

New Heroes: A search for role models in difficult times

SHAHIDHA BARI: Hello and welcome to the Big Book Weekend and this event. Thank you for joining in the fun. I'm Shahidha Bari, I'm a BBC presenter and your host for this event which will last about 40 minutes. We will talk about heroes and new heroes and the search for role models in difficult times. Are we re-thinking heroes after the cultural reckoning of the #MeToo movement and recent controversies about statues and heritage? Or in a time of crisis do we need icons to inspire, and heroes to worship and adore? Joining us to think about those questions and to talk about their work are the writer Irenosen Okojie and BBC Security Correspondent Frank Gardner. Hello!

IRENOSEN OKOJIE: Hi!

FRANK GARDNER: Hi!

SHAHIDHA: Hello. Irenosen, you are a Nigerian British writer and your debut novel, *Butterfly Fish* won a Betty Trask award and was nominated for the Edinburgh International First Book Award. You are also a fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, and your short story *Grace Jones* won the Caine Prize for African writing in 2020. It's also one of the short stories that features in your newest book, *Nudibranch*, and here it is. Frank, many people will recognise your face, you are the BBC's long standing Security Correspondent. We have been reliant on you for so much, reporting in Afghanistan to piracy off the Somali coast. And it's now 17 years since you were ambushed by Al Qaeda in Saudi Arabia and your cameraman Simon Cumbers was killed, and you suffered life-changing injuries. And you write about those experiences in your own work, particularly *Blood and Sand*. And in recent years you've turned to – Oh I think that was *Far Horizons*, here is *Blood and Sand*, so many books, Frank. In recent years you have been turning to travel writing and fiction, *Ultimatum* being the latest in your high-octane spy thriller series, with the undeniably heroic, Luke Carlton. So, welcome to you both. From that introduction I think it's very clear that you are very different people. But you are both writers. So maybe we can start there with literary heroes. So, what I would like to know is when you started writing, were there writer heroes that you had in mind to emulate? Irenosen you go first?

IRENOSEN: Well, what a great question to kick off the discussion. Certainly, Toni Morrison was a big one more me. I picked up *Jazz*, maybe I was 13 or 14 and I happened to pick it up from the library shelf and I was just blown away by the scope of the novel, the fact that it was capturing the black American experience in ways that were so complex and nuanced and revelatory. It really struck a chord with me, because of course I didn't see myself reflected that often in British literature. There weren't that many black writers being published, very few. So, to find this book, and to see what Morrison had done, not only with the idea, but her use of language as well, I thought was extraordinary. You know, it felt like this book was imitating a musical genre. How did she do that? That stunned me. You know it really captured my imagination and sort of lit a fire under me in terms of this passion that I was already actively cultivating for literature. So, Toni definitely I would say is one. Also, James Baldwin, somebody who proudly stood firmly in his identity as a black, gay man, you know, in America, in the 1950's and 40's. Again, brilliant writer, fascinating writer, who

looked at the social impact of being black in America and what that felt like. But I was also just deeply impressed by his social consciousness, you know, he was active in the civil rights movement. Very much at the forefront of trying to ensure that black people got what they deserved, and very vocal about that. But also, he was a dreamer and I loved that about him. He moved from the states to Paris to continue to write. So, this was a man who was interested in the world and other people and not just his own experience. I would say those two writers definitely. And then somebody like Roald Dahl as well.

SHAHDIHA: Really?

IRENOSEN: Yeah, I mean people often smile when I say that, but I think you can see it in my writing actually because *Fantastic Mr Fox* was the first book I read in this country – I went to boarding school in Norfolk at aged 8 – and I just loved that book it was so funny and again it had this idea of what the imagination could do, having this fox at the heart of the narrative that was able to speak and cause all sorts of chaos was fascinating to me.

SHAHIDHA: Honestly you have made my nine-year-old niece's day, she will be delighted to hear that her hero, Roald Dahl, is yours too. What about you Frank, were there writer heroes that you had in mind when you started writing?

