

British Village Life: Heaven or Hell

ALEX CLARK: Hello, everyone, and welcome to Big Book Weekend. My name is Alex Clark, and I'm thrilled to be joined by three writers who have decided to take to the country life, or the near-country life in some cases. We have Amanda Craig, author of *The Lie of the Land* and *The Golden Rule*, and recently short listed for the Women's Prize. Congratulations, Amanda. We have Ayisha Malik, author of *This Green and Pleasant Land*, and Julie Ma, author of *Happy Families* which is part of the 'Richard and Judy Search For a Bestseller', which must have been tremendously exciting. Now we are going to talk about the countryside, and its representations in fiction. We're not all in the countryside right now, are we? Let's just take a moment to kind of say where we are and what our relationship is with our environment. I am very definitely in the countryside. It's a Sunday morning, so it is the power tools special, the countryside as we know is not as quiet as people think. It is the moment when everybody gets out their chain saws and their tractors and sets to all the jobs they've been putting off through the week. What about everybody else?

JULIE MA: Well, I'm here in a small market town in a quiet corner of Wales. It is Sunday morning. It is quiet because of lockdown as well. But it also is one of those days where you don't have that special agricultural smell, which I'm sure you're familiar with - basically the smell of cow poo! It's just basically a nice quiet Sunday. I am the rural representative on the panel!

ALEX: Amanda, I know you spend lot of time in Devon, and you also live in north London. Tell us a little bit about that?

AMANDA CRAIG: I spent the last year, 95% in North Devon, so I'm very familiar not with the smell of cow poo but sheep poo which I quite like in small doses. I am in London this weekend, because of a medical emergency, but that is also quite quiet, I mean, I'm just astonished by, you know, it is as if the whole city, apart from the suburbs, has gone like Sleeping Beauty into a kind of eternal slumber, apart from Hampstead Heath which is heaving with people and dog walkers.

ALEX: Yes exactly. These pockets of green in London where, Ayisha, I know where you are, have become a kind of fair, haven't they, a fete, a place where everyone converges.

AYISHA MALIK: Absolutely. I live on a main road. Lots of swearing at people, lots of cars honking, and honestly, it's kept me entertained for the past year so that's a good thing, I guess. Lots of staring out of windows for me.

ALEX: One thing I noticed about all your books which really fascinated me - we brought you together because they are about the countryside, and we are talking about that relationship between town and country, how we relate to it, the assumptions we make about it, and the people who live in it. But they all start with families. They all start with an event in the family that threatens in some way to destabilise it, to disrupt the life that people have tried to build for themselves. Ayisha, I wonder if you would explain a little bit about your book?

AYISHA: So, setting always tends to be secondary to characters, right? So, in some ways, that's not surprising that we start with families, because that's the crux. People are the crux of each book. My book is about a Muslim man living in a very English village who visits his mother who lives in Birmingham, and she is on her death bed, and she is very fearful for his soul, and his loss of cultural identity, his loss of faith, and on her death bed, she requests for him to build a mosque in his village. Which is a very naughty idea, to be honest. But I went with it, and then, you know, *This Green and Pleasant Land* was born.

ALEX: And he really is, a kind of what I get from him in this quiet sort of south coast tiny, tiny place is that he wants the quiet life.

AYISHA: Absolutely.

ALEX: He just wants to be part of the community but essentially go pretty much unnoticed, keep himself out of harm's way, and that is about it. He's now landed with this task that just seems impossible.

AYISHA: Absolutely. You know, he has this guilt for having rejected so much of his identity, for having disappointed his mother, and not being the adherent Muslim son that he thinks that she wanted.

ALEX: Julie, coming to your book, *Happy Families*, that starts with a crisis, a serious illness in the family. But it also begins with this nod to the past, to the idea that people that you're describing have already made a long journey of migration to settle in this town. Do you want to just tell us a little bit about it?

