



Kia Abdullah and Abir Mukherjee

KA: Hi everyone, thank you for joining us today. I am Kia Abdullah, author of *Take It Back*, and I'm joined by Abir Mukherjee, the best-selling author of the Sam Wyndham crime series.

AM: Hi, Kia.

KA: Before we dive in I thought we'd tell you a little bit about our books. Abir, do you want to go first?

AM: No, no, you go first. Ladies first.

KA: Well, I thought 'age before beauty', so I thought you might want to go first!

AM: (laughs) You go first.

KA: Okay. I'm the author of *Take It Back*, a courtroom drama set in East London. It follows a barrister turned rape counsellor, named Zara Kaleel. One day Zara is in her office when a sixteen year old girl walks in, called Jodie, who says that she was raped by four of her classmates. Jodie is white, the four boys she accuses are Muslim. That creates a bit of a firestorm in the streets of East London, and we follow Zara and Jodie through the course of this rape trial that becomes quite explosive. Now Abir, over to you.

AM: I write a series called *The Wyndham and Banerjee* novels set in colonial India in the 1920s and feature a British detective called Sam Wyndham and an Indian sergeant called Surrender-not Banerjee. Essentially I'm looking at the history of the British in India at the same time killing a lot of people along the way. Because that's the best way to look at history. My most recent book is *Death in the East*, the fourth in the series. It's a wee bit different from the others in



that this one has two timelines: one in East of India and the other in the East End of London. It sees my hero Sam Wyndham come across a ghost from his past. The book started off as my homage to Agatha Christie. I always wanted to write a locked-room mystery, where there's a body found murdered in a room with the door and windows locked – how was the murder committed? It just took me five years to come up with something that worked that hadn't been done before. It's my latest one and hopefully people will like it.

AM: I love Sam Wyndham and I already have ideas of who I want to play him on screen. We can talk about that later. Today we're here to talk about social divisions. What strikes me is that both our novels have central characters who are dealing with quite an elemental division in their lives. Zara, the rape counsellor in my book, she is Muslim herself and is going up against four Muslim boys and because of that she's accused of being a traitor. With Sam Wyndham he's basically part of the machinery that upholds Empire, although he doesn't necessarily agree with the system. So I was interested in how you created a sympathetic character who isn't necessarily on the right side of history.

AM: That's a really good question. I should say I think your book is such an impressive debut. It's such a difficult topic to handle and you handle it with such aplomb. In terms of Sam, I think for me, he's a bit of a man out of time. I think when you're writing historical fiction you always have that, or at least most of the time you do, because if he was to be the generic man, a British man from the 1920s, the chances are he'd be racist and homophobic, and not a particularly nice person to follow. At the same time I don't think he's completely anachronistic. The fact is there were good people at the time who realised that the endeavour of Empire wasn't what it was cracked up to be – it wasn't this great civilising mission that it was sold as in this country. You had a lot of people going out there and realising that truth was very different and you can see that from books like *Burmese Days* by George Orwell, where you actually get to the truth of Empire and the impact of Empire not just upon the colonial subject races but on the people actually doing the governing. I wanted Sam to be able to hold up that mirror to the society that he represented, partly because I've always been interested in this idea of a 'good person upholding a system that they don't believe in', and secondly, it's this



period in our shared history, British and Indian shared history, that I don't think we think about. We don't look at. We either brush it under the carpet or we look at it through rose-tinted specs, almost as if it was like *Downton Abbey*. What I wanted to do was give a different view to it. You and I know, we grew up between cultures, we know the history that's taught here isn't necessarily the truth, and similarly the history taught in the sub-continent is not necessarily the truth; I think it falls somewhere in-between. That's really what I wanted to get at through these two men.

KA: One thing I really love that you've managed to do is inject humour into your books as well. *Take It Back* is quite serious, maybe that's just because I'm unable to be funny, sadly.

AM: I think you're dealing with a very, very serious subject.

KA: I just wondered, obviously you're dealing with some really difficult topics as well, and you're dealing with it with a light touch, but is there anger too, and how did you balance that gravity with the levity?

