

Kirsty Young:

Hello, I'm Kirsty Young. Thank you for downloading this podcast of Desert Island Discs from BBC Radio 4. For rights reasons, the music choices are shorter than in the radio broadcast. For more information about the programme, please visit [bbc.co.uk/radiofour](http://bbc.co.uk/radiofour).

My castaway this week is the writer, Andrea Levy. She is full of surprises. Award-winning and highly regarded, she didn't read a book until she was 23, and there surely can't be another significant figure of the literary establishment who's worked on The Dick Emery Christmas Show. But perhaps most surprising of all, for someone whose father came to Britain on the Windrush and who so vividly depicts the experiences of Caribbean immigrants, she says that growing up, didn't really think of herself as Black, adding that when she began writing, she wasn't writing about being Black. She was writing about being human.

You might well then be held up, Andrea, as this ideal articulate spokesperson for the Black experience. But it sounds to me like you don't really think there is a Black experience to write about.

Andrea Levy:

Well, a Black experience is an experience of many millions and millions of people so no, not one experience at all. The reason I write is because I am exploring my heritage and its relationship to Britain and all sorts of things like that. There's still a lot of that story untold.

Kirsty Young:

We'll talk more about that. And what about The Dick Emery Christmas Show?

Andrea Levy:

Oh yes, I remember it very well. It was recorded in July.

Kirsty Young:

Right. Fake snow, all of that, I'm imagine.

Andrea Levy:

Fake snow, absolutely. It was great [crosstalk 00:01:50].

Kirsty Young:

What were you doing on it?

Andrea Levy:

I was very lowly employed in the BBC in the costume department. It was a great job. I loved being on set and just watching everybody doing their stuff, and having and Christmas in July was wonderful.

Kirsty Young:

And your career at that point at the BBC ended with something of a whimper because your contract was not renewed. As I understand it, as you left the building, you sort of vowed, "I will be back."

Andrea Levy:

I did. I punched the "I'll be back. I'll be back." And I did.

Kirsty Young:

Yes, and you did. Tell me about that.

Andrea Levy:

When *Small Island* was coming out, the television series, they invited me to come and view it. A car picked me up and dropped me at the door and I was back.

Kirsty Young:

Yes. You could hardly have imagined when your contract wasn't renewed that it would be under such circumstances. Did you-

Andrea Levy:

Well, no, but I daydreamed it. Funnily enough, it came true.

Kirsty Young:

You daydreamed what, that you would be back as a grand writer of a great novel?

Andrea Levy:

Not as a grand writer of novels, but certainly as somebody who was producing something creative that the BBC had to do.

Kirsty Young:

How interesting. I mean, when you hear me introducing you or you read a piece in some broadsheet newspaper talking about you as the identity that we all know you as, the great novelist, does it feel like you? Do you feel you can occupy it quite comfortably, or do you sometimes think, Gosh, really. This is me. This is the life I have?

Andrea Levy:

I actually occupy it very uncomfortably. I feel quite uncomfortable with it, and I'm never quite sure of what my place is within it. I'm constantly surprised by it, too. I feel very uncomfortable and very nervous. My mom's mantra is always pride comes before a fall, and I'm very nervous of being too uppity.

Kirsty Young:

For now, we're going to have some music. The first track of yours that we're going to hear today is what?

Andrea Levy:

The first track is *High Hopes* by Frank Sinatra. Now this track, where I was brought up, the mantra was don't get ideas above your station. That was how I was told to view life, really. Once I'd heard this song, I thought, You know what? I think I will get ideas above my station.

(singing)

Kirsty Young:

Frank Sinatra and *High Hopes*. So, Andrea Levy, it is true. You were 23 when you read your first novel.

Andrea Levy:

Yes.

Kirsty Young:

Why had it taken you so long?

Andrea Levy:

Ooh, to my shame, yes. Well, I was supposed to read novels at school. I did A-level English, can you believe? We were meant to read 19th century novels, so I was reading Dickens and George Eliot, Jane Austen, those sorts of things.