JULIE: The story opens with a health problem with a grandfather collapsing in the street, and health problems will always bring the family together, so there has been a family feud of unexplained origin that's been going on for the last 30 years. Part of the novel is looking to how that happened. When you get to the reason of why it happened, I wanted to celebrate families, and there is the immediate three-generation Chinese family who live in this community. I also wanted to celebrate the sort of families that are not, you know, blood families, or first family. When I was small, and my mother used to take me around town, we used to go and visit all my aunties, and, when I got to their house, they were all small Welsh ladies who smelt a bit of sherry and a bit of wee and that's because they were my aunties in the same way that there are colours in *This Green and Pleasant Land*. But they were like a family of love rather than blood and I felt that very much. And that was something I wanted to represent, because you think of the countryside as being perhaps unfriendly, or undiverse, but I know that 50 or 60 years ago, people were very welcoming to my parents, and families aren't just what you think they are. Families are extended.

ALEX: Did you feel then that was something that didn't get represented in stories of the countryside, the fact that your family had arrived and made different kinds of connections, made connections that were in many ways as close as blood family?

JULIE: Yes. When I read *This Green and Pleasant Land*, parts of me did sting a bit thinking perhaps I'm looking at this through rose-coloured glasses, but I do feel the countryside is not not diverse. People think that it is pale and stale, but there is nowhere in the UK that is not within a driving distance of a Chinese takeaway, or an Indian takeaway, or a large General Hospital. Staffed by people from many nations. It's not a multi-ethnic community where you will walk down the street and certain kinds of politicians will go, "That's disgusting, there's nobody speaking English", it's never going to be like that. Although it can be a bit like that as you can walk down the street here and all you can hear is Welsh and Polish just for a bit. But it's not not diverse, and I think that you don't make somewhere that's not diverse be more diverse by never going there, or never representing it. So that is what my plan was with this book to a large extent.

ALEX: Thank you so much. Amanda, in your two books, *The Lie of the Land* and *The Golden Rule*, one of the things you really do is to show all these communities from the super wealthy to the people who are really struggling to get by in rural economies. I mean, that is something you wanted to showcase these things right up against one another, wasn't it?

AMANDA: Yes, very much so. I think it's very easy if you do live in a big city, particularly London, to be, to have this totally false idea of the countryside as full of merry peasants, and cottage core interiors, and all this stuff that is very pleasant and indeed ancient fantasy, far older than Marie Antoinette dressing up as a shepherdess. But it is very shocking certainly in North Devon, which is one of the poorer places in Europe, along with Cornwall, when you discover the depth and level of rural poverty. And, when we got our home in Devon, I discovered this for myself, and I was very, very shocked. It is rich in many other ways, you know, you've got this wonderful clean air, you have very strong communities of largely absolutely fantastic people, but the poverty of income, the poverty of opportunity, in truly rural Britain is really quite astounding. I thought immediately that I wanted to write about this because it is a kind of hidden world. So, I imagined this couple who were middle class North London professionals - one is an architect, and one is a journalist. Two particularly embattled profession in the present time - going and losing everything, losing their jobs, finding that they can't stay in London, and being forced to rent a really quite horrible house in Devon that sort of is damp and rat-infested and all the rest. And their shock at discovering this hidden world, and the shock is particularly acute in the case of Lottie, the wife's son, who is mixed race, and what Julie has just said, that you never have to go very far before meeting someone from another culture, well, in the year that we have spent in lockdown, the only people who are not white British that I've seen are in the Chinese takeaway, and there is one quite famous Black farmer who lives not far from us, and it is a great shock when you see this kind of Britain - the Britain of basically 50 years ago, so much alive and well, and not unfriendly, exactly, but certainly not at ease with people from other cultures. So, all that formed the background to actually both my novels, but particularly *The Lie of the Land*, because intertwined with it is a murder plot, because the house that they rent is very cheap for a particular reason, that the reader discovers, and so do they.

ALEX: There are these wonderful twin themes coming out there and just thinking Ayisha of the fact that you centred faith and faith acts in your plot, and we think of this, as Amanda

says, the Britain, the England of 50 years ago, as part of this John Major spinster cycling back from evensong, has a kind of Church of England core to it, but that is not representative of the kind of Britain we are in now. I'm just wondering how much you wanted to explore and think about, that would absolutely be like to take a very quintessential countryside place and put a mosque in it, a physical reality.