AM: That's a really good question. You're not the first person to have asked me about the anger. Another writer said 'Aren't you angry at the way people were treated? And the way minorities are treated today?' And the answer is yes, but you know there's a limit to how angry you can be, and there's a limit to the effectiveness of anger. If you're constantly angry, and you're constantly banging a drum, it almost puts people on the defensive. Whereas if you can tackle something with a bit of levity, then I think it sort of disarms your audience in a way. And I'm very lucky, I come from the West Coast of Scotland. Glasgow is a very hard, working class city. It's a city that's had a lot of issues, and the way people deal with that a lot of the time is through gallows humour. I think that's true of many working class cities. I think if you look at the East End of London you see a similar thing, in Liverpool you'll see a similar black gallows humour as a way of dealing with really serious and dark issues. It's a great coping mechanism.



KA: It's a great way to draw people into the debate as well, isn't it? If you take a pure, dogmatic – 'these are the crimes that Britain committed' – that kind of attitude, you are going to alienate people. Whereas if you're wrapping it up into the context of a thriller, you're almost educating people in a stealth-mode kind of way.

AM: Absolutely. None of us like being told something we disagree with. I find it very hard to watch the news sometimes. Especially in this day and age where we tend to live in our own bubble, and only listen to opinions we already agree with. To get an idea across, to get an alternative version of events across, is extremely difficult. You can't hit people over the head – you can! – but I'd suggest to do it entertainingly and to do it in a way that makes them think 'Actually, you know what, I am open minded to this other point of view' – I think that's better done. Utilising where possible things like humour and empathy. At the end of the day nobody that I've met is 100% evil or 100% good, we're all on this spectrum. Everybody wants to think the best of themselves, everyone wants to think they're open-minded to a degree. And most people that I've met are. And so if you give them a chance, if you don't paint people in just black and white, if you show them the greys and you show them that everybody has a better side and a worse side, then people are a lot more open to your arguments, I think.

KA: Do you find that people are put off your novels because they think they're going to be really heavy and quite dogmatic in tone? Or do you think people recognise that you can just read them as gripping thrillers?

AM: I don't know. I think it's changed overtime. I think at the start there were people who, when I started out, because people didn't know the sort of book I was writing, there was this assumption. I still think there is – amongst people who haven't read the work – there is this assumption, and we can talk about this more a bit later, there is this assumption about the sorts of books Asian writers are writing, or they expect Asian writers to write. And I didn't want to fall into that trap. It's actually become easier over time. Now that I'm on my fourth book, a lot of people know what to expect. There's a lot of word of mouth. People have said, you should read this, try this. And that's worked really well. The curious thing in terms of pushback has



been, the two people I probably make fun of most in the book are the Bengalis – my parents are from West Bengal, I think your parents are from Bangladesh.

KA: Yeah, that's right.

AM: Bengal is this big area in the East of India, half of which is now Bangladesh, the other half is part of India. That's where my family's from. The two peoples I make most fun of are Bengalis and Scots. Because for me it's just therapy, that's all I'm doing, I'm just pointing out the hypocrisies in the two sides of my personality. And I get Bengalis coming up to me saying, 'You're very, very harsh on the Scots', and Scots coming up to me saying, 'You're very funny about the Scots, but what you said about the Bengalis, that was... you know.' So people notice themselves and don't have a problem with that, but they think I'm being harsh towards the other side, which is really quite interesting.

KA: Equal Opportunities Offender, let's say.

AM: Absolutely. And it's love. It comes from a very loving place, my offensiveness.

KA: Well, see that's interesting because my novel was probably a lot angrier than yours. As you said, it's a serious subject – and I think you *can* inject humour into anything – but mine is quite angry. People ask me, 'Does it come from a place of anger because you are quite – not necessarily negative, but critical – of certain communities.' I did an interview with the BBC and he said, 'Well, you're not very nice to Asian men'. And I said, 'Well, so much of it is based on my own experience and so obviously as minority writers, we have a responsibility towards the communities we're writing about, but equally I don't think there's any point in sanitising what you're writing about in order to please an imagined audience.'

AM: I want to pick up on that point. I'm going to ask you this question: Do you think we have this responsibility to the communities we're writing about? Or do we have a responsibility to tell the story and the truth that we want to tell?