But I lived in a tiny council flat and there were six of us in there. This was the days before central heating, so we only ever really kept one room warm, and that was the front room. And we were all in the front room. Usually, the television was on from the time we got home from school to the time the little dot disappeared after the national anthem. I would defy anybody to sit and read *Middlemarch* whilst *The Golden Shot* is going on. I mean, it's really very difficult. You had to go to another room and be quiet to read a sort of novel like that. So I never managed to actually read them.

Kirsty Young:

But you say you got your English A level. How did you get it, then, if you never read a novel?

Andrea Levy:

Well, you those little pass note things, that's what they were called. That was how I got through it. I wasn't a brilliant pupil at English, I have to say.

Kirsty Young:

I mean, I talk to plenty writers who say, "Well, I was secretly writing from the age of seven." Obviously, that wasn't the case for you. As a young child, what was it you were aiming at?

Andrea Levy:

Well, I loved watching the telly. Well, my main ambition was to become Julie Andrews. I wanted to sing and dance. I wanted to live in a world where all of a sudden, everybody got up and sang and dance and knew how it was. That was the sort of thing that I aspired to. So it was more that kind of entertainment.

Kirsty Young:

We're going to have some more music, so tell me about what's coming up next.

Andrea Levy:

I'm in the Mood for Love by [Skatoons 00:06:31]. Now Skatoons are a group of friends. I have great family and great friends. I doubt that I ever let them know how much they mean to me. Basically, as I've got older, I realise that to love and be loved is what life is about, and so I wanted to just play this song for my friends.

We used to have these wonderful parties where we had karaoke evenings with a live band. The kids were growing up then. It got to the point where one of the kids is actually singing, so Max is singing this song. It's just for my friends, really.

(singing)

Kirsty Young:

That was The Skatoons and I'm in the Mood for Love. It was Max singing there who, as you say, is now one of the grown-up children of one of your friends, so plenty memories there of family parties.

Your father came to Britain, Andrea Levy, and it was 1948. He was on the Empire Windrush. Your mother stayed at home for the first few months. Why did they decide to move?

Andrea Levy:

Well, my mom had always wanted to come to Britain. She really wanted to go to university. There wasn't a university at that time in Jamaica. She wanted to better herself in that sort of way. My dad just wanted a quiet life and a good job.

Kirsty Young:

So that was what they wanted. What did they find?

Andrea Levy:

They were quite shocked, I think, when they... Well, I don't think. I know they were very shocked when they first came to Britain just to find themselves not considered part of the empire and certainly not considered a desirable part of the empire.

People asking them where they'd come from. Nobody knew about Jamaica. And also, they felt like second-class citizens completely. They were treated badly.

Kirsty Young:

Some of the language that you use in Small Island, it's very arresting and it's vicious to contemporary ears. Were they routinely abused in the streets that were derogatory and extreme?

Andrea Levy:

Well, I don't know about routinely. They had many days where everything was fine. I mean, they loved this country, too, and they got on with a lot of people here as well. It wasn't every single day was like that.

Kirsty Young:

Colour is a very complex issue, and even degrees of Blackness is a complex issue. I said in the beginning that you didn't really think of yourself as Black when you were growing up. Can you explain more about that?

Andrea Levy:

Right. Well, my family are very light-skinned, so we're not obviously dark-skinned Black. In Jamaica, the class structure kind of works on the colour of your skin, not on the amount of money you have.

My parents were brought up to think of themselves a high class because they had a lighter complexion. They believed that once they got to Britain, that those sort of gradations would be recognised by the white British and were surprised to see that no, they were just Black here. They tried

to distance themselves, I suppose, from other Black people in the hope that nobody would notice that they'd sneaked into the country. They didn't want us to talk about Jamaica.

Kirsty Young:  
They didn't?

Andrea Levy:

No, no, no, because they hoped that no would question us about that and that they would just think that we were a little dark, but we just sort of got a tan. It's a very complex issue.

Kirsty Young:  
It is. It's very complex.

Andrea Levy:

It's very complex and it's very hard to explain quickly without it sounding crazy.

Kirsty Young:

No, it doesn't sound crazy and it doesn't sound glib. I think you've described it very well and this idea that they could slip unnoticed and maybe they were just people with a bit of a tan. But of course, everybody else was seeing them as the Black people who've arrived from somewhere we don't know where.