FRANK: Well interestingly that you say Shahidha that Irenosen and I come from very different backgrounds, I too was sent to boarding school at eight, and Roald Dahl was definitely, you know, reading *Kiss Kiss* when I was very young, his collection of short stories was amazing. I think from a life perspective, Wilfred Thesiger was something of a role model to me, my mum introduced him to me. He was this sort of extraordinary explorer, who was born in 1909, or 1910 I think, and he crossed the empty court of Arabia and wrote this up in his book *Arabian Sands*. For me it was a fantasy to follow in his footsteps and explore these unknown parts of the Middle East. Basically, I probably was born about 50 years too late. He was able to do it when it really was unknown. But he wrote beautifully about mornings in the desert and just the feeling of emptiness there but of companionship with his Bedouin guides. But more latterly in terms of fiction, Gerald Seymour was a big influence on me. He wrote a lot about espionage, and his, I can't remember the name of his character, I know that his code name was "dolphin", and this character Dolphin was sort of stuck somewhere on the Turkish border and it described the loneliness of being an agent runner out there, in those days probably without much back-up. These days there is so much technology. But I have been lucky enough in my job to encounter a lot of real-time life spies and talk to them about their lives and how they work and stuff. It really struck a chord for me about some of the dangers and risks that these people take. Particularly the agents they are running, and I have tried to bring that out in my writing.

SHAHIDHA: That is such high-octane stuff already isn't it, we are already into the land of espionage. I want to talk about the heroes and heroines in your books, characters like Luke Carlton, your hero in your series Frank, he's ex-military, contracted by British intelligence, he's parachuted into a cabal of drug barons in South America in the first book and then Iran for the second and God knows where in the third that is coming. He's a sort of a Bond

figure, he's kind of a John Le Carre figure, who are his literary predecessors or is he something new under the sun, Frank?

FRANK: I hope he's new and I don't want him to be a Bond type. At the risk of name dropping, I was lucky enough to meet Roger Moore a few times before he died. And, you know, his films, based on the novels, were so incredibly hammy, sort of "take that, and that", it's like ah no! I would like to think that Luke Carlton is much more Bourne, Jason Bourne. But he is neither, he's quite a flawed character. He's got a troubled relationship with Elise his very impressive girlfriend because she is a black belt in aikido or karate and I remember when I started writing these and we went to the publishers, my literary agent said before we went in there - we were literally in the taxi on the way to the publishers - he said look the first thing they are going to ask you is does your hero have legs. Which I thought was kind of ironic given I can't really use mine! And I said, well yeah, absolutely, I want this to be more than one book. I'm glad to say they have just commissioned another trilogy, which is great. But I wanted him to evolve, but I also wanted very strong female characters in it. So increasingly, Luke Carlton is working with a chemical weapons expert called Jenny Lee who you will see quite a lot of in the next book. Because I'm not trying to kind of virtue sit on this, I get to meet some really impressive operators in the security, intelligence and defence world, women who, in some cases take greater risks than the men who are incredibly cool at what they do. Things have moved on a long way since the 70s when John le Carre was doing much of his writing. You know, it isn't the stuffy world anymore. You go into MI5, you know, you will see, and GCHQ in particular, GCHQ is like a Californian campus, there is a Costa coffee there, there are people in trainers and T-shirts. It's just amazingly vibrant.

SHAHIDHA: I was going to ask you, I don't know if your wife has a black belt in karate, but is there something of you in Luke Carlton?

FRANK: Physically, no, because he's six foot one and sort of, you know, this kind of super-fit, and I'm this guy in a wheelchair. But yes, I think in the way we think, definitely. I made him deliberately flawed, he was orphaned at the age of ten, and it was his fault, he went wandering off in the jungle in Columbia from a picnic and his parents went to find him and were killed in a car crash and he's always carrying that burden with him all the time. But yes, I put thoughts into his which I would probably have. And he's not terribly good at chatting people up. I mean when he first meets Elise, his girlfriend, she says, "do you know what, stay there, I'm going off to get us a couple of mojitos" and he says "why" and she says "because it might improve your conversation!"

SHAHIDHA: I feel like we will have to ask your wife about that, whether this resemblance is true. But let's leave that for another time. Irenosen, so I want to ask you a little bit about your protagonist but it's slightly harder because your heroes and heroines are – they're slippery and mysterious and in *Nudibranch* certainly the stories shift genre. We move from social horror, and trauma – I hope I'm not giving things away - to horror-horror, and there is a story of course called *Grace Jones* which is about a Martinican woman called Sidra, and she's a Grace Jones impersonator but she has dark secrets. Why Grace Jones?