KA: Well, I think we have the responsibility to be authentic, but I don't think we have a responsibility to be positive. And so those are separate things. I've had people pick up on the Elevator Pitch of my book which is 'Four Muslim boys are accused of raping a disabled white girl'. And I can completely see why people would balk at that and say, 'Well, you're feeding into the same narratives we see in the tabloids.' You have to obviously identify what's legitimate criticism, and I do try to engage with people. I had a girl stand up at a Literary Festival and say, 'I'm not going to read your book because it sounds like it's going to be another negative story about Muslims,' and I wanted to say to her that in the book, both the antagonists and the protagonist are Muslim, and I think one of the problems people have with *Take It Back* is that Zara is not Muslim enough for them. I've had somebody say Zara's not a Muslim-enough name, it could be a White name. They've said the fact that she's a barrister isn't Muslim enough, which I think is hugely problematic – are you saying that they can't be barristers? On top of that, the boys are hardly shown to be particularly devout or traditional, so it's absolutely not the case that the devout Muslims are the bad guys, and the progressive Muslims are the good guys. The whole point of my novel is that we do things both good and bad because we choose to do them as individuals. That does get lost, and I do feel a bit of responsibility to be authentic, but again that's not the same thing as the responsibility to be positive. What do you think?

AM: I think you're right. I think there is a tendency amongst certain parts of our community to stick their heads collectively in the sand. And there can be a perception that anybody who speaks out on certain issues is doing something counter-productive. Well, I would argue the opposite: you're shining a light on an issue we know is there. Now that may act as ammunition for groups that disagree with – racist or right-wing groups – but that doesn't mean we shouldn't discuss it. We can't brush it under the carpet. If we do that I don't think we're any further forward. What I'd ask you is how many of these issues are issues of religion, and actually more issues of class?



KA: There are certain things I tackle, and in fact that's one of the criticisms: somebody said to me, you're dealing with race, faith, gender – and I thought, well, I am a woman of colour who happens to be a Muslim, so these are things that I deal with in my life, which is why they're in my book. It's class and it's also the mistreatment, not just by the media, but our perceptions of people that we meet. An example I always draw on: I used to work at *Rough Guides*, the travel publisher, and I remember we were interviewing for a role, and somebody said, 'I hate to say it, but there's a British premium, isn't there?' and that really affected me because I could see why they'd said that. I'd made a conscious decision to try to interview more people who had more ethnic-sounding names, but people who weren't educated in Britain obviously couldn't communicate as well as somebody who was schooled and raised in Britain. I say, 'obviously'; many people have better language skills than I do. I thought how has that affected me in my life? My name is Kia Abdullah. And so there's so much there that we're struggling with, it's not just faith, as you say, it's class, it's gender, its socioeconomic barriers, it's who you're friends with, there's nepotism to deal with, and so all of those things. I think it's a rich area for fiction, which is why I understand why so many Asian authors or authors of colour choose to tackle those things. But I don't think they have a responsibility to tackle those things as part of their duty of being an author.

AM: Absolutely. I think you should be able to write about whatever you want to write about. As you say, as long as you're dealing with it truthfully and not just propagandising one aspect or another, I think that's the right way to do it. And of course you're going to get criticism; it's probably a sign that you're doing your job well.

KA: Yeah.

AM: You are getting criticism.

KA: One thing that really struck me about Sam Wyndham is that obviously he's a white narrator and you're an Asian man. I remember mentioning this book to a friend of mine, and he said 'oh that's quite unusual'. And I wanted to know when you started to write the series whether



you considered writing it from an Indian's point of view or was it always going to be – you are, after all, British – was it always going to be a white British man?