Andrea Levy:  
Absolutely.

Kirsty Young:  
How did you feel in school?

Andrea Levy:

Well in school, I knew I was a Black girl who'd arrived, and I was made to feel very different. "Where are you from and when are you going back?" I was asked a lot.

Kirsty Young:

Were you welcomed into people's houses as a little girl? Did you go around to play? Yes.

Andrea Levy:

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah.

Kirsty Young:  
Right.

Andrea Levy:

Yeah. As I say, prejudice isn't the sort of thing that happened every single day, you know?

Kirsty Young:

Yes, but it's interesting that you have spoken about the fact that any racial slurs or insults were quick to surface when things became difficult. You could be playing a game on the playground-

Andrea Levy:

Absolutely.

Kirsty Young:

... and then as they do between kids, things suddenly turn sour.

Andrea Levy:

That's it. You had to be very careful, and we were very careful. I didn't realise until I got older that I had been very careful as a child. I thought everybody had to be this careful.

Kirsty Young:

And this was in Highbury.

Andrea Levy:

This was in Highbury, yeah.

Kirsty Young:

Were there many other Black families living there?

Andrea Levy:

Not round our way. No, there weren't.

Kirsty Young:

Right. Let's have some more music for now, than, Andrea. Tell me what we're going to hear. We're on disc three now.

Andrea Levy:

Disc three. Ah, this is Georgie Fame and the Blue Flames singing-

Kirsty Young:

Why have you chosen this?

Andrea Levy:

... Yeh Yeh. There's something about this song. It takes me right back to my childhood and to a particular Christmas. It's Christmas day in this tiny flat and we got a coal fire burning. My dad's lying on the sofa, snoozing. My brothers and sisters are just sitting around being annoying. I'm playing with a Penny Brite doll and my mom's in the kitchen and Yeh Yeh is playing.

(singing)

Kirsty Young:

That was Georgie Fame and the Blue Flames and Yeh Yeh. You were the youngest, then, of the four kids. Had your mother been a teacher in Jamaica? She'd worked in the education system?

Andrea Levy:

She had.

Kirsty Young:

Yes.

Andrea Levy:

Yes.

Kirsty Young:

When she came over to Britain, did she want to work again as a teacher?

Andrea Levy:

Yes, and she thought she would. But she had to retrain.

Kirsty Young:

Did she take in sewing or she worked in a factory as a seamstress? What happened?

Andrea Levy:

She took in sewing. There was nothing else that she could actually do. She'd got four children and she had to make ends meet as well. My dad was just working for the post office. I remember very well her just sitting, sewing in the bedroom. Somebody would come with great bundles of things for her to sew.

Kirsty Young:

And so as a trained, educated, young woman and a busy mother of four, how did she feel about all of that?

Andrea Levy:

I think she felt incredibly frustrated and she was scared that she wasn't going to make this work, that that move that she'd made had taken her out of the middle class in Jamaica and put her really into a very lowly position in this country. She was scared that she was never going to get out of that.

Kirsty Young:

Did she talk to you about that?

Andrea Levy:

Latterly, she has spoken to me about it. Yes. And I could tell. I was brought up with my mum. I was at home with her and I could tell her frustration. I sort of took it in my pause.

Kirsty Young:

Did she want to go back?

Andrea Levy:

I don't think that that was ever a possibility. I know that there were times when she missed her mother with a passion, but there was never enough money to do anything like that. There was barely enough money to put food on the table.

Kirsty Young:

Do you think she regretted having such a big family? I mean four kids, that's a lot of responsibility. It's a lot of work.

Andrea Levy:

Yes, I think that that is definitely a possibility. I certainly thought that my being at home with her as a young child was very frustrating for her. At that point, she was about to go to college and become a teacher and then she got pregnant with me. That kept her at home again for another five years.

Kirsty Young:

Right. Did she expect you to do well in school, then?

Andrea Levy:

Yes, she did. I mean, education was everything to my mom. You had to be well educated. She made us go to ballet lessons. She made us go to piano lessons and to work hard at school. She didn't get involved in the schoolwork. She had a great sort of respect for school teachers because she used to be one.