IRENOSEN: Well, firstly because Grace is incredible. And you know, you talk about visionaries and she certainly is one. And she is somebody that always impressed me, not just in terms of being an artist, but everything that comes with her as well. The storytelling aspect, the costuming, the fact that you feel transported to another dimension just looking at her. So, I knew that when I wanted to explore this story about, you know, trauma and how we navigate trauma in our future, past trauma, and you know, we're trying to process that and unpick that. The ways that happens are quite mysterious and strange. I knew I wanted the character to, you know, impersonate a famous person, and to have that as something she did part-time. Grace was somebody that really spoke to me in that way. So, that felt right. But obviously there are elements of myself as well in Sidra, I think as writers we do that. But she's also, I think, you know, a distant relative to somebody like Janey from *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston who was, you know, this free spirit. Had to go through these stifling marriages during the Jim Crow era, but was able to just stay optimistic, and keep forging a path for herself. So, there is something of that have quality in Sidra as well. And also, Adah, from *In The Ditch*, by the wonderful Buchi Emecheta, who I don't know if many people know about her work but she is a fantastic writer, that was social realism, very different to what I do in *Nudibranch*. But there is the connection because again that protagonist is navigating being a single mother, living in a, you know, a poor neighbourhood, but she's ambitious. She's driven and she's irrepressible. So, there's something of those qualities, I think, that definitely find their way into a character like Sidra.

SHAHIDHA: Grace Jones is a fantasy figure for most of us but not for you apparently Frank?

FRANK: Well, she was a neighbour for a while, yeah. She was incredibly exotic in a sense that whenever we saw her, she would always have like this amazing hat and scarf thing, rather like out of Bond movie. And she had this entourage of incredibly wildly dressed people. She used to have some pretty wild parties. We did share a bottle of wine one afternoon in the local cafe, and she was just huge fun. But Roger Moore, shortly before he died. I bumped into him in the BBC. We went to lunch. And we went to this rather noisy place that he chose for lunch, and he was telling all these amazing stories, most of which I couldn't catch because he would speak very quietly and then mumble. And there would be a lot of noise in the restaurant. I asked him about Grace Jones. "Grace Jones let me tell you about Grace Jones blah, blah, blah, blah with all her clothes off." I was like, "what, what did you just say!" I couldn't keep asking him to repeat himself. So, I still don't know what his anecdote was there.

SHAHIDHA: I like that it is shrouded in mystery.

FRANK: It remains so!

IRENOSEN: That is amazing that story, I would actually love to know what Roger's anecdote was!

SHAHIDHA: Let me move you to talk a little bit about our modern times, I think you started to head in that direction a little bit Frank. Can we still prize the classic British hero, usually

brave, brilliant and very male and white, are we seeing different ideas of heroism and new heroes in stories emerging do you think? Irenosen you go first?

IRENOSEN: Yeah, I mean certainly in fiction now that we're having more, you know, inclusivity happening, and I'm all for that, I think obviously it's not before time, it should have been happening a long time ago. So, for me that's really exciting, because you know we want to see ourselves reflected. It means that things are possible, and it means that you can see yourself or what's, you know, what's out there for the taking in new ways. I'm thinking of heroes that have spoken to me recently, people like Maggie Pocock whose a space scientist, black woman, came from a working-class background, suffered with dyslexia, you know, is now one of the foremost scientist in the UK. I think she's presenting 'The Sky At Night' at one point as well and gosh when I discovered her I was thinking if I had seen somebody like her when I was in my teens I would have wanted to be a space scientist. How cool is that. And also, somebody like Frank, I watched the documentary, 'Being Frank', and was just so moved, and absolutely blown away by his attitude kind of reimagining himself after this tragedy happened. And navigating disability and what it meant going forward for him. That was certainly really inspiring. But, yeah, there are heroes all around us, Marcus Rashford the footballer as well. I mean look at what he did with the free meals campaign, to be able to impact our Government, to take that seriously, to use your platform as a footballer to do that. I mean it shows great empathy and care for people outside of himself. I'm really impressed by that.