AM: That's a really interesting question, and I think it's actually linked to what you've just been talking about, about communities, as well. The fact is we're both Bengalis but we're very different Bengalis in terms of our communities. My community came here in the 60s as middle-class professionals, they didn't come with money, but the vast majority of Hindu Bengalis came here as engineers, doctors, lawyers, accountants. And what that meant was that they had a ticket into society which is a very different ticket to which other communities such as Bangladeshi Muslims, Pakistanis who came as generally working class communities, they came with a different level of social capital. Which meant the level of integration that Hindu Bengalis of my generation have had is very different to a lot of other communities. I come from a community which is basically a community of 'coconuts' – for the listeners who may not know that term, a 'coconut' is basically somebody who is brown on the outside and white on the inside. The fact is that our community integrated, found it a lot more easy to integrate, because of the social capital that they came with. They came with social capital which translated into financial security a lot quicker than a lot of other communities. What that meant is that people of my generation who are Hindu Bengali, British-born Hindu Bengalis, our level of understanding of our culture and of our Indian heritage is probably not to the same degree as people who grew up with Bangladeshi-Muslim-Bengali backgrounds, or Pakistanis. Firstly, our community didn't congregate in one place, we're spread out across the country. Wherever there's a hospital, you'll find Hindu-Bengali doctors. Even in the Outer Hebrides, you know, there are Bengali doctors there. That meant that we didn't have the same cultural – we didn't have this hothouse – and when it came to writing these books, I just didn't feel comfortable that I could portray the Hindu-Bengali Indian's point of view in a way that was authentic. It was the first thing I'd ever written and I felt more comfortable writing about an English White person authentically than I did about a Hindu-Bengali Indian, which you can take one of two ways. You can either say, 'Well, that's a sign of integration,' or you can take it as 'My God, that's ridiculous, you've lost all idea of your heritage.' The truth is probably somewhere in the middle. The fact is that when I started out writing, I didn't feel I could do justice to the Indian's point



of view in that book. I'm writing book five now and it's the first time that I'm writing from the Indian's point of view, so we're hearing Surendranath, the Sergeant, we're hearing his voice for the first time in this book. As I say, it's taken me five books to feel confident enough to do that. But that, I think, goes back to the community that I grew up in. And again when we talk about issues such as religion or class or socio-economic ones, I think a lot of the issues that we say are religion-based or race-based are actually just variations on the problems that this country's always had with class and gender, I think. That's my view.

KA: Culturally you're probably closer to Sam Wyndham than you are to Surrender-Not Banerjee, so why shouldn't you write from that perspective? The class thing is really interesting because I've heard you say, as a Hindu-Bengali, you've probably had better life chances than a White working-class man and I just wondered why you think that and if you think that's true?

AM: I absolutely do, and I'll tell you why. I grew up in a very poor part of the country. I grew up in the West of Scotland which has its share of issues. But as I say, my community, and whether it's in London or Glasgow or anywhere in-between, because of the kind of community it was, it was virtually completely middle class, so everybody of my generation that was born here is expected to go to university, they tended to go to decent schools, and you always had that expectation, whereas five miles down the road from me, or ten miles down the road from where I grew up, you have places like Govan or The Gorbals where there's immense poverty and deprivation, White poverty. These are places that are on a par with places like Tower Hamlets in terms of the level of poverty and in terms of the level of drug abuse, of low life expectancy and life prospects. The fact is that because of the education and the chances I was given, despite the colour of my skin, the fact that we're having this conversation, these opportunities that I've had in life, have come about I think because class is often more important than race. And we sometimes miss that, we think that it's an issue of race or religion and it's not, it's the same issues that we've always had in this country, which are issues of opportunity for our working classes and for women, to be honest.



KA: It's really interesting, I'm really pleased you brought that up. I remember having a debate with one of my friends who says that when she comes to the media and certain elite fields, it's definitely race, she thinks, and from my perspective I thought it was more class. I said, you know, if you look at the few Asians in media, most of them are either privately educated or have come from very middle class families, and so even though ethnically we are still underrepresented in the elite fields, I think when you take class and you compare those statistics, you'll probably find that people of colour have a far better of opportunity... Of course there are cross-roads, people like me who come from Tower Hamlets at the junction of race, class, and gender. It's a really tricky situation but I also agree with you: look at the country we live in, look at the fact that we can be novelists. It's tricky because I do feel grateful, and some people will say well, you shouldn't feel grateful because you're just taking your rightful place in society.