Kirsty Young:

Earlier when we were talking, you said you weren't a very good pupil then. So were you aware of disappointing your mother?

Andrea Levy:

Did I say I wasn't a very good pupil?

Kirsty Young:

You did, yes. When I was asking you how come you'd got to the age of 23 and you hadn't read a book, you said, "Well, obviously I wasn't a very good pupil."

Andrea Levy:

Oh, okay. Yes, I wasn't very good at... Yes. Well, I don't think I did disappoint my mom. I think I did fairly well.

I know when I went to college, my mother was very disappointed that I went to art college and that I didn't go to university. And art college, she didn't really rate at all. She just thought I was just going to go and do some drawing for four years. She thought I should have been good enough to go to university.

Kirsty Young:



Let's have some more music. Tell me what we're going to hear next.

Andrea Levy:

We're going to hear a hymn, which is Dear Lord and Father of Mankind.

Kirsty Young:

Why have you chosen this, Andrea?

Andrea Levy:

Well, I was in a lot of choirs when I was young. I loved singing. I miss it. I miss it, that communal singing, now.

So I was in a choir at church. I was brought up a Christian but I'm not anymore. But I was in a choir, so I went three times on a Sunday. And if ever this hymn was to be sung, then it cheered me up. It was going to be a good day.

(singing)

Kirsty Young:

That was St. Paul's Cathedral choir singing Dear Lord and Father of Mankind, written by John Greenleaf Whittier, set [inaudible 00:17:28] by Sir Hubert Parry. Andrea Levy, your mother, then, was a little disappointed that you didn't go to university. She can't surely have been disappointed with the success that has followed later in your life. What has she made of your writing?

Andrea Levy:

Oh. Well, when I first started writing, my mom would've liked me to shut up, to be honest. She was absolutely horrified.

I think there were a couple of reasons for that. One of them was that she was worried somehow I would make a fool of myself. My mom always used to say to me, "If you can't pause a sentence, you can't speak." I didn't want to argue with her, but my mom just thought I am just going to show her up with my lack of knowledge of English as well.

And also, I was writing about our family. I was writing semi-autobiographical stuff, thinly disguise sometimes. I was telling everyone our business, and so she really wanted me to stop.

Kirsty Young:

I mean, telling everyone our business, that's really interesting. Because in Small Island, of course you are almost telling the story of your parents' life, and certainly the lives of that generation of Caribbean immigrants.

It was interesting you said that when your parents came here, they knew everything about Britain, but people in Britain knew nothing about them-

Andrea Levy:

That's right.

Kirsty Young:

... nothing about where they came from. In a way, with *Small Island*, it seems as though you were defying people to ignore the importance of that relationship and of where these people should stand in British society.

Andrea Levy:

Absolutely. I mean, that's why I write books, is because I'm sort of belligerent on that topic that you should understand what happened in the Caribbean. It's a very important part of British history. That's why I write.

Kirsty Young:

The beginning of the first piece of prose that you were removed to write was, am I right about this, the death of your budgie?

Andrea Levy:

Yes. A very important subject as well. But yes, that was just me when I thought, I'm going to do an evening class and I think I might try writing. But just in case, I'll write something down and see. The first thing that was with the death of my budgie, which was a very important event.

I wrote it and I read it out to my husband. I was so scared of this one paragraph. I just thought, I really am going to make a fool of myself by writing.

Kirsty Young:

So you gathered your courage in both hands and read it out loud to your husband. His response was what?

Andrea Levy:

His response was, "That's very good. Yes, do the class."

Kirsty Young:

Right. Did you actually learn anything in a night class about writing? Did you learn more about sentence structure and all of those things in [crosstalk 00:20:15]?

Andrea Levy:

Oh, I learned everything. I learned such a lot about writing, not in that a teacher and blackboard sort of way, but by listening to other people's writing and by listening to what the teacher, Alison Fell, who was a wonderful teacher, said about that writing.

I learned about storytelling, and I realised as well that I could, bless my mother, but I could just not worry about the grammar and actually go for the feeling, go for the story, go for how you gain somebody's interest.

