



Big Book Chat With Lenny Henry

KIT DE WAAL: Welcome to Big Book Weekend and thank you all for coming to this very special event with Sir Lenny Henry. Legendary comedian, author, activist and avid reader. Sir Lenny Henry is here to talk about the books that have made him, the stories he still wants to tell. And why we all have to get angry and active in improving diversity in what we watch, what we listen to and also what we read. Welcome Lenny.

LENNY HENRY: Hello. How are you?

KIT: So good, so good to see you. We have had to make sure we don't get talking too early, because me and Lenny have so much to talk about! But I want to start by going right back to the beginning of you as a reader, as a child. What were the books that inspired you? I mean were you a big reader as a child?

LENNY: You have to understand some things about me. I'm from Dudley, and Dudley has a library, and we used to walk past it every day and we'd sort of do a long loop to school and my Auntie Pearl, when I was quite little, five or six, said "you have to go in here and you have to sign up or you won't be able to borrow the books, they will stop you, they will stop you if you walk out and you are not a member. So, you have to join up." So Auntie Pearl took me to the library and the lady looked at me and there were no other black people in here at all by the way, just me and this old lady. We signed up to the library, and it was like manna from heaven. Getting a library card for me as a five-year-old boy, was just the best thing in the world. All these books! And I think I have spent my life trying to recreate this palace of books. Everywhere I have been there's always books, books everywhere, there is books wherever I go. I have tried to make my life a place where I'm surrounded by books. So, the first book the lady on the thing gave me, she said "hello, what's your name," "Len", "OK here's a book I thought you would like. We give it to a lot of kids to start their reading when they come here." Do you know what the book was, *Little Black Sambo*!

KIT: No!

LENNY: Yeah. So, I go home with *Little Black Sambo*, which is as you would expect this quite bizarre caricature of a small African child with massive lips and weird hair with bones in it and stuff. And what happens to Little Black Sambo is he's a brave little kid who takes on a tiger and he escapes the tiger by running around a tree until the tiger turns into butter, spoilers! That is the first book I ever read. And when I got to the end, I was only five, I thought damn I can't wait to get to Jane Austen! Because this is some bull...! So, from that moment on I was intrigued to know about the other kind of stories – other stories there was going to be - so I went back, and I slammed it down on the counter, and went like this "this is terrible, have you got anything else?" And then I started to read other kinds of books. I read things like *Grimble* by Clement Freud which is about a little ten-year-old boy who cooks because his mum and dad don't really look after him. I read books like 'Jennings', I read 'Billy Bunter'. I hoovered all of the 'Just William' books, I read all the 'Narnia' books. And

then there was a moment when I was at junior school in Dudley, hello anyone who went to Justin's junior school, where I read every single Dickens' book.

KIT: How old were you when you were reading Dickens?

LENNY: About 10, 11, or something?

KIT: Oh my god!

LENNY: About nine or ten. I knew it was important, I loved the film of *A Christmas Carol* and wanted to see what it was like on the page. And this replicated itself as I got older, I watch something, and I go I wonder what that's like on the page and so I'll buy the novel or a screenplay just to see what it looks like. And so, when I was reading the Dickens, I was more concerned with the visual aspects of it strangely, than the slightly verbose nature of it because Dickens is the kind of guy who uses nineteen words when half a one would do. So, I loved it, but I bet you I skimmed, because when you read *A Christmas Carol* or *Bleak House* or 'Edwin Drood' or *Great Expectations* – now there's a lot of words! I read all of them and was fascinated by it. I could feel the amount of words and the amount of working out in your head. I could feel that all happening in here, and I didn't know what was going on. I was learning that stories aren't just once upon a time a man or a woman did this. And also, at no point did I think where are the black people in this?

KIT: No.