AM: I don't think you've got anything to feel grateful for. I think we should all, as a nation, feel grateful for the tolerant country that we do live in. I think we all have that to be grateful for. I don't you or I should feel more grateful for it, because it is a right. But there is something extraordinary – I mean, putting politics to one side for a moment – if you look at the situation we're in now, the fact is that our Chancellor is an ethnic-minority, our Home Secretary is from an ethnic-minority, our Mayor of London is from an ethnic-minority, the Head of Counter Terrorism from the UK is from an ethnic-minority – so many of our NHS staff: doctors, nurses, carers, are from ethnic minorities. And the thing is nobody bats an eyelid anymore and that, to me, is huge progress. The fact that a year ago, you switched on the telly and the only Asian person you'd see on TV would be as a terrorist, and today you switch it on it's probably going to be a doctor, I think it's brilliant. I hope that that's a lesson the country's learning. The country needs to learn to value all of its people. It shouldn't just see its minorities as problems, and that's what's been going on for too long, but now I think, I'd hope – obviously, I want to hope this – I'd hope that when we come out of this, we will come out with a better appreciation of all the strands that make this country what it is. At the same time, it would be wrong of me to dismiss just how tolerant and welcoming a country this is, especially if you're a middle-class immigrant, and it's the same thing today. You look at all these tests for people coming into this



country, it's all about skills. If we could deal with the issue of opportunity and education for the people that don't have it in this country, I think we'd solve a lot more problems than just by focusing on race or religion.

KA: Absolutely. Coming back to your novels, you mentioned Surendranath or Surrender-Not Banerjee, who I think is a brilliant character. He started off a little bit quiet and obedient, probably, but then he grows in confidence and I just wondered how you went about developing him.

AM: He sort of grew organically. Part of it was developed with my own confidence in writing. I like to say that both Sam and Surrender-Not are two different sides of my personality. Sam represents obviously my British half, but also my more Glaswegian, wizened, rather pissed off with life half...

KA: He's quite critical, isn't he?

AM: He is, because he's been through a lot. Suren is younger, more optimistic, but he's the junior party. What we're seeing in the books hopefully is him coming of age, in the same way, and I would think that would mirror the coming of age of Indians in the country from very much being subjects to effectively imposing their own will on things, and to an extent, by '47, definitely taking over the country. So I want him to sort of mirror the change amongst Indians in general over that period, but also he's growing as an individual. As I say, the book I'm writing at the moment, book four definitely, he actually does confront Sam about Sam's own prejudices, and book five is the first time we're actually going to have half of the book narrated by Suren.

KA: That's interesting.



AM: I'm toying with the ending right now, I'm not quite sure what happens, but I think there may be a split coming between the two – I don't know, I've been sort of pondering it on walks and in the shower, wandering around the garden in lockdown.

KA: Speaking of splits, *Death in the East*, as you say, is set between two timelines and two places. Why did you decide to structure it that way?

AM: It started off as this homage to Agatha Christie, I wanted to write this locked room mystery, but as I started writing, this was about 2016—17, when we were coming out of the end of the Brexit vote and there was a lot of negativity, a lot of anger, a lot of hostility, and there was the big question of what it meant to be British, and there still is. I wanted to address that, and one of the things, I was living in Tower Hamlets at the time, I've spent the last fifteen years in Tower Hamlets until last year, and one of the things that fascinated me was the fact that today those streets that are predominantly occupied by Bangladeshi-Muslim immigrants, those streets a hundred years ago were mainly occupied by Eastern European Jews fleeing persecution, in the same industries, the same streets, and what really shocked me was the fact that the press reacted in exactly the same language that they do towards Muslims today. So you can take a passage from a newspaper in 1908, change the word Jew to Muslim and you can run it in some of our tabloids today. On one hand, that sounds quite negative – nothing's changed – but there is a positive spin to that as well which is that, barring the recent aberration of the Labour Party, the Jews are integrated, they are British, and they are a British success story, in the same way that my community, which has not been here as long, I see as quite a success story. I think as a nation we're actually very open minded, we do let people in and it just takes longer for working class communities, but if you look at the educational attainment levels for Bangladeshi Muslims now, they're now above the average. Which is fascinating because you go back twenty years ago when I was at school and right at the bottom of the heap you had Bangladeshi-Muslim kids because they were the newest community, they were here with nothing and they were learning a foreign language, and they were learning it without any resources. Now, within the space of twenty years, they're above average – and that, to me, points to the fact that integration works and it's not quick, but you go forward another



twenty, twenty-five years, I have no doubts that the Bangladeshi-Muslim community will be as integrated as my community and to be on the way to being just as integrated as the Jewish community.