Kirsty Young:

As well as the recipient of many prizes, you've been on many judging panels for these big literary prizes. You've said, and I think this is very straightforward of you, that you've learned a lot about writing while you've been reading other people's books. Do you think it's the case that your readers can almost trace your development as a writer as you matured?

Andrea Levy:

Oh, absolutely. If you start from the beginning of my books, you can see absolutely that I'm learning my craft as I go along. It's absolutely there.

It was when I judged the Orange Prize for Fiction in 1997 that completely changed the way I felt about writing. I read 70 books in three months back to back. From them, I just sort of learned that you could be more ambitious. It really taught me to trust my instinct in that way and to really push myself.

Kirsty Young:

Let's have some more music. What's next?

Andrea Levy:

Okay. Well, there was a TV series made of Small Island. The music for this was by Martin Phipps. This bit that we're going to hear is the theme tune from Small Island.

When I first heard this, which was in a studio in Hampstead, I went to see this 50-piece orchestra playing this music. It was such a great moment in that I was sitting, listening to a piece of music that, in some way, I had inspired. I think it's the most fabulous piece of music that he made, in fact, it won a BAFTA, but it's so wonderful.

Kirsty Young:

That was the theme music written for the television dramatisation of Small Island by Martin Phipps. So, Andrea Levy, were you 38 when your first novel was published?

Andrea Levy:

Oh, I believe so.

Kirsty Young:

Yes, and how many publishers had seen the manuscript?

Andrea Levy:

Oh, every single one. I think there was about one left by the end of it. Quite a lot. Quite a lot have seen the manuscript, yes. I had sent it out for about a year, and then I got an agent and he sent it out for about a year. We must have got through quite a lot of publishers.

Kirsty Young:

Every Light in the House Burnin' was your first novel, and then 10 years later was when you won the Whitbread prize. Was that the point at which you felt... Had there been two novels in between that or-

Andrea Levy:

There had, yes.

Kirsty Young:

Right. When did you feel you could look yourself in the eye in the mirror and say, "Yep, definitely a writer"?

Andrea Levy:

Oh, any day now, yes. I just always feel I'm learning. I do fear complacency. I do fear that you think, I am the best thing since slice bread. I think it's bad for the creative spirit. I really do.

Kirsty Young:

Did you ever worry after the first novel that that was it, that you'd spent your creative force, that that niggling feeling that you seemed to have had for a couple of decades that you just wanted a... You had an itch and you didn't know how to scratch it?

Andrea Levy:

I think you feel that after every book. After every book I've written I think, Well, that was it. That's it. I washed up now. It's like the tide going out and then it sort of slowly starts to come back in again and you think, Well, maybe I could write another book.

Kirsty Young:

You used a curious phrase once. You said that when you write your first draught of a novel, you say it's like the meandering of an idiot's mind.

Andrea Levy:

Yes.

Kirsty Young:

Tell me more.

Andrea Levy:

Well, I usually write in my local library and I write just absolutely the first thing that comes into my mind.

Kirsty Young:

And this is long hand [crosstalk 00:25:20].

Andrea Levy:

Long hand. Yes. They really are the meanderings of the very first ideas that I sort of come to and they're bad. The first things I write down, oh no, they're not good.

Kirsty Young:

So if the writing in itself can be difficult, then the subject matter... I'm thinking about *The Long Song*, nominated for the Man Booker Prize last year, tackled the incredibly, I mean a very big subject and also a very difficult subject of slavery. You went back to the Caribbean, I'm imagining, to do that research.

Andrea Levy:

I did. I went to the Caribbean to research a plantation, the geography of a plantation. I couldn't really do that from Crouch End.

Kirsty Young:

You said in one interview it was terribly unpleasant research. 19th century ideas of racial superiority are, to a modern ear, abhorrent. My heart would sink sometimes.

Andrea Levy:

Yes, absolutely. It was difficult in that there wasn't anything for me to read about what a life of a slave would've been like. The only way I could do it was by reading the slim volumes that a lot of the white people like missionaries or planters, planters' wives wrote about when they went to the Caribbean.