LENNY: At no point, when I read *Narnia*, when I read *Just William*, when I read *Billy Bunter* and he had an Indian mate who was a Sikh, I thought, oh, there is an Indian kid in this that kind of looks like me. I knew he looked like me, because they did the lines on his face to make him look like me. But at no point did I go "why aren't there any black kids in *Narnia*." Because I was so busy embodying the focalised, the central character that it didn't really matter to me. Now when I read a book, I'm like "where are the black folks?" But when I was a kid because the author had said I'm going to write such a kick arse story you're not going to know what the hell's going on. I was just in there, reading. I read a book called 'Birdy', by somebody called, why do I remember this, EW Hildick, and it was about a kid at school who really whistled well, and Birdy got to make records and be in the charts and do concerts. And his best mate who was another 12-year-old kid, went on the road with him as a kind of manager. And why do I remember that now? Do you know why? Because it was great story and I was really interested in a kid who, because he can whistle really well, like Roger Whittaker suddenly gets a pop career. And even in my brain as a kid I was going how does that work? But I went with it, because when you are reading a great story and the writing is good you go with it. And I went with it. Those are the kind of things that I read, I read *The Hobbit*, I think. I didn't read *The Lord of the Rings* until later, because *The Lord of the Rings* is this thick, and it was a daunting prospect for me to read *The Lord of the Rings*. But I ploughed through my level of books from the time I was five to the time I was, well until now!

KIT: That's amazing. And is that part of, I mean you say you didn't see yourself reflected in books, you as a black person reflected in books. Can you remember the first book that you read that did reflect your life, if you like, even if, not your life as a black person, but maybe as a working-class person? What's the first book you could really identify with? You can't remember? You're going to write children's books now?

LENNY: Yeah, I am, yeah. I think it is really important, by the way. What's really good is that there's loads of kids' books now with a black girl on the front or a black boy on the front or an Asian kid on the front. But when I was growing up, when you were growing up, those books didn't exist. And so, we had to, through the narrative, find a place for ourselves to be. Well, I'm like Johnny Seven, I so wanted there to be a black friend in the 'Famous Five' books or 'The Secret Seven', I always thought why haven't they got a cool mate called Tyrone who they bring along on the adventures, he could replace the dog, he could replace Timmy. But for a long time, my childhood reading was un-raced. So, you know, the first time I read about working-class people was in *A Kind of Loving*, it is a kind of naughty, Stan Barstow, a kind of naughty working-class book, I think the girl got pregnant in it and it was quite salacious, and I thought oh my god this is about working-class people. That's in there, that's when I started to read. And when I was doing my O-level, which wasn't until, the 1980s, because I was doing summer season with 'Cannon and Ball', thank you, thank you, once again I thank you, you little liar, you little liar, rock on Tommy. Honestly Gandhi would have killed himself Kit. So, I was doing a summer season with 'Cannon and Ball', and I just thought this is going on for 22 weeks, if I don't do something I will go nuts up here. I was up at 10, breakfast, walk around Blackpool, go to the theatre for five thirty, sound check and whatever, get ready, do my ten minutes and then go to my dressing room, wait until the end of the show, come on and take a bow. That was my show. And I used to catch 'Canon and Ball' and every night because I thought the guys are at the top of my field and I want to see everything to they and I met their writer actually who said "I write some of the material" and he showed me what he did, so he showed me scripts and stuff. So, I was learning something. But it wasn't enough. So, I rang Preston College, it was called WR Tuson then and I said have you got anybody there that can teach me my O-levels because I would like to take my O-levels when I'm here, how long do you think it would take me to take my o-levels? And they said we can take you through your GCSE maybe in about 12 weeks if you have one-on-one tutoring.

KIT: Twelve weeks? Wow.

LENNY: So, I had to read all these books, I read *Cry*, *The Beloved Country*, Alan Paton, but that was deeper than deep, because we are in apartheid, and it was the whole thing about we have to - they have to love us before we have turned to hating. Oh my God! It was like a lance going through my brain and into my heart. I don't think I had ever read a book like that before. I was really moved by it. And I had read *Roots* but I had also discovered that *Roots* wasn't real. But god bless Alex Haley as well, when I saw *Roots* on the television, as usual I thought, we were all upset and we were all, my family, my whole family were vexed! We watched *Roots* and we all went out on the streets, like this, with our chests high, we see you! But I read all the *Roots* books and I thought it was brilliant. And then we found out he

had fictionalised it all. But it didn't matter because this guy created this narrative about black people and it encouraged everyone to be interested in where we come from, we stand on the shoulders of giants and if you don't know where you come from you don't know where you are at. So, I devoured that but reading about Stephen Marlow in *Cry, The Beloved Country* was one of the first reading experiences where I read about a black guy that was trying to do something important in the time of apartheid, and it really made me think, aside from what I was watching on the news, because when we watched South Africa on the news people were getting necklaced and things were exploding and you just saw gunshots in the street! And you just thought it was a type of, the way it was reported you only heard and saw one type of representation.