KA: It takes patience, doesn't it? That patience is not just external, as in the press and all these people shouting about us Bangladeshi-Muslims not integrating, but also, it's interesting you say that because it also takes internal patience. Growing up, I did chafe against the conservatism of my community, and a lot of that comes across in *Take It Back*. Zara struggles with what I see as tribalism. There is still a strong sense of tribalism in my community, and growing up I had people saying to me, 'Well you're one of us, you can't be one of them, or you can't dress like that, or you can't go there, or you can't say this', and that kind of low-level rage simmers in my book, but as you said, fast-forward a generation or two, and like you I have no doubt that there'll be more Bangladeshi doctors, lawyers...

AM: Absolutely, it's happening already. As I say, the great difference in our community is not one of religion, it's just one of – you know, the people who came here to start with came from such different economic backgrounds – and that's the issue, and that's always been the British issue. On the other side, I think you're absolutely right, there's a tendency amongst certain communities, especially when you have no – if you're coming here with no social capital and no financial capital – people do tend to congregate together, because you need that support. So I completely understand it. I used to mentor kids in Stepney Green, the school was something like 98% Bangladeshi, and what really shocked me was that these kids would speak Sylheti in the playground, which is something I'd never seen before, and very quickly it became clear they had very few role models outside of the square mile they lived in. They could see the city of London, see all the skyscrapers, but it could have been a million miles away. I asked them, 'What are you?' and they'd say, 'I'm Bangladeshi.' And I said, 'Well, how many times have you been to Bangladesh?' and it would be like once or twice on a holiday. And the idea that these people, these kids are British, has to be inculcated too, and that's a problem on both sides – that's a failure of the country, but it's also a failure of the communities to show these kids that, 'Yeah, you have as much right to a future and a stake in this society as anybody else.'



KA: Absolutely. This point of role models is so important, I remember, like you, a friend of mine is an ex-accountant, and when –

AM: You had to bring that up, didn't you?

KA: I'm sorry, I'm sorry. You're so dashing and charming.

AM: That's better. You called me old and accountant before, so that's...

KA: She went on a field trip to the Square Mile and I think she was in the building where the Lehman Brothers are based, and she was really impressed, and she said to a teacher, 'Oh I want to work here one day', and the teacher wasn't really encouraging her. Years later she did work at Lehman Brothers, for all her sins, but when you grow up in an area where even the teachers don't necessarily believe in you... I'd say I had teachers who encouraged me greatly, but that one specific example I always come back to, because it's so interesting: you have this scheme where you take these kids to this grand shrine of success and then you're saying to them, 'Oh, no, no, this is just for you to see, but not for you to achieve.' I definitely think it's changing. I see role models within the local community, Bangladeshi and Bengali and White and all the rest of it, so yeah, things are improving.

AM: And you're one of those role models. There'll be kids out there who'll be inspired by the books you write and your story.

KA: I hope so.

AM: And that's very important because if you think about it, who did you look up to when you were coming through? Who was there to point to? There weren't anybody.



KA: I was going to say it's obvious that you and I both tackle things like race and politics and all these kind of broad, heavy themes in our books. Are you tempted to ever just write a straight-up whodunit without worrying about all these grander themes?

AM: Yes and no. I want to write something different, and I will write something different, but I don't want to write anything that doesn't have something that is a message. I don't want to write something that anybody else can write. What's the point? I don't want to write a straightforward thriller or whodunit because there are many people who can write them, and they probably write them better than me. Anything I write has to have a certain insight into it and it has to be grounded, I'm guessing, in the insight that being from two cultures offers. So right now I'm planning on the next book. Once I've finished book five of the Sam Wyndham series I'm going to take a bit of a break from those books, and I'm going to write a thriller based here and in America. It's going to be a modern-day thriller, but it's going to be something which is informed by the fact that I have a different outlook on things like the War on Terror and the causes of radicalisation than your average White writer. I'm not saying it's a more informed position, it's just a different position, because people like you and I, we're British but we have the camera at a slightly different angle. So if the average White writer is coming at you straight on, because of our backgrounds we're looking at something from a slightly different angle, and that difference in angle gives you a very different perspective. And I think that's what people like you and I can bring to the world of fiction, and can bring to the readership. You can entertain, and you *should* entertain your reader, at the end of the day if you want someone to invest hours and days in your books, you *have* to entertain them. At the same time, if you can get across a serious message inside that entertainment, that's you doing a really good job. And I think, for me, unless I'm doing both, I wouldn't be happy writing a book. I wouldn't be happy writing a book just – at this stage anyway – just to write a thriller to make some money out of. It would have to be something that I wanted to invest my heart and soul into because it was an issue I wanted to shout about.