SHAHIDHA: Well, let me pick up on this and maybe I can come to you Frank about this too, about heroism right now. We have been talking about fiction, but we could talk about leaders, we could talk about icons, we could talk about figureheads in public life. Does being heroic still matter? And do we have people in mind when we think about heroism in the present moment?

FRANK: Yeah, it absolutely does. A few months ago, pretty much at the height of the pandemic, the Covid pandemic here, I got asked to take part in a project by Imperial College London and the NHS, where they were matching up people who had experienced and, I suppose survived or overcome traumatic experiences, with some of the frontline NHS doctors and medical staff who had been right on the frontline of dealing with Covid patients. And they recorded this, I think it's still available on-line somewhere. I ended up in this conversation with a young doctor from Harrow. Northwick Park I think it was, who had experienced some of the worst influxes of Covid patients. Actually, he had both me and him in tears I think on it. He was saying the hardest thing was when somebody comes in and you know they are in a bad way, they are on oxygen, they are intubated at some stage and you get to know them and then they die and you've got to walk outside to the waiting room, still in your scrubs, all in your PPE, muffled up, masked up, with a hidden face and tell that family they haven't made it.

SHAHIDHA: Noble and heroic work. Irenosen, let me come to you, this is a difficult question, and I don't mind if you try to evade it, we are in this moment where we can feel like we are questioning our heroes and we are sometimes becoming exacting, holding people to some

high, perhaps even impossible standards. Can we accept that our role models might be flawed at the moment, or do we need them to be morally upright?

IRENOSEN: That is a really good question. From my perspective I think we can accept they are flawed. You know they are human, just like we are, they will make mistakes and they will pick themselves up again. And, you know, if you are somebody in the public eye it's very difficult to do that. That kind of pressure to be perfect. A lot of people crack under that. Or feel they have to live up to an image that, you know, becomes something they no longer enjoy. We don't want to do that to our heroes, we want to acknowledge the work they do. And we also want to try to celebrate them while they are still around. I think that's something else about heroes as well, sometimes they can be forgotten. Rightly Frank mentioned our NHS staff, doctors at the forefront of this horrific battle with Covid. But also, local heroes who don't get anything on the news said about them who are helping the elderly, going shopping, or running things to help people who are at a disadvantage in the community. Those people are heroes too It's interesting. But I think we have to give them room to be able to make mistakes.

SHAHIDHA: That is a very generous response.

FRANK: Can I just ask actually, Irenosen, I would be really interested to know what you think of the character in *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo*, Lisbeth Salander, who is incredibly powerful, incredibly capable, bent on revenge. She does some pretty bad things to bad people, I was wondering, this is in Stieg Larsson's series of books.

IRENOSEN: Well as a woman who loves messy, complicated women, I mean you will see that my female characters do all sorts of bad things. I still have some empathy for that. Because I think nothing comes from nowhere. There's a reason why she has gravitated to what she does as a job. And that's because there are things in her past that have caused that. You know, there are wounds there. I certainly think for women it's important that we don't hold them up to perfect standard. And Lisbeth Salander, she's certainly a very, very complicated and intriguing character. And quite bad ass as well I have to say! For me, you know, yeah, she's interesting. She's fascinating in lots of intriguing ways.

SHAHIDHA: Listen Frank you asked Irenosen a tough question, I'm going to ask you a tough question, I'm going to ask you the Churchill question, is there a statute of limitation about heroes, when someone is no longer sacred, can we begin to question their heroism, do you think?

FRANK: Absolutely, yeah, history should be held up to a spotlight, definitely. I grew up as most people did probably thinking Churchill was like this absolutely incredible statesman who had saved us during the war. I kind of have a very vague memory, I'm old enough to just remember my dad saying, "I'm popping out now because I want to see his funeral cortege go past." I would have been very young at the time, sometime in the 1960s. Stuff has come out that he approved of gassing the Kurds, I think it was in Iraq in Northern Iraq. Some of the things he said would be completely unacceptable now. But you know a few years ago we went, I did a BBC documentary on Tintin, the adventures of Tintin, and the

programme makers, it was a BBC Wales production, they chose Tintin in the land of the Bolsheviks, and we had to exploring his life. He was writing at a time in the late 1920s, and he was writing Tintin in the Congo. When he was interviewed later, he said he was deeply ashamed of the way he depicted people back then, not just in the Congo but the Bolsheviks, and it was very anti-Russian and essentially racist, and he said that's what people were like in Brussels in 1928, but it was speaking later in the 1950s and he said unacceptable. So, I think we move on and it's right to hold people up and their stuff to the spotlight of accountability.