KIT: Yeah.

LENNY: Whereas this book presented another kind of representation. And I thought, yeah, okay, okay. And you know, Tam o'Shanter, Robert Burns, Henry IV part one.

KIT: You read all that in 12 weeks.

LENNY: Yeah, I had to read all of that, and lovely David Emery came one a week and gave me a lecture and read through things with me and read all my essays. And then in the October of that that year I did my exams. I did English language and literature and I snuck into the exam room, and I don't think anybody in that room passed their exams because they kept looking behind themselves and saying why is the black guy from 'Tiswas' in the back of the room, why isn't he saying OOOOO-K. They were just looking at me going why is Lenny Henry here? I took my exams, I passed, I'm not thick, I'm not an idiot. This is brilliant news, because I only did my CSEs, which is like a chocolate fire guard. And I just thought, I'm not stupid, this is amazing. And so that gave me the thirst to continue my education. So, a few years later, I decided to do a BA Hons in English literature. Interestingly I was playing a headteacher, no qualifications necessary - when you're an actor, you can play anything you want. I was playing this idealistic headteacher who is tasked with turning a terrible school around, Ofsted have given it, you know, it's the bottom of the list, this school, my character Ian, goes to the school. First of all, he's a black guy, and secondly, based on the guy at The Phoenix School in Shepherds Bush, where somebody got stabbed in the playground and on his first day somebody tried to deal drugs to him, so he had a lot of work to do. So, Lucy Gannon wrote this story and the first script when I read it, I was shaking when I got to the end of it, I thought this is great writing and A, I want to be in this and B, how do you learn to write like this. I want to learn how to write like that. So, I bothered Lucy a lot about how long does it take you to write a script and how long is a script, and this is 56 pages for an hour, is that normal? How can you make it a movie? So, I asked a lot of questions and I'm playing this headteacher, and I'm really inspired by this educational manifesto that Lucy is creating every week. I'm reading these scripts and he's making speeches about, if not you who? If not now when? You know, grasp the nettle, seize the day, he was one of those 'Dead Poets Society' teachers. In make-up every day, Karen is putting the make-up on me, is this too brown? No Karen it's fine. All right! So, I'm having the make-up put on me, and I'm starting to look at the paper and the Open University advert is there. And I keep looking at it

and going, “I wonder if I should send off for the prospectus.” And she goes “go on, you should send off for it.” And they kept encouraging me and I sent off for it. And I read it and said I want to do English literature, I want to do a BA Hons, and they said go on and encouraged me, and I sent off for it and two days later the prospectus arrives, and I'm really excited. Because there's tonnes of books Kit! Thousand gazillion books to read. And I thought oh my god I'm going to read all these books, Jane Austen, I'm going to read Dickens! Oh my god and *Dombey and Son*, oh my God, I wept. Spoilers! The death of little Paul! I was in bits. The sequence about the train, ahhh! I just thought how do you write like this. So every time I'm reading these books I'm thinking how do you write like this, how do you write, how do you write like this. Dickens blew my mind and I just thought I would like to write like to be able to write like this. And the essays were hard man and every time you got below 50 you just thought how do I get above, how do I get 60? First time I got 60 I went out into the garden and danced naked for about ten minutes, and then a neighbour looked out of the window and I ran back in the house. Then I got a 70, and I couldn't run out naked and ran out in my clothes and danced, wasn't the same but was still cool. So, when you get 80% in an English literature exam, that's like opening the cava from Tesco's and celebrating proper. I don't think I ever got a 90 but I got up there. By the time I got to the end of my English exams all my family are going Lenny, Lenny! And when I graduated, they all came to the Barbican, and it was the best, most wonderful experience of my life. So, books have been part of these non-showbiz, life changing experiences where I have thought, I'm going to better myself via education. And I only ever wanted to do literature. Never really wanted to do, I loved science, my favourite teacher in the school was Mr Brooks who disarmed a kid, took a knife off a kid, and we all went oooohhhh! Mr Brooks is bad! So, Mr Brooks was the guy who said, “go in the back room and use the reel-to-reel if you want to make some comedy because I've heard you do all these voices”, Mr Brooks was that guy. And he was a genius, he just said to me – he was the first person to say – “do your thing man!” Not like that but he was the first person to say “whatever you want to do, you've got talent, just do it.”