AYISHA: It is interesting you ask that, because that was basically the impetus behind the book. I think there had been a terrorist attack, and whenever these things happen, it forces - especially when the terrorist attack is by a Muslim person, a so-called Muslim person - it forces you to ask a lot of questions about belonging, about home, about how you perceive things, but also most importantly, about how you are perceived. And I began to ask the question - I'm a total imposter on this panel in the sense that I've never actually lived in the country. I went to West Dorset for a month to stay there to do research for the book, which was wonderful, and I wanted to ask the question, and it was more for myself, actually: why would a mosque not be part of the English landscape anymore? What prevents that from being the case? That is the question I sort of went into when I started to write the book. It was very much about how integration and assimilation work. Bilal as a character, their family is assimilated, very much part of the community, very much loved by their community, until they want to impose a reflection of their own culture and faith into a village that is very English which, you know, causes people to feel quite territorial over the land they live on, and I didn't want to come in with this antagonist and protagonist one right and another wrong. I really wanted to show a sort nuanced view of how everyone lives with prejudices of sorts. We are all guilty of it. It is just how these prejudices manifest, and what causes these prejudices to manifest.

ALEX: I'm very interested one of the things you've done throughout your writing career, thinking of you writing the Sophie Khan books with the tag, the 'Muslim Bridget Jones', it's that idea of taking mainstream commercial fiction with a really broad appeal with a kind of pleasure in it, with a laugh, with entertainment at its heart and as it were sneaking in something more serious.

AYISHA: I think comedy is the best way to engage readers, especially when you're talking about intense, loaded, and controversial themes like racism and identity, especially with the various conversations going around nowadays about identity politics, and I think comedy is a sort of, you know, Julie uses this a lot in her book as well, comedy is a great way to engage the reader, and not feel like they're being lectured to, and a kind of exploration via this comedic lens of what it means to be human, and what it means to be a community. And, you know, creating characters that are Muslim, but that being quite incidental to the overall goal of the writing.

ALEX: Julie, tell us a bit about that in your novel - the idea of using comedy - because it's not for a minute to say there are not serious and difficult, and indeed often very dark things. You know, as the owner of a Chinese takeaway, the protagonist frequently encounters racists coming into her shop, drunkenness, male violence. Tell us about marrying those two things, the comedy and darkness.

JULIE: It has come as a bit of a surprise to me that I'm a comedy writer to be honest because I did set out to be like Amanda and be a little more serious! I think these comedy situations present themselves to me, and I just write about them. I do think that a novel without comedy is a bit bland and unseasoned... There are some grim things that happen in the shop - there is racism with a former drug dealer - and you have to leaven these things because people don't want to read a grim book all about racism, or a grim book about drug takers and how they get clean. I think in Amanda's book too, there is humour. When I went through the book, I put a little exclamation mark every time something makes me laugh out loud. And in both books, there were plenty of those exclamation marks.

ALEX: They're covered in exclamation marks! I was going to say to you, Amanda, you do throw comedy into the mix. But also, as you mentioned there, murder plots in both the books, there are kind of dark and unexplored murderer and mystery, and suspense. Marrying all these kinds of genres together, it's quite a sort of task you've sort of set yourself?

AMANDA: I think all three of us, actually, are comic writers who are tackling very serious subjects, and I think what Julie and Ayisha just said, shows that you are choosing a specific way to address these much darker subjects. I think we - I hope that literary fiction as well as popular fiction has passed beyond this ghettoisation that you can only be funny, or you can only be serious and we are getting back, as I have battled my entire professional life to try and make happen, we're getting back to the things that made Victorian writers like Dickens and Trollope so enormously popular. People are fed one the kind of book that is hammering the same nail repeatedly again and again. We all of us are a mixture of laughter and tears. We want that richness that we feel in life to be reflected in what we read. I chose to write about some of the most excruciating things that my peer group who are now all middle aged are going through, which is the breakdown of their marriages, and the loss of their professional careers and incomes, but I wanted to make it funny as well as dark, because otherwise you're just repelled, and depressed, and as I've always said, what I want to do is afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted. Really, that's all of us, we are all, if you live in Europe, basically comfortable, even if some are more comfortable than others, and we are all particularly in the last year, afflicted. So, I just think if you succeed in doing that, and I think certainly Ayisha and Julie have written the most delightful and entertaining books, as well as quite serious ones, then hooray.