SHAHIDHA: It is so interesting isn't it that a narrator might change relationship there with their own work. I want to ask you Frank, about your own heroism, you are too modest to use that term yourself, but people would say it is heroic, certainly to send yourself to the frontline of reporting, as you did for many decade, and as you continue to do. Do you have a sense of what compels a person to do something like that?

FRANK: First of all, I'm not being modest, I completely reject the charge of heroism, my lawyers will be in touch with you later! No, look, I saved myself, I wasn't in a position to save anybody else. To me heroes are people who sacrifice themselves or go through enormous discomfort, danger and trauma to do something to help other people. I haven't done that; I just have gone back to work. Because I enjoy doing it. That's a pretty selfish self-indulgent thing to do, almost anti-heroic. Why do people do it? Why do people go off to these difficult and dangerous places? Because they enjoy doing it. It is really interesting. I remember recovering on my hospital bed and my wife at the time - I'm since no longer with her by the way - I remember she said "well do you want to do something completely different; shall we go be farmers in Australia or something" and I said "no I want to go back to my BBC security job, it's really interesting." And I think if you are fired up by something and it takes a long time to find a job that you find interesting - I didn't find this until my 30s - it is never too late to switch careers. I switched careers from banking to this when I was 34 and I'm still fired up by it.

SHAHIDHA: Wow, that's really inspiring to hear. I want to ask you Irenosen a little bit about your writing because I think there is a way to understand your writing as risk taking too. It's so genre bending and elliptical, mysterious. The stories in Nudinbranch are eerie and weird and not at all straightforward and it does feel like you are inventing your own genre sometimes, I wonder what it is like when you set out to write like this at sometimes, do you have confidence or does it feel like a hazard or a risk?

IRENOSEN: Yeah, no, I mean now I have confidence, but I had to find my way too in the beginning. I got a lot of that ambition I think from reading people like June Jordan, Toni Morrison - who I mentioned - my heroes, who dared to do things on the page. I think it is a vulnerability isn't it, to write, to say you want to write. But I knew that I wanted to write about particularly people of colour and particularly black women and black people. In contexts that are unexpected, in contexts that people don't often see them in. Because often the depiction is so limited. I was very clear early on that I didn't want to do that. I wanted to be really bold and not just in terms of the ideas, but in terms of, you know, the world you create. So, people are really getting an immersive experience. And I wanted to

play with language. That fascinates me. How you can bend it and twist and shape it. You can force people to interrogate, I don't know, context that they may see in a new and different way. That means we as human beings have more empathy. We're interested in other people. I certainly have grown up reading voraciously and being interested in all types of people. So, I always find it astonishing that other people aren't. Well, why wouldn't you want to enrich your world in that way, why wouldn't you want to have access to all of that. I love being able to experiment. It means hopefully a little girl who looks like me, someday down the line, will go "oh I want to write in this genre. Oh, I want to be like Octavia Butler, I want to write sci-fi, oh I want to be like Irenosen Okojie and write in different genres and dare to be experimental" so that's why I do it. Like Toni Morrison, I want to write the stories I haven't seen for me. I want those stories to be available to other people. So, that is why I do that.

SHAHIDHA: In *Nudibranch*, one of your collections, one of your heroines, dreams of Pam Grier and when I read that my heart leapt as she's of course a great African-American actor who forged a career in amazing 1970s blaxploitation films, and her career as many people will probably know was revived in the late 1990's with Quentin Tarantino's 'Jackie Brown', one of my favourite films. Were you seeking out heroic black women, and different models of black womanhood?

IRENOSEN: Oh, I'm always doing that, I do that anyway, you know, because I'm interested. It is something that gives me great encouragement, it is something that nourishes me to see these women and to see them make a path for themselves in the world. It is really, really inspiring. And Pam Grier I think now lives on a ranch somewhere and so that in itself is just amazing. This blaxploitation icon, you know, now she's living the quiet life!

SHAHIDHA: Now she's a cowgirl, brilliant!