KIT: You did your BA, but you also have done another degree in screen writing. And you've done a PhD.

LENNY: I did an MA in screen writing with Royal Holloway, it was a distance learning thing. You do a week on site, or you would go somewhere to do a week on site, and then the rest of it was online. But it's probably, the screen writing thing was amazing. Working with Professor Sue Clayton and just talking about movies, and the kind of syntax of pictures, actually. I didn't realise that movies weren't just man talking, woman talking, wide shot, medium shot, close-ups. It's, there's a whole storytelling that happens with pictures. It is called movies for a reason. The reason why silent movies were so famous and popular, is because so many people are who were unilliterate could understand them. The writers had to write in pictures and then sequence of pictures was like a paragraph, and then a longer sequence was like a part, and then the whole movie was like a book. But it was all done with visual acuity. And I loved to find out about take, so I got to meet other people like me who wanted to tell stories in pictures. That was an amazing experience, and then the PhD was something else I think I got boondoggled to do that. Someday said you “should do a PhD”,

and I was like “really, you think I could that, you know, because I always thought I was thick”, “no you have done an MA, you can do a PhD.” And the next thing I know I'm doing a bloody PhD, seven-and-a-half years later it's over, it's such a long time!

KIT: Wow! And as part of your interest in literature, you go and write your memoir.

LENNY: For Faber.

KIT: Which, very funny, obviously very funny, but intensely moving, especially you know, I'm more or less the same age as you, I can remember this time, I know this black West Indian Caribbean community. What was that like excavating some of that stuff from, you know, a distance to go back there and relive the 60s and the 70s. Was it an emotional journey for you?

LENNY: They say that thing of no tears in the writer no tears in the reader. I was crying all the time writing this book. It feels, hopefully, what I was trying to get this thing was me talking to you as the reader. As I was going through these emotions, and Walter my editor was basically really nurturing me and saying “just tell me the story, as you are writing it, just tell it to me. Tell me all of these things as if I'm just sitting with you.” And I really learned a lot because I had written standard comedy before, it's different, it's not the same. Because stand-up is like notes, it's like sending yourself texts saying it would be funny to do a thing about your mum doing such and such. That is not writing a chapter about that or a well-turned paragraph. And I have a sneaky regard for the well-turned phrase, how do I tell you the story as me but incorporate the well-turned phrase throughout this. I'm nowhere near where I want to be, but I started to get to a point where I would read things and go that's alright, that's not bad. Len you are doing OK. As I was telling the story about my stepbrother who I didn't realise was my stepbrother. Or my birth father who I didn't realise was my birth father. Or writing about being hit by my mum. And thinking, wow, I wonder if she knows when to stop? You know all of these things were very emotional and there were things - because my family had to read the book - because when you write about your family they are also your co-authors. They are not just subject matter. They go, so you are writing a book about everything! Well, I want to read the book and see what you write about ME! So, I had that to deal with. So, they all had a copy of the book. They had the gallies. And that was really interesting, because they wanted to protect me. They said things like well don't put that in because that makes you, that's not a very good representation of you, so don't have that in. And are you sure you want to talk about your birth father, are you sure you want to talk about that. Because I have always been very private about my private life. And I thought well you know, when am I going to tell this story, when am I going to say these things? And if I go in and write this and I avoid that stuff and do a kind of puff piece, it would have been easy to get a ghost writer in and: leave it with me Len I'll do this from cuttings. There's already been a cut and paste job of this. And I really didn't like that book, because it didn't represent me properly. It was just stories from the Daily Mirror and the people I didn't get to. I asked my family and friends please don't co-operate with this person because I just don't want people to get the wrong idea. I don't want the storytelling to be wrong, I want to represent myself if I'm going to write a memoir. And so, this is my opportunity to