ALEX: One of the things that does draw them all together of course is this idea of country living and what it is like, or small-time life in the case of both Julie and Ayisha's books, even more so. It's that idea that what we think if we don't live there is informed by books like, for example, *Cold Comfort Farm*, that the outsider, as the reader or one of the characters goes into this place, and is it frankly horrified by the privations that they see. We were chatting just beforehand how this props up in the media, and media representations, non-fiction representations where people go to the countryside to live, to escape the horror of the city, and are just absolutely appalled and they can't get whatever they want when they want it. Do you think that's a kind of rich vein of comedy?

AMANDA: Yes, I think it's an ancient vein. It goes back to the Aesop, the town mouse and the country mouse, which Beatrix Potter rewrote. I think just as the countryside is an escape for city dwellers, you have to remember that the city is also often an escape for country dwellers. It's not a coincidence that in both *The Lie of the Land* and *The Golden Rule* the central protagonists are people who have escaped from small communities and turned their back on them and are completely horrified to find themselves returning there, and they have a very negative view of what that life is like and part of the journey they undergo is realising that it is not all that bad, and, in fact, being part of a community and a family is something that is enormously splendid, and reinforcing, revivifying and a good thing. But you need that constant oscillation between the two. You mention *Cold Comfort Farm*. There is the famous line about something nasty in the woodshed which of course I particularly exploit, but I've been very aware reading quite a lot of literary fiction set in the countryside that there is particularly now a strong gothic vein, so authors like Ross Raisin, *God's Own Country* and Melissa Harrison, *All Among The Barley*, they all kind of reflect the incredible beauty of the countryside and its very sinister aspects. Of course, people who live there don't feel that at all. This is very much an outsider's perception, trying to think how it must seem to those who either choose, or who are forced to live in the countryside. I do find it slightly annoying. I'm sure that people who really are living in the deepest rural countryside find it intensely annoying, but it is a way of trying to get both sensibilities, both the urban and the rural into a work of literature. I think that the city is as dangerous, dangerous, and nasty and possibly haunted as the countryside. We often see that.

ALEX: I'm very fascinated to get Ayisha's take here as somebody who described herself as an imposter who wanted to do her research and is a person who lives in the city. This idea of this sort of either rural idyll or horrifically cut-off and basically inured in the attitudes of the past, when you went to the countryside to do the research, what did you find was your biggest challenge?

AYISHA: In some ways, I was lucky because I went to a place in West Dorset where a friend of mine lives. She is white, and that helps - sometimes. She introduced me to many people in West Dorset, including the head teacher at the local school. She was the reason I was living in the west wing of this really quite extraordinary mansion, which was painted pink, with gold gilding, and so in some ways, because I had her as a sort of segue into the community, it was - they weren't as perturbed when I asked them the question: how would you feel if I built a mosque in your village? There was obviously an uncomfortable silence. Maybe I'm a bit like Julie in the sense that I lived with rose-tinted glasses that I went with quite an open mind, and I hope heart as well, just to see how people live, and by and large, I was greeted with immense friendliness, and openness, and kindness. And I remember going to Dorchester with a friend of mine who was wearing a hijab - and I myself used to wear a hijab so I was wearing one too - and we went into this cafe in Dorchester. People looked at us and then looked away. Then this man ushers us over to his table, because there was no place to sit, so he was being very kind and welcoming. We sat down, and up to this point, I had, you know, we had been having a great experience, and we were chatting about Brexit, identity, he travelled the world, and he had no problem with brown people, and he loved the idea of living in a community. I spoke to him about my book with a mosque in a village and was very open. By the end of the conversation, he said, "Now, girls, whatever you do,

no matter what. Never, ever turn to terrorism." It was that moment that my friend and I looked at each other, and I loved that Julie laughed, because most people are so horrified. Like, "oh, gosh, what do we do? How do we react?" My friend and I just looked at each other. We thought we were just having this really lovely conversation, and this guy thought he was preventing two women from being radicalised!