KA: We've kind of touched on this a little bit, about whether we 'owe' it to our communities to tackle these heavy themes, and obviously, as a minority writer I should be able to write what I



want, but I remember in *A Rising Man*, was it, where I think Sam Wyndham says one of the powers that be are more scared of the Bengalis who can write or debate and use the pen – you know, ‘the pen is mightier than the sword’ – than those that can fight. Do you think we actually have a responsibility to use and harness our power to hold power to account, and draw attention to these issues, or do you think, no, we should just be able to write what we want?

AM: Well, I think it’s both. I’m going to say both there. Firstly, to pick up on your point, yeah the British were scared of the educated Bengalis in a way that they weren’t scared of warrior races like the Ghurkhas or the Sikhs because the Bengalis whom they had educated were now playing the British at their own game. When it came to force of arms, the British would always win because of Industrialisation or whatever, but when it came to the issue of law and arguments of morality, what they found was that these people who had been educated by them in Western ways were now taking them on at their own game, and they found that really very threatening, which led to this campaign to almost emasculate Bengalis in the public psyche, so certain Asian races were held up as virtuous, so the Martial races like the Nepalese and the Sikhs, whereas the Bengalis were nefarious because they were using ideas against us – how dare they? – rather than a Gatling gun. To come back to your point about ‘Do we have a duty?’ I think I have a duty to write not for my community, but for British people, and the wider world. People have asked, ‘What’s your audience?’ My audience is anyone who wants to read, but more importantly, I want to shout about the things that I found upsetting when I was growing up. The lack of knowledge about things like the Bengal Famine in which 3 million people starved on the orders of Churchill, this is what I want to shout about. The people that need to know this really are people of this country, because if we don’t know our history we’ll make the same mistakes. That, I suppose, is my audience. I’m not writing for British-Bengalis or British-Asians, I’m not really writing for Indians – I’m glad Indians are reading the book and enjoying the book, but really my market is the people of this country, because you and I and every other British-Asian – the first part of that hyphenated word is British, and it’s important that our voice, our perspective is heard, because we’ve got something very important and interesting to add to the mix of what it is to be British.



KA: Absolutely. I think I agree with you I see myself continuing to write novels that do grapple with society in some way, but do so under the guise of a really good thriller. I feel that *Take It Back* and your novels can just be read as pure page-turners, and if the audience chooses to engage with the broader themes, that's there as food for thought as well. One thing I have heard you say, and I don't know how serious you were –

AM: I'm very serious all of the time, can't you tell.

KA: Was that you attempted to write a book under a white-sounding pseudonym.

AM: If I was to write something different, as I say, this thriller, it would make sense to have a penname to stop issues with branding, you know. I write under my name for historical fiction, if I'm writing something new, firstly there may be an argument to write it under a penname. If I was to use a penname, it would be a White name. This goes back to what we were saying earlier – I think there are still certain sections of the readership which thinks when they see a funny-sounding foreign name, especially an Asian name, they have certain preconceptions about what the book might be about and may decide that's not my cup of tea. They say don't judge a book by its cover, but the amount of money spent on cover designs means that covers matter! And if the cover doesn't matter, then the name on the cover matters as well. I'd ask you to go into your local supermarket wherever you are in the country and see how many books you can see on those shelves by authors with funny-sounding names.

KA: But then do you think you're shirking your responsibility a little bit, in that, is it up to us to change the system so that the Abir Mukherjees and the Kia Abdullahs are standing up and people are recognising that, 'oh, people with names like this write good books', or are we evading it?