set the record straight and to tell the truth. And my sister Kay said, “burn it all down! Just tell them everything!” So I said, “OK”, and so I thought I'm going to talk about when I found out about my birth father. Because my mum said, oh, there's a thing called the pardoner in the black community. And everybody in your circle puts one or two pounds, about 10% of your wages, in an envelope, like this, and your mum will say “go to Auntie Kit's house with the ting”, we never knew what that was. “Go to Auntie Kit's house with the ting and tell her to give you her ting back and bring it back to me.” You are like eight or nine-years-old with the ‘ting’ walking the streets of Dudley going I wonder what it is, you never looked inside because you get a beating. So, you go to Auntie Kit, “you want biscuit and squash”, “yes please”. You'd sit there and you would overhear big people talking but you wouldn't get involved. No child would get involved with big people's things, you sat there drinking your squash and eat your biscuit and then get Auntie Kit's ting and bring it back to mum. So, I used to go to my birth father's house, Bertie, with the ting. And Mum said, “when you go down to Bertie on a Friday, help him with some chores, do some tings for him because he needs help because he's on his own.” Bertie lived in a bedsitting room. And he was a big man. He had family, but he lived on his own. And when he went there, he had a bed, a double bed and a wardrobe and a dining table and a telly and one of those old-fashioned radios, all in the same room. And it was a shared kitchen. It was an Asian family owned the house, and I remember going in there and smelling Indian food cooking for the first time, and the lady cooking chapatis before, and I never had seen a flat frying pan, and thinking wow flat frying pan and I got to taste a chicken curry and I thought it was delicious and I thought oh there's some transferable things between Indian and Jamaican food, but I didn't articulate it at the time! Bertie would cook chicken and rice and he would cook the rice perfectly, he had the skill where he'd hit it on the wall, he would hit the pan on the wall and if you heard the right noise that meant the rice was done. And I used to while he was cooking the chicken and rice, I would sweep out his room, the whole room and make the bed and clean the windows, and I had a pinny on and the little feather. I would do all his cleaning for him. Every so often Bertie's son, who was about 18, 19 would come and he would do French with linguaphone on headphone while I was doing the cleaning. And he would watch me with disdain and get to know me a bit and ask questions. And one day he took his headphones off, he said “you haven't got any idea why you are here; you don't know why you are here, do ya?” I said “no”, he said “that's your dad.” And I went “what?” He said, “that's your dad, if you don't believe me go and ask him.” And it was literally like a bomb had dropped on my life. I was only like ten or something, 11. And I went into the shared kitchen and he was there banging the pot against the wall to see if the rice was done and checking the fried chicken. And I said “Lloyd says you're my dad, is it true?” He went, “yes. Your mamma never tell you?” And I ran out of the kitchen and I ran all the way home. And mum was doing fish or something. And it was the red snapper in the foil with the onions and the garlic and the green pepper and the scotch bonnet where you pinch the top of the foil and you put it in the oven for a very short space of time, and she was doing that and it's delicious, and making green food and maybe some potato if you are lucky, she was doing that so she had a bit of time and I just came into the kitchen and I said “Bertie says he's my birth father, is that true?” She went “oh yes, we thought it right not to tell you for a while.” And I just ran up to my bedroom and I just cried and cried and cried. I don't know

what I was crying for. But I just cried. Because you know when big people are talking in black culture, that's what they are talking about.

KIT: Yeah.