ALEX: You were thinking, "I would really like a scone now, and he was thinking I'm going to deradicalise these two girls."

AYISHA: Which is why the whole notion of how you perceive things, and how you're perceived can be so at odds with one another. That's one of the main stories I came away with, and he was like, "all right, have a lovely day", then. Like, "Bye, George, nice to meet you!"

ALEX: Julie, that idea, the assumptions being projected on to you, and you going along in a way, all innocent, like having an ordinary interaction, does that chime with you?

JULIE: That's a variation where you have a conversation with somebody, and at the end, they go, "Your English is really good!" I go, and before, when I was younger, I would go, and be a bit upset, now I go, "Thank you very much, yours is really good too!" In that case, I would have said to that guy, "Yeah thanks. You keep away from the old white radicalism as well, or don't be a terrorist either." Yes, it's difficult. Some of the things that people say in the countryside I feel are perhaps are not ideally woke, but I think the kindness, what I got from *This Green and Pleasant Land* and also from my own experiences is that, in the countryside, kindness and good manners can trump almost everything, unless you really come along and say, "I would like to build a mosque"! You could see the characters. You can see them hesitating going "I want to be kind and have good manners, but also I really want to say something about this mosque." I think if you let it lie long enough, kindness and good manners should win out every time. Yes.

ALEX: I wondered, Julie, if I could ask you, and Amanda, if you could come in afterwards, of course, you're in Wales, and we should mention you're in the family takeaway that is quite similar to the book, because, as you explained, it's a place that you can get away from barking dogs.

JULIE: Yes, that's right!

ALEX: It's the nice quiet place in the house.

JULIE: Also, it's got really good broadband as well which I noticed that Amanda in London is not necessarily having, and that is since I've entered the world of publishing, I've discovered that people who live in North London don't have really good broadband. It is always a bit ...

ALEX: You're trumping the broadband that you are in the market town in Wales! I'm thinking about Wales that of course has and has had, many of its own identity issues and issues with devolution, and of course Amanda you've latterly written about Cornwall. To be

another person, to be perceived as an incomer to a place that is already having its own kind of quite seismic arguments about how it relates to the rest of the country. I was just wondering about that and how those layers of belonging and resistance work?

JULIE: I think Wales, Wales is pretty much followed England - and Cornwall and Devon - in terms of the Brexit vote, and that came as a surprise. But they were all people that I knew, and when I asked people who voted remain and leave why did they do it, and they all seemed to have the vast majority had perfectly good reasons, some of them on both sides had slightly peculiar reasons relating to the length of cucumbers and things which I didn't think were ace reasons for deciding to vote as they did. I think Welsh Nationalism has taken - yesterday, there was a rugby match between Wales and France. And when Wales play England, I'm afraid there is a lot of what I describe unacceptable anti-English behaviour. However, there are a lot of English people living in my particular area. It's a Conservative area. Three miles up the road, it's a Plaid Cymru area. I think we see a lot of stickers saying, 'yes to Welsh nationalism'. A lot of children who live in this area who are Chinese or Syrian, they go to the Welsh medium school, taught through the medium of Welsh. I think in the old days, nobody would vote Plaid Cymru because of the need to be a fluent Welsh speaker, and that is no longer the case. We have Leanne Wood who is not a fluent Welsh speaker lead Plaid Cymru. I think that Welsh nationalism will possibly going to have its time soon or will be taken more seriously quite soon. There is no barrier because you're Chinese or Syrian to be a supporter of Welsh nationalism, really. It's different to how it used to be.

ALEX: Thank you. That's really interesting. I live in the Irish countryside. My lockdown project of learning Irish has gone super well! It is - I just going to say it's a lot harder than it looks if you start at the age of 52. There are a lot of things I can't pronounce. Amanda, just to bring you in about Cornish nationalism, which is - you're writing about an area that has a difficult relationship with the rest of the country - how did that fit in to what you wanted to explore?