IRENOSEN: I know! And she has this great, fascinating body of work in film which also really interests me, and I draw a lot of inspiration from film as well as medium in terms of storytelling, so I'm constantly looking at interesting women to help shape my story. Someone like Isabella Huppert, is an actress that I absolutely love, a French actress, so daring, so bold in her choices. You would just think where does she get the confidence to play these roles that a lot of other people wouldn't touch. Somehow she does them and makes them really interesting.

SHAHIDHA: We started talking about film and it made me think who would play Frank in a film of his life but I'm not going to ask that irreverent question. I'm going to ask you a more serious question, Frank.

FRANK: Rowan Atkinson!

SHAHIDHA: Rowan Atkinson, that hunk of course. But you in *Far Horizons*, you mention this brief flutter of celebrity status that happens on your return to the UK after your terrible injuries, and you are very insistent in that bit in the book and of your life you talk about your recovery and you return to your job as a Security Correspondent. But I wondered if there

was a burden in being regarded as heroic there too, as a role model for disability charities. I wondered if that was something that had troubled you too, after your injuries?

FRANK: No, not really, when I came back to work. I agreed with the BBC, I said, look, we will spend one day where I do the rounds of the various programmes and describe what happened to me, how I have spent the last seven months and then I want to get back to reporting. I didn't want to be the story anymore. And just to move on, because I'm much more interested in other people's stories and real stories than my own. Going back to Wilfred Thesiger, one of his defects I think of him was he was never interested in anybody else's story, only his own. I think that's a flaw. You have to be interested in other people's stories, which is why journalism is so fascinating to me. I just, I love it. One of the most thrilling, liberating things about writing fiction, as a news journalist, is that you have to completely jump out of your skin to do this. It is totally counterintuitive, you know, like Irenosen is doing, I'm making up dialogue in conversation that have never taken place, but that takes a big leap of faith from somebody, who it is drilled into us to be impartial, to be accurate and to have no prejudices and yet here I am writing conversations that have never taken place. That is kind of exciting actually for me.

SHAHIDHA: Yeah and sometimes, Irenosen in your case, some of your characters are not certainly simply heroic, some of your women, dare I say it, are diabolical too. In *Nudibranch* some of the stories are quite terrifying, there is a story called *Point and Tell* where a couple and their friend drive out to darkest deepest Wales, apparently doing quite geeky and innocent research on eels, then it turns into a white-knuckle horror story, I've got a very poor stomach for those sorts of things. And I won't give much away but maybe that hero, that protagonist Bronwyn, is a kind of diabolical heroine it strikes me?

IRENOSEN: Yeah, firstly it delights me that you were terrified as it shows I did my job with that story, but that story is about desire I think and the sort of slow disintegration of a relationship, and also the unknowability in a relationship. Do you ever fully know who you are with, you know, you think you do, but then you start to see other sides of them that might be slightly terrifying. And with Bronwyn there is this hunger in her that starts to come to the forefront, that scares her partner, and of course out in the wilds, in Wales, you know, setting contributes to that, and we really see that desire taken to new heights without giving everything away. But I love playing with that, and I love playing with tropes around that, that we often see. But centring a woman at the heart of it instead. Because usually we see men in those spaces, but it was really fun for me to flip it round and tell it from her perspective.

SHAHIDHA: I get an enormous sense of fun in your memoir, in *Far Horizons*, Frank, which is the book about your life of travels. That begins with you as an impetuous teenager, with quite some gallus, you biathlon skiing and rival shooting as a teenager in Sweden, there is a whole series of adventures and misadventures, including you catching typhoid in Thessalonica and hitchhiking to Manila, and tiger tracking and volcano climbing in Sumatra. I can't believe your parents ever let you do that. But then of course -

FRANK: They didn't know about it.

SHAHIDHA: There are some secrets teenagers need to keep! But then of course the shooting happens later on in your life which changes many things for you. I wonder if it made you less thrill-seeking and more risk-averse?