LENNY: But we didn't know. We were just kids we didn't know what they were talking about. That's all they talk about, who is pregnant with who, what they will do about it, who needs money. Where will you borrow money from, how the partner will work for them, they need petrol, they need clothes, such and such died, that is what they are talking about. So, I realised I had been the subject matter of conversations for years and nobody told me. I think it was embarrassment, but there was something cosmic about it. I say in the book it was like a cosmic rug being pulled from beneath my feet. It felt like that, and it felt like I was falling. And then I got used to it. And Bertie used to listen to the Archers, so we kind of bonded over food and over listening to stories actually. He was a big fan of the Archers, so we would listen to Archers on Sunday morning, he would make bacon sandwiches and he would laugh at Walter Gabriel, he would laugh at the characters. I registered the power of comedy and the power of storytelling. This is an important thing for us. It's why my mum and dad, poppa, Winston, the father that raised me. I noted that they loved country and western music because of the storytelling. My name is Sue, how do you do, now you going to die, I shot a man in Reno just to watch him die. Stories. Every single song was like a movie, a novel or short story. I'm getting all of those things, the storytelling, I'm getting all of those things from my family but I'm not realising it yet because there were no books in our house.

KIT: What's also fascinating about your memoir is that so many chapters are graphic novels, they are written like comics, the comics that I would have seen, the Beano, the Dandy, those fantastic first comics we had.

LENNY: This is another Auntie Pearl story, we were going to see Cousin Irma in Birmingham, it was about 10 miles, 12 miles away. I'm only little, seven, eight, nine, about eight and a half years old, and it was going to be a long journey, because Birmingham's far you know from Dudley! And we had to go in the car, which was a Rover. SOC58 was the registration number. Mum and dad were going to be in the car in the front and us kids were going to be in the back. Long journey, they were both going to smoke, and they would reduce to crack a window, so we had to be in the back of the car with the smoke up to here. And by the time we got to the destination we would be green as well as black kids. Because they just wouldn't open a window to let the smoke out. So long journey, and to pass the time Auntie Pearl said, take these. She brought the X-Men, Fantastic Four, Spiderman, Tales to Astonish, Weird Tales, and she gave us these comics. And from that moment on I was in love with graphic storytelling. I was in love with graphic novels although I didn't know that is what they were called then. But I became a collector. I would go to the news agent every week and buy comics called Fantastic, Terrific Wham Pow and Smash. My sister used to read the Jackie, so I used to read that too. I bought Whizzer and Chips, the Beano and the Dandy, all of things you mentioned, and I immersed myself in the world of comics. I loved them, I loved Leo Baxendales cartoons, the Three Bears, Pansy Potter, The Strongman's Daughter, I

didn't realise the pronunciation of daughter was Glaswegian to rhyme with Potter. Pansy Potter the strongman's daughter, Roger the dodger. I didn't realise that they said oh yeah, until I heard Robbie Coltrane stub his to and go oh yeah! It's a Scottish thing the oh yeah thing.

KIT: Why do you think many of us grow out of comics?

LENNY: Because movies replace that doesn't it.

KIT: Yeah.

LENNY: But I still love, this idea of Alan Moore, deliberately writing the most complicated single panel descriptions anybody has ever written and saying to the Archers, go on then, try and illustrate that! You know, Alan Moore writes comics and dares Hollywood to make a movie version because graphic models are a medium in and of themselves. It's a whole thing.

KIT: Yeah, they are not a gateway, are they? It's not read a comic until you take up serious reading. Graphic novels are an art form in their own right.

LENNY: Yeah. Well, I think that's why the adaptations - it's why I think Spiderman In The Multiverse works and why something like the Justice League doesn't. Because in the multiverse there's a real playfulness with imagery and with special effects and cartoons and captions and different types of media, which is what graphic novels do. Whereas to just literally go, Batman sits in a cave and looks at a computer. That's not it, that's not all of Batman, that's a bit of Batman. You know, when you read Tom King's version of Batman or Neil Gaiman's version of Batman or any of those earlier versions of Batman. The storytelling is complex, deep and rich and the words and the dialogue complement the picture. I don't think a lot of the movies, I mean I love Christopher Reeves as Superman, and Margot Kidder as Lois Lane, and I loved Adam West as Batman back in the day. I nearly killed myself in a Batman costume. Trevor nicked my batman cowl, and I ran after him and said, "come back with my Batman cowl", and I jumped over our fence slightly forgetting it had iron spikes sticking up and I got stuck halfway because I was an overweight child, and cut my tummy open. I didn't realise I was bleeding until I got in the house and my mum said, "I just cleaned this floor why are you bleeding on the lino?" And then she took me to hospital.