I mean, I would read some things and be really quite shocked. Really, the history of the Caribbean and the history of Jamaica is a very violent and unpleasant history. And the history of slavery is, you know, a very difficult thing to go into. We don't really talk about it that much in British history in this country.

Kirsty Young:

You are clearly driven to change that. Clearly, you see your books as if they are doing anything, it seems to me, is that that is recorded and people understand.

Andrea Levy:

Yeah. I don't want it to sound too worthy that I'm going out, trying to be didactic about something. I'm not about beating people over the head with this history. That would be horrible. I want to entertain you as well. I want you to understand this story and to understand the sort of people that had to go through that sort of situation.

Kirsty Young:

We'll have some more music. Disc number six, then, Andrea Levy. Tell us what it is.

Andrea Levy:

Well, we're talking about Jamaica. This is Redemption Song by Bob Marley. Somehow, this song really speaks the history of Jamaica.

(singing)

Kirsty Young:

That was Bob Marley and the Wailers and Redemption Song. Andrea Levy, you've described how your mother had, well, not just really mixed feelings, but actually quite negative feelings when you started to write. Given the enormous success you've had as a writer, what's her view of that?

Andrea Levy:

She was so excited when Small Island began to take off and when it began to win prizes. That was a real nod from, I don't know, from somewhere that she respected. Actually, when I won the Commonwealth Writers prize, one part of the prize is that you get to meet the Queen. I phoned my mom and I said that I was going to meet the Queen and my mom just cried. She just thought, how can a child of hers get to go and meet the queen? She was terribly proud of it. And now, she is saying to me, "Why don't you write about Jamaican women getting older?" She's willing to tell me anything. I can't shut her up.

Kirsty Young:

And she went on. She did retrain and she did become a teacher.

Andrea Levy:

Oh, she did. Yes. She became a teacher. Yes, but she had another ambition, and the big ambition was to have a degree. She couldn't go to university because she had to work, but she did an open university course and got her degree.

Kirsty Young:

And what about your husband, then? He works in graphic design and you worked with him for many years. He was the one who heard the story about the budgie that you wrote at night class. How has he coped with all of the enormous attention that your career and your success has brought?

Andrea Levy:

Well, I think he's coped very well. It's funny because I don't know, it's something to do with him being a male and me being a female. People almost feel sorry for him that he has a wife who has been successful. It is sort of, "Are you all right? Are you all right?" Because somehow, he's being emasculated in some way. But he doesn't feel that at all. He's been absolutely fantastic.

Kirsty Young:

Does he critique your manuscripts before you hand them to the publisher or that's not his department?

Andrea Levy:

When I finished writing a section, I will read it out to him. I will trust that if there is anything wrong with that manuscript, he will find a way of telling me. Now, it can't be directly because divorce would come into the equation, but he must find a way of doing it. And he usually he does. He's very tactful about it.

Kirsty Young:

Right. And you are stepmom to his two kids. I mean, that is a very different role from being a mom.

Andrea Levy:

Oh, yes.

Kirsty Young:

Yes. How have you found it?

Andrea Levy:

Well, I sort of modelled myself on Maria in The Sound of Music.

Kirsty Young:

How did that go?

Andrea Levy:

It didn't go so well. I mean, most of the time you feel like Cruella de Vil. It's a very difficult role. When you're having to do the sort of parenting, it somehow feels crueler or more difficult coming from a stepparent. But it's also been a great joy. I'm really pleased to have those two girls in my life. It's great.

Kirsty Young:

And you haven't had your own children. Has there been any point of which you thought, Okay, I made that decision. Maybe I should have made another decision, or has it been fine with you?

Andrea Levy:

No, I think I made the decision not to have children at about the age of five. I always knew I would never have children.

Kirsty Young:

Why was that?

Andrea Levy:

I don't know. I don't know. I just didn't want to have children and I knew I would never have children. That was always the case and it never wavered. I think it wavered for about 10 seconds once when I was at the birth of a friend's child and I thought, Aw. And then it passed.

Kirsty Young:

Right. And so having children in your life, though.

Andrea Levy:

Oh, yes.