AMANDA: We live five miles from the Cornish border, so again it's quite a familiar area for me to write about. Cornish nationalism has definitely been growing for all kinds of reasons, but I think chiefly because of actually economic deprivation. This fragmentation that we're getting throughout Britain, and indeed Britain from Europe, is so clearly because people are - they wanted to stick it to the man in the Brexit vote, you know? They were absolutely fed up with so much of their taxes going to, as they see it, London, when they need that money themselves. I think I feel very strongly that I really want to kind of defend the country people from the rather sneery metropolitan attitude that they are racist, all stupid, they didn't understand what they were voting for. I think they did understand - perhaps not the full consequences for business, but they were voting because they thought they were defending their green and pleasant land from being overrun with development, which, unfortunately, is still happening. Just down the road from us, indeed, we've got another 30 houses going up. That is something that I don't think has really been addressed by the media, but this mutual hatred and suspicion between town and country cannot be good. It can't, you know, hatred never brings anything positive. And I would just like to see a lot more dialogue between these two spheres instead of hostility.

ALEX: Ayisha, I can see you nodding enthusiastically at that. Was that something that you ...

AYISHA: I think Amanda has just hit on something really important, and certainly something that I wanted to explore when I wrote *This Green and Pleasant Land* is that it also happened at the time the idea came at the time when the Brexit vote had come in, right? So, I think everyone in London was in just shock. Who knew that people thought differently to us? Shocking! And it really sort of punctured this idea of superior cosmopolitan living, because, guess what, other people have a voice, and they spoke up, and this has been the result, and so this idea of the mosque in the village kind of coalesced with this idea also of everyone says the village is a bubble, the countryside is a bubble, but guess what, London was also a bubble, and it burst. And so, when I wrote it, I tried to kind of understand what it might have been that really was troublesome which caused people to vote leave, and I don't know if I got the answer to my various questions, but I do know that one of the main things that I discovered when I stayed in this wonderful village, Long Bredy, was that they were very averse to change. And this aversion is there whether you are brown, whether you are white, no matter where you come from. Change as a concept is something that we all rail against in some form or another. And so, this was, this then became a core theme in *This Green and Pleasant Land* - how we reject change, but how it is inevitable, you know, the inevitability of change is that is life, moving forward, being able to reconcile what you want and what happens, and this is the struggle that we are facing now, you know? Trying to live in a civilisation in which so many ideas are opposed to your own beliefs, you know? These are all things that you can understand, no matter what your background.

ALEX: This is really interesting, isn't it? I can see you nodding vigorously, Amanda. One of the things that a city affords us is a certain degree of anonymity and that is often why people come to cities, people who are not finding that they can live in a smaller community easily and happily. That idea of wanting to conserve a community, and wanting to make sure it is not infiltrated by people who are just going to put you under the microscope, I think that is something that you feel quite strongly about, isn't it?

AMANDA: Yes, again, it's another reason why I chose Cornwall for *The Golden Rule*. Cornwall at the moment, according to the papers this week, is having more property inquiries than London. There is certainly an absolutely mass exodus because of the pandemic, and the way it has reformulated people's work and commutes, and all the rest of it. People want to get out of London with its high prices and bad air. Where do they most want to go? They want to go to Cornwall, but the enormous problem that the West country faces is that all its most pretty and desirable coastal villages have been bought up as second homes, and then the local people cannot afford to continue to live there. Just in case I sound like the world's biggest hypocrite, where we are in Devon is not one of those places. It is very remote, and what we bought was thoroughly broken down, could not have been bought by someone local. But it really is a colossal problem, and I think the Cornish in particular now are really hostile to Londoners. You know, I've heard stories about Londoners being told to go back to London, turn around your car, get out of our place. I mean, you know, also, quite horrible and problematic, because these places are largely economically dependent, not on fishing, but on tourism, and people buying these properties, so, it is a real headache, all this. I don't know what the solution is, but I suspect it is to do stuff like St

Ives is doing which is to forbid non-residents, or non-natives, even, from buying homes that are on the coast. You do need a redistribution of wealth in this country, and, if that has to come through Londoners moving out into poorer places, then maybe that is a good thing. But you also need to have less closed mindedness at the same time. I mean it's a really tough - I'm not a politician, thank God - It's a really tough balancing act, but the way you get conflicts like this between wanting everything to remain the same, and needing to change, that is the most fertile ground you could possibly think of for fiction. Fiction is about, is it not, you know, debate, and conflict, and change? You know, basically, a story is something in which people by the end of the story have changed. You know, that is the journey that you must go on and take your readers on.