KIT: So, Batman is to blame!

LENNY: Batman nearly killed me. But, you know, this idea of words and imagery and the complexity and playfulness of how those things complement each other, that is why I loved writing for Mark Buckingham. I would say things like I'm an underwriter, I'm walking along, I'm talking to the reader and we are having a chat about existentialism, but we are not calling it that and just talking about how things work in the world. Buckie would say, OK, and then I would get 14 panels of exactly that. So, I loved it. He's going to be part of the memoir, of the second part of the memoir, but I'm going to hopefully we are going to work

in a different way. There might be single panels, there might be four panel pages. But I think because the second memoir, which is called *Rising to the Surface*, goes from 18-30, it's going to be more of a growing up book. It's me growing up in the public eye and all the difficulties of that. And it's about getting married and *Three of a Kind* and the *Lenny Henry Show*, and *Alive and Unleashed* and me growing up and getting better. The first ten years of my career, I don't know if you have this, you are such a brilliant writer, I don't know whether you have this, but I spent the first ten years of my career going Ahhhhh! How do I do this? What do I do? I didn't realise I was a comedian and that there was a whole bunch of rules about being a comedian? What's it to do with, writing or is to do with performance. I love performing, but how do you get better at the material? It's about writing again.

KIT: Absolutely.

LENNY: John McClean showed me five pages of what his stand-up comedy looks like on the page and I got it!

KIT: Talking about the power of words, I want to talk about this book. *Access All Areas* it's a Diversity Manifesto for TV and Beyond. On the front page, it is a fantastic book.

LENNY: Go and get it right away viewers!

KIT: Exactly. On the first page is the manifesto itself and it says, I'm just going to read these very short lines: We believe the time is now. We believe in the power of allies. We believe in individuality. We believe in structural change. We believe in setting specific measurable goals. We are fighting to (which I particularly love) we are fighting for a power share not a power grab. So fantastic, just to see all of those wants and needs articulated in that manifesto. And you say at the end of the book, that you want to start a discussion on how to create a better society. Where the privileged create and provide opportunities for those less fortunate. How do you think, I mean first of all do you think it's happening? And how do you think we can all play a part in that?

LENNY: When you say 'we' are you talking about we and media or what are you talking about?

KIT: I'm talking about us as individuals, because not everyone, most of us aren't in the media. I mean not everyone is involved in TV. And there's going to be lots of people watching us now who won't be involved in the TV industry. Is there an application for this manifesto beyond TV?

LENNY: Yeah, of course, I think that it applies to everybody, in terms of...you know that thing when people go you can't say anything anymore, it's all political correctness gone mad! I never thought it was political correctness to address people by their proper pronoun or not to satirise people because of the colour of their skin or their sexuality. You know, it took a long time to learn. But I never thought that was political correctness. I think if you call it civility and manners that's probably a better way to think of it. I always thought this thing

of political correctness probably was the wrong thing, it was the wrong way to address that. I think that in the workplace if you have got a black colleague and somebody makes a stupid joke be an ally. Say that's out of order, I think say well I'm going to say that we don't need to hear that kind of language. If you see someone being sexually harassed, be an ally. It's about being an ally really in the real world. Because in the media we just need more People of Colour, more gay, more trans, more you know, people of alternate sexualities. We need to mix things up. If it ain't say varied get aeriated, we need to vary this stuff so we can start going there's me, there's somebody I can look at across the table at. The whole thing about the boardroom, how does the boardroom look? The boardroom is very monocultural, there is very few women and virtually no black people. So, that's all got to change. And what's great about - I was looking at the Comic Relief website the other day and I don't know whether it's because of me or what, but the Comic Relief Board of Trustees has changed considerably since 1988. There's a lot of people of colour, there is many more women than there used to be. Really, really good. The national theatre board is changing slowly but surely. They have just managed to get another person of colour on board. So that's three people of colour on the Board of Trustees. Three doesn't sound like a lot but it's better than none.

KIT: Yeah, absolutely.

LENNY: The other thing to realise is change takes time. The 100 years' war, when you were in it, that was really slow! When you look at the drawing in the Ladybird Book of History, the 100 years' War is that long but if you were living in it and you were born that went on for years. So, change is slow.