FRANK: Physically, yes. I was offered the opportunity to go paragliding recently in Bavaria, I turned it down because I said look does it ever happen that you have injuries from this. They said well yeah it can happen you can wrench your shoulder, and I thought, right no, because I propel myself with my arms. I'm a four-engine jet that's got two engines knocked out so I can't afford to lose another engine. So, I thought no not going to do that. But just before - about a year ago - before the pandemic we did a big programme in Columbia and that was really fun, I had no qualms about going into the jungle in Columbia, we rode horseback. But there was one ravine that was simply too steep, and I thought if I go down this on the horse, the horse was stumbling and with each stumble I would lurch forward, I thought I know how this will end, I will side slip off the saddle and end up in a heap of broken bones, I thought that's not worth it. So, I said time out, I need someone to piggyback me down this bit, and the rest was fine, I'm happy to do that. A while back I went off to Laos on my own, to write actually, to write the next book and it was a spur of the moment, it was a drunk booking! I had been at some dinner and had too much to drink with friends, and that evening I thought, sod it, I'm just going to go to Laos and do it. Instead of booking a one-week return trip by mistake it was five weeks and I had to unravel it!

SHAHIDIHA: Oh my goodness!

FRANK: But I still went, and it was just amazingly liberating as a wheelchair user to go on my own, with nobody to this wonderful old imperial capital called Luang Prabang which is really lovely - I don't know if either of you have been there - it's much nicer than the capital Vientiane. And just to wheel myself around there, going to coffee shops, to weaving centres, to watch the sun go down over the Mekong. And then to sitting in a garden with the bulbuls chirping, typing away on my laptop. It was thrilling.

SHAHIDHA: Wow. What about you Irenosen, us bookish types less adventurous than roving reporters like Frank or does your writing allow you to take those risks or are you a risk taker in real life too?

IRENOSEN: Yeah well, I think I've always had slightly more alternative interests, that helps, it didn't feel like such a leap in the writing space. I love things that are different, I love things that are challenging. I love things that are involved in creating new spaces or seeking things in spaces that we're familiar with. So, I think that aspect is in me, I am a risk taker and that works beautifully for me in the writing because what I have done is given myself absolute freedom to play, you know you want the writing to feel like that. You never want it to be a chore, because the reader has to soak all of that in and enjoy that process too. So, for me, I think it's symbiotic, so both in the writing space and outside of the writing space and of course you need stuff happening in your world to be able to write. You don't just sit at home and not experience things and not travel and not have connections with other people because of course that wouldn't work. One of the most transformational trips I had was, you know, going back to Africa. Again, after a long time, going back to Nigeria, after years

away, and just seeing how lively, how vivid, how enriching it was, the language, the way people were with each other, how entrepreneurial people were, even everything on the street is doing one thing or another. I love that, it made me feel alive. And of course, I tried to incorporate that within my novel, *Butterfly Fish*, as well, it all goes somewhere in the writing!

SHAHIDHA: Frank, I feel like when I was reading, moving from your memoir to your fictional writing, I felt I could sense a way that the imaginative fictional writing was working in a different way for you. Was it cathartic for you? Is it allowing you to stretch a different muscle?

FRANK: Yes, definitely. It took me a while to do, so there was a bit of a gap after I wrote *Ultimatum*, which was my second sort of non-fiction book. And the publisher said, "so Frank, come on it's been a while, how about the next book. How about you write the definitive history of Isis?" I thought how about I don't. No, I thought that doesn't sound like fun! And it was a while before I was ready to write the book. I knew it would be a big jump to fiction. And I would say that the jump from writing non-fiction to fiction is even bigger than the jump from being a broadcast journalist to writing a book. And that in itself is quite a big leap. It wasn't until I had a long flight to LA, we were doing some filming there. 11-hour flight, and I thought right, I'm going to open up this laptop and I will start writing this book. I didn't know how it was going to go. I started with a dead body, in the jungle, in crisis, they turn him over, he's got some weird purple document, turns out it's a British passport, turns out he's the MI6 chief in Bogota and he's been murdered, and it begins from there and it just, I actually didn't know how it was going to end but I started writing. I wanted to immerse myself in that hot, damp, sweaty jungle, the hum of mosquitoes and barking dogs and spluttering fireworks to put people into that place and see what happened from there.

SHAHIDHA: Oh Frank, we couldn't ask for a better cliff-hanger to end the discussion. Thank you very much to Frank Gardner and Irenosen Okojie. The latest instalment in Frank's, the Luke Carlton series, *Ultimatum*, and his next book, *Outbreak* is out in, May, and Irenosen collection *Nudibranch* are out now. Thank you for watching and keeping us company. See you soon.