AM: That's a really good question. The answer to that is really complex. There are different strands to it. I agree with you there is the issue of – I don't want to write under a penname! I'd like to write under my own name and to be as successful as possible – at the same time, I am



aware of certain hurdles, and part of that is, as I say, there is a segment of book buyers out there whom I think, for whatever reason, have certain expectations of a funny name on the cover. Secondly, I don't think British-Asians read enough. There is a statistic that says that the users of libraries in the UK, the biggest minority group, or the biggest group that uses the libraries as kids are British-Asian kids, but then something happens after that and they don't go back to reading. There's another statistic that one in two British-Asians has never been into a bookshop, which is scary. That, to me, is a concern. It comes down to a simple matter of economics here: if there is demand for books written by people with funny names, then supermarkets will stock them and they will do well. If there isn't a demand, people won't stock them. And that demand comes from the White community, which has been brilliant, to be honest, 95% of my sales go to White people! And that's great, but there's an issue with engagement in two segments. One, as I say, is this segment of the market which might be buying a book on an impulse. So they're in the supermarket and they'll pick something off the shelf. Unless you're on that shelf, they're not going to pick you up. And if you're on that shelf and they don't recognise your name – unless you're a brand like Nadia – they're not going to pick up your book. So there's a problem there. The other side of that coin is that if you've got a lot of Asian people or ethnic minorities going into bookshops and seeing a name that's like theirs, if they pick it up, then that can help. But they're not doing that because I don't think enough British-Asians read. I'd love your opinion on that. I've thought about this a lot, we've done wee a bit of research into it, we've run a couple of things, I've talked to other authors about it anecdotally. Let's take the average Book Festival you'll go to in the UK, let's say there's 50 people in the audience, probably 2 of them will be non-White. And the one different one to most of those is Bradford, the Bradford Lit Fest, where you have a large turnout of ethnic minority readers, just because Bradford is that sort of community. What I've found is that when the book or subject matter being discussed is religious-based, then you'll get a mix of minorities. When you're talking about a crime novel, again it goes back to a something like 80 – 90 % White audience. So, there's an issue here I think in terms of our communities not reading, but also there's an issue of a certain section of the wider readership being put off by non-White names. And this used to be the case with Scandinavian authors as well, it's not a racist thing. Until Stieg Larsson came on the scene, my publishers told me it was very difficult



for them to get traction with somebody with a Scandinavian name. So things can change, it's not a hard-and-fast thing, it's more about familiarity, rather than anything else. And to answer your question, 'Do I feel like I let people down by writing under a pen name?' I'm writing under my own name, so that's the first thing. I'm trying something else. At the end of the day, I have an obligation first and foremost to my readers and to my family. I want to get the book into as many hands as possible because if somebody who picks up my book, even if it has a different name on the cover, and they read it and it increases their span of perspective – they can see, 'Well, this is a point of view I never considered'. So I'm less worried about my name on the cover because, firstly, I have got my name on the cover of books, but secondly it's about reaching every reader out there. I don't feel disheartened by the fact there are these structural problems, it's a fact of life. There are people out there who won't read a book by a woman, for whatever reason.

KA: I think I'm just too egotistical to not have my name on the cover. But Abir, this is fascinating. I think we could talk about this for far longer, but I am aware that we're running out of time.

AM: I want to ask you a question: what are you writing now?

KA: Well, I have literally just sent off the final version of the next book, *Truth Be Told*, which is the follow-up to *Take It Back*. It's not a sequel, it's kind of a follow up, so Zara Kaleel is working on a new case and that's going off for copyedits. Exciting times.

AM: And when will it be out?

KA: August. So not very much time at all.

AM: Cool, cool.

KA: Before we go, I want to ask you one more question. Since we're talking about divisions. You're British and you're Indian, so who do you support in the cricket?



AM: Well, that's a good one. I support India at the cricket because I'm not English. My Scottish half tells me to support India, so that's really easy for me. Anybody other than England is generally the first answer.

KA: (laughs) Lovely to talk to you, Abir.

AM: Thank you so much, and hope to see you again soon after this lockdown.

KA: Take care.

AM: Take care.