KIT: We have so little time left, so I will ask you quick fire questions. First one, what are you reading at the moment?

LENNY: I'm reading lots of things, but the fascinating thing is this book by Dick Gregory, which is called *Defining Moments in Black History: Reading Between the Lies*. And basically, Dick Gregory a brilliant black comedian at the same time as Richard Pryor and Bill Cosby, became a civil rights activist actually turned his back on comedy, marched and met Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King. He's the one that said went into a restaurant down south where they said, "we don't serve Negroes here", and he said, "that's OK we don't eat them!" Dick Gregory is the guy that did those jokes. And basically, doing this to Black history as told by, as history is a story told by the victors or by the folks with money or the people in charge. He wants to just elbow out history a bit in terms of what really happened, and he talks about Rosa Parks and says the story about Rosa Parks is she sat down because she was tired, and I asked Rosa Parks why she sat down and she said I was mad as hell about Emmett Till, now this is the boy who got killed by white supremacists, and his mum had an open coffin so that the world could see what they had done to him. His mum was hardcore. And so Rosa Parks said it made me angry and I didn't want to...you know because they made you, you got on the bus, you paid and you had to walk out of the front door and go all way to the back and walk back in, they didn't show you that on Doctor Who, but you had to walk out walk around and go on the back, and sometimes they would drive off and leave

you once they had got your money. They would drive off and leave you and leave you standing there, and you had to get the next bus. So, A, she was cheesed off about that, infuriated by the death of Emmett Hill and she'd just had enough. So, the next bus came, and she just sat down and refused to move and that was the beginning of the Montgomery Bus Boycott which Martin Luther King took on as a major cause. What he also says in this amazing book is the way to protest isn't necessarily, because all activism is really about people in the room. If you can get the right people in the room you can change the world, right? What he talked about was the effect of retail, if black people understood the power of retail, the power in your pocket, if you can understand that, then when they had the bus boycott and they just stopped taking the bus, it affected the business. It affected the bus business. They weren't making any money from the black community, and therefore a lot of those businesses were going to the wall, because they had lost a load of customers. So, once we understand the power of our pound note.

KIT: The power of economics.

LENNY: We could change everything.

KIT: Lenny it is so fascinating to talk to you, we are obviously going to run out of time, because that's what happens. Last question, you chose *Catch 22* as your desert island disc book, would you change it? Yes or no?

LENNY: No.

KIT: That was 30 years ago. So, you are going to stick with *Catch 22*?

LENNY: Although I have read many books since then, I would say all of Neil Gaiman's, *The Sandman* is up there, *The Watchman* is up there, *My Name is Leon* is up there – hooray!

KIT: Yes, thank you.

LENNY: My production company is filming *My Name is Leon* at the moment as you know. And the reason we are doing it is because I was halfway through doing the audio book and I said, A, I've got to meet the person that wrote these and I rang my Managing Director and said we have to make this book, it's brilliant, it's called *My Name is Leon*, I have been crying all morning, can we make it. So, thank you for that.

KIT: And so, we are making it.

LENNY: It's happening and being filmed in Birmingham as we speak.

KIT: And I'm coming to see it soon. Lenny, thank you so much for joining us at the BBC.

LENNY: Thank you so much. It's so rare to be able to be in a platform where I can talk about my enthusiasms, there's so many books, there's *The Real McCoy*, there is, you know, *Duppy*



Stories, there's that book, there's *Poking a Dead Frog* which I love, which is all about comedy. There's *Jackie Brown*, the screenplay, there's *Watchmen*, there is *Wild and Crazy Guys* which is all about the SNL people and how their careers unfolded. I love this *Barracoon* by Zora Neale Hurston the last ever slave, she actually interviewed him. There is so many books we can talk about.

KIT: For the next Big Book Weekend come on and we will do the quick fire books and why they should be read.

LENNY: So many brilliant books out there. Thank you so much, and thank you everybody for listening, I know I go on a bit. But I'm excited by reading and by books. And keep reading.

KIT: Thank you. Thank you, Lenny.

LENNY: Thank you.

KIT: Fantastic.