theatre seems to be one of the art forms, that is so impacted and it's so frightening to those of us who love it and have worked in it.

BE: It's really scary actually. Because, obviously theatre is for actors and people working in the profession is a very precarious profession anyway. Do you know what I mean? I mean actors are out of work most of the time. And, also, theatre needs people to congregate in close proximity to each other. And of course, that's not going to be happening now. And who knows when? I guess, when we have a vaccine, perhaps, is when we kind of go back to what we had before. Who knows?.

So I am very worried about it.

But at the same time, I also know that people are going to be creating, and they're definitely going to be creating as of this moment, and it may even inspire a new generation, a new generation of theatre makers. My only concern is that people shouldn't just jump on to writing COVID dramas, you know, because I'm not going to, and there's a reason I'm not going to because everybody else is going to be doing that. But it might inspire people in other ways, just in the ways in terms of the ways that we're kind of, you know, there's a feeling that we're valuing community more at the moment, and people are prioritising differently. And I think this experience for us will deepen, the longer we're in lockdown, because we're all kind of having to self-reflect, I think, to a greater or lesser extent. But I'm hopeful for theatre, it will definitely bounce back. You know, we all bounce back, the arts always bounces back. But I think it will need a lot of support from the funders to make up for the time that's lost.

MK: It was actually, because we were scheduled to have this conversation about a month or more ago. And that, what happened happened. It was actually really strange, I reread the novel, just to make sure it was all fresh in my mind. And in some ways, it's a strange experience reading a novel that is so vast, I know, it ranges across England and indeed the Caribbean and further afield, but it still feels



like a London novel to me. In some ways it's a love letter to London, the way that I read it. And it's strange, it's almost, in this bizarre moment it reads differently because of that feeling of - This is how we lived until very recently, and what will change and some of the real inequalities that we're seeing increasingly highlighted, we all knew we're there. But we're seeing highlighted. In some ways, part of me. So I was reflecting whether, in some ways, I'm absolutely with you, we shouldn't be jumping on the bandwagon of writing COVID narratives. And it's slightly makes my heart sink when I see competitions to write the time of COVID, but interesting to see in the longer term, how it changes our thinking.

BE: If it does, you know,

MK: Indeed, I'm kind of hoping, I've got my fingers crossed. I'm aware that might be a naive position. But I'm aware we've got this far and we haven't mentioned the fact that this, that you and the book were most deserving winner of the Booker Prize. You have been involved in prizes from both sides, a winner of the Jerwood prize and more and also an organiser of prizes. So, what's the experience been like and has it made you think differently about prizes? Has it cemented them in your mind as important?

BE: Well, it is a case of winner takes all I think with, certainly with the Booker Prize, you know, I didn't I, you know, obviously the Booker Prize is like, sort of, the predominant prize, I think, fiction in the world. And I didn't realise quite how significant it was until I won it. It is so interesting, because obviously, it's, it's been around for a very long time. And I followed it for many, many years. But winning it changed everything for me. And it has so much significance, you know, just everywhere, everywhere I go. And so my career went from, in fact, people still can't spell my name, but even more so, you know, "Bernadine Evaristo how do you spell that" to people being honoured to meet me, you know, so I would do things for people and they say, 'Oh, that was an honour.' I was like, well, you wouldn't have said that a month ago.

But it's improved the fortunes of my career in every way imaginable, every way imaginable. In terms of recognition, in terms of readership, you know, my expanded readership. In terms of translation rights, in terms of media exposure. And yeah, it's it's just been the most incredible, positive, experience for me. And it's of course shocking that it took until 2019 for a black woman to win this prize and for most people not to notice that, you know, that was the case. And also for a black *British* person to win this prize. Because I'm very much into supporting black you know, homegrown black British artists because I think we can get overlooked and so I that's my responsibility is to champion black British arts I've taken that on have done



for many years and also arts by people of colour. People who are marginalised and underrepresented in this country. But when it comes to some of the prizes out there, and it's not just the Booker. The Booker has actually, you know, been awarded to people of colour for a very long time. I think the first person was V.S. Naipaul in 1971. It just hadn't gone to a black person or black British black British people or black British or a black woman. But there are other prizes out there that are disgraceful, I have to say, I'm not even going to mention names, and I could. So I think I think prizes are important. But I think somehow that the best prizes are the prizes that do more than just anoint an individual writer. So, I set up the Brunel international African poetry prize in 2012. And that was to develop, promote and celebrate African poetry. Because African poetry was nowhere on the international landscape. That year I had chaired the Caine prize for African fiction, which had revolutionised the fortunes of African fiction for, at that stage, for over 10 years. Before that prize came along, African fiction was nowhere. Within 10 years, you know, it had raised the profile of African fiction, and suddenly it blew up. And it was a big thing in our culture, African novels, people were discovering African novels, but African poetry was nowhere. So, this prize was just to try to do with the Caine prize had done and then I hooked up with Kwame Dawes, who's an amazing poet and professor at the University of Nebraska. He runs the African poetry book fund, which he set up the same year I set up the Brunel international African poetry prize, it's such a mouthful. And basically, he produces these beautiful box sets of poetry, of chapbooks by poets, and you'll have a box set of maybe seven or eight poets who published their first chapbooks with him. And so, with us working together, judging each other's prizes, and partnering up in various ways, a lot of my short listed poets have gone on to be published through him. And also a lot of them are now publishing their own books. So in that period of time, eight years, we've seen a huge growth in African poets. So today we can probably talk about 70 or 80 international African poets who are out there, publishing books and doing the job of poetry in the world. And the other thing about my prize is, is that in the first year we gave it to one person, second year we gave it one person, third year we gave it to two people, a couple of years ago we gave it to three people, and I was fully behind that because I think 'share the love'. You know, there wasn't an outright winner so let's share it between three poets and then they've all got that behind them to help build their careers. So this is some of what I do, which I've been doing for a very long time. Kind of, we call it activism now, but I don't know what I called it before. I just called myself an advocate.

MK: I think advocate is a very good word. And it has been an honour, you've been so generous with your time and your insight into how you work and what you believe in. And this is an absolutely glorious novel and it was an absolute honour to speak to you about it. So thank you so much.



BE: Thank you – I'll look forward to coming to Glasgow another time!

MK: Absolutely

BE: Thanks very much – bye everybody