ALEX: I'm really, really interested in that, and it is exactly - exactly, what we are trying to talk about through this weekend, the idea that books can change us, be both education, and information, as well as comfort and succour. How were each of you changed by writing your books? What were the thoughts that you had were that changed during the course of them? I wonder if I could start with you, Julie?

JULIE: Well, the book is set in a rural area, and there is one small scene set in Cardiff which is representing a city here. Again, it is a similar situation to the characters in particularly the *The Golden Rule*, in that she is a country girl who has gone to the city, and then for whatever reason, has to come back, and then there is the question mark at the end, should I stay in the country or go back to the city? I don't say what happens in either of those books to spoil the ending. I think to a certain extent, when I came on to, invited on to this panel, I thought oh well it's my job here to represent the country, and say how great the countryside is, and how awful the city is, but I don't really feel that way. That's not how it is. I think what Amanda said about Cornwall being a popular location to move to for Londoners is also something that is reflected in the *The Lie of the Land*. If you do move out of the countryside, move out to the countryside from the city, it's very possible that you won't be able to go back again for financial reasons, so, in a way, everybody who is in the city now, the things that you love about the city that you can't have because of the virus, they will all come back in due course. So, you need to think about living in the countryside as being like a puppy. It's not just for lockdown, it's for life. So, have a think. Come and visit the countryside. We love having you here for economic reasons, and we love having you visit, but have a little serious think before moving here.

ALEX: Ayisha, does that make you think twice about extending your month in the countryside?

AYISHA: I don't think I will ever be a country girl, to be honest, but I love visiting. I think, actually, one of the things that I learned when I was writing, by the end of the book, is I had a very hazy idea about the poverty, the situation when it came to poverty in the countryside, and in some ways, I'm glad I didn't read *The Lie of the Land* before I wrote it because my book would have become all about the class structure, which Amanda does so brilliantly, and I - so that is one thing. It opened my eyes. When I wrote *This Green and Pleasant Land*, it was very middle-class focused, and actually the strand I brought in of a few other characters, and of drug problems - not that drug problems don't exist in the middle

class obviously - but those strands were brought in afterwards because I realised this is a situation that need to be in the book in order to, in order for it to be authentic.

ALEX: Amanda, finally, I know you're writing these books as a connection. Is there more to come in the same vein? Is there more to explore in the countryside?

AMANDA: Yes, the one I'm writing about now is the Italian countryside because I grew up in Italy. They have a colossal battle going on with immigration from particularly North Africa. And I mean, these traumas that you can write about in microcosm are all over the world now. The world is full of people who, for one reason or another - persecution, starvation, economic lack of opportunity - we are full of people who are being upset, and either forced to move, or forced to accept those who move. You know, I think we are at a kind of crux. Are we going to go the way of welcoming the stranger into what has been a fairly homogeneous community, seeing as in Julie's book that they can bring, you know, the most wonderful food, and vitality, and love and affection, or as in Ayisha's book, you know, a different way of looking at faith and community that is still involves everybody? These are very positive and uplifting narratives, or are we going to turn to the dark side and become increasingly fragmented and full of hatred and distrust? I mean, I really hope that if there is anything that we can do as novelists, it is to encourage the former. It is to encourage people to see that we are all human beings. We are of one blood. You know, even Kipling said that in *The Jungle Book*, did he not? We are of one blood, thou and I, and when Mowgli said that even to snakes, even to monkeys, they had to accept that this is the thing. We are all - we owe each other at least respect and peace, and trust, and I really do think that that is what as writers, that is our - should be our very serious and deep purpose as well as entertaining and comforting and, you know, getting us through this rather dreadful time in our lives.

ALEX: Amanda, that is a wonderful message of kind of hope and togetherness on which to end on. Sorry that we do have to close now. What a brilliant session. Thank you so much Amanda craig, Ayisha Malik and Julie Ma. I thoroughly recommend each of their books to all of you out there. Thank you for joining us today.