Kirsty Young:

A good thing?

Andrea Levy:

I'm so pleased about that, yes. Having children in your life is very good, and having grandchildren now is great. You just see life afresh.

Kirsty Young:

Let's have some more music, then. Where are we now? We're on disc number seven, Andrea.

Andrea Levy:

I've been with my husband now for 30 years, but when we were courting, this was our courting song. It's Baby Just Cares for Me, Nina Simone.

(singing)

Kirsty Young:

That was Nina Simone and My Baby Just Cares for Me. Andrea Levy, when we order our experiences, it somehow helps us understand our own responses to ourselves. Do you find that your writing has... I

used in the introduction that phrase, you saying that you didn't really think of yourself as Black, which is so interesting given the decades that you've spent writing about what it means to be Black and the history of coming from Jamaica. Has it helped you understand yourself more? Do you feel more of a connection with that cultural heritage that was never really spoken about at home?

Andrea Levy:

Oh, absolutely. It's been extremely important. I've grown two inches. I mean, really has made an enormous difference to me. And it's an ongoing project. There's still work to be done.

Kirsty Young:

You've grown two inches. What a great phrase. Explain a little bit more of that to me, then.

Andrea Levy:

We were talking earlier about those kids who would say to you, "Why are you here?" and "What are you about?" That cowed me for very many years. I felt like I had no right to take up space this country, indeed in this world, and actually learning about my history and about my heritage has me stand tall.

Kirsty Young:

You've written a lot about the resilience of the human spirit in your novels, Andrea Levy. I'm imagining on a desert island, you'll be absolutely fine. I think you're made of strong stuff. How do you think you'll be?

Andrea Levy:

I think I'll be fine for the first day. Then the night will come and in the morning, I think I will probably be insane.

Kirsty Young:

Just 24 hour, then.

Andrea Levy:

Yes, just 24 hours before insanity sets in. I am actually scared of anything that creeps and crawls. I am scared of things that fly. I'm scared of things that go bump in the night. I have a lot of fears. Although I do have some grit, a desert island is not a good place to put me.

Kirsty Young:

Let's comfort ourselves with your final piece of music, then. Tell me about the eighth track today.

Andrea Levy:

Okay. Well, I'm going to take you back to my adolescence here to discos. I used to have a dread of slow songs at discos because if nobody asked you to dance, which is usually [inaudible 00:34:39], you'd have to do this strange swinging your arms dance with a sort of head tilting as "If I don't care that nobody's asked me to dance," and you just had to do this on your own. But when this song came on, I didn't care because I just went into a world of my own. This is Let's Stay Together by Al Green.

(singing)



Kirsty Young:

That was Al Green and Let's Stay Together. So, Andrea Levy, let's have your book. Of course, I'm going to give you the Bible and the complete works of Shakespeare and you're going to take-

Andrea Levy:

Thank you.

Kirsty Young:

... what?

Andrea Levy:

Well, I'm presuming there is no book called Get off a Desert Island in Two Days or Your Money Back.

Kirsty Young:

No. And even if there was, I probably wouldn't let you have it.

Andrea Levy:

Oh, okay. Well, failing that then. I'm going to take my thesaurus.

Kirsty Young:

Oh, okay.

Andrea Levy:

I'll do some work while I'm there, probably.

Kirsty Young:

Right. That's yours. And a luxury, too.

Andrea Levy:

My luxury. Most people, when they see rolling white sand and beautiful sea lapping the shore and sun and palm trees dipping down, they think of paradise. I just think, Ooh, I bet there's a lot of mosquitoes.

Kirsty Young:

Right.

Andrea Levy:

I need some mosquito repellent, I'm afraid.

Kirsty Young:

Okay, that's your luxury. It's yours. And if you had to choose just one of these eight discs, if they were going to be washed away by the waves, which one would you choose?

Andrea Levy:

Well, it's so apt and so beautiful, the theme from Small Island.

Kirsty Young:

Ah, right. It's yours. Andrea Levy, thank you very much for letting us hear your desert island discs.

Andrea Levy:

Thank you. Lifelong ambition achieved.

Kirsty Young:

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