

Andrea Levy:

Well, July when we first meet her in the book is an old woman, and she's sitting at the end of the 19th century, and she's decided that she wants to tell the story of her life to her son. Her son is the publisher of *The Long Song*. And so there is this woman who's in her late 80s, writing down the story of a slave girl called July.

Speaker 2:

It's an incredibly rich portrait that you've painted of a certain moment just before and just during the Baptist War. The research must've been phenomenally difficult. Was it because so much is written about slavery, but not from the slave's perspective?

Andrea Levy:

Yes. I mean, the thing is that slavery lasted for 300 years. And so what is written about slavery tends to sort of go down into a few tropes. So the cruelty on the plantations and these are what we know of slavery in this country. And once I realised that it was 300 years and that societies were built and that people survived and thrived, and that people had to live under this ridiculously cruel and terrible system, but they did and they built lives. I wanted to look at the lives that they may have lived in order that they become people again and not just slaves.

Speaker 2:

So how did you do research?

Andrea Levy:

Well, I found what I could documentary evidence. There are a few, three or four from Caribbean slavery I'm talking about now, but one of the main things was that there was an enormous amount of the white people who were there, the missionaries, the planters, their wives, their sort of overseers, anybody who seemed to have anything to do with the Caribbean wrote a small volume at some point about their sort of troubles there, or their lives there. And through it, you could see how the slaves lived because they were always talking about them, because they were so important to them. So they're always talking about them in disparaging ways.

Speaker 2:

What was your sense of these records dehumanising slaves?

Andrea Levy:

At that time, and we have to take our modern sensibility away and think about how people thought then, and at that time, they thought that a slave was not an African, was not human, not truly human, and didn't really have souls. And weren't worthy of that sort of treatment. So much more akin to cattle than human beings.

Speaker 2:

Seems extraordinary in modern context to hear you even say that is really quite shocking, isn't it?

Andrea Levy:

It is, it is shocking and it would be more shocking. But the thing about it is that we have a propensity to do that all the time. It was done in the 20th century. I have no doubt in my mind, it will be done again, where you make other human beings. It's not quite as good as you for whatever reason. And then you can do what you like with them.

Speaker 2:

But what's extraordinary about *The Long Song* is that you have taken the perspective from the individual slave's point of view, and it has to be pointed out. It's not without a huge amount of humour. That is a fantastic achievement.

Andrea Levy:

Well if I'm writing about a human being, there has to be humour in it because that's the part of the human condition, as far as I'm concerned. Any character that I would write that didn't have a sense of humour, wouldn't quite be right. I believe everybody has a sense of humour. You find the odd person that doesn't, but certainly if you come from the Caribbean and you've been through slavery, you had to have a sense of humour to get through that as well.

But that's not to make light of it. I don't make light of slavery and that I want to make quite clear. It's not to carry on at the plantation. I don't sort of make jokes about it. It's a serious book, but out of my character will always come a humour.

Speaker 2:

It's having a huge success at the moment, *The Long Song*, it's being translated into I don't know how many languages at the moment. Have you got the tally?

Andrea Levy:

I think it's about 13 at the moment.

Speaker 2:

When and it gets to the Caribbean, what's the reception are you anticipating?

Andrea Levy:

Oh, I have no idea.

Speaker 2:

Do you think that there might be a different reception there?

Andrea Levy:

There might be. I mean, the reception here is very important to me as well. In Jamaica, we know about slavery. It's living there. It's with you all the time. In Britain, it's not, and this was British slavery for 300 years. And that's very important. Now what happens is that if you talk about American slavery, you can't enter into the history of America without slavery coming up. You talk about the Bill of Rights or anything, Abraham Lincoln, you cannot talk about him without slavery coming up. And so slavery is very much part of their history, but because our slavery in Britain was in the Caribbean, it's not. And so it seems like that was just something that sort of went on over there.

Speaker 2:

So you're saying distance metaphorically and physically?

Andrea Levy:

Metaphorically and physically, but the slavery was the same as in America. In that it was perpetuated by the British on millions of people. And so sort of bringing it home if you like, bringing it back to the mother country is very important to me because it just feels like, although it's part of British history, it's such a little adjunct to it. It feels like an adjunct and it should be much more centre stage. I really do think that it was an extremely important part.

And when I started out with *The Long Song*, publicising it, I had two interviews from very intelligent women in two different interviews, very intelligent women who had been through university system and who didn't know that slavery had happened in the Caribbean. And I was more than shocked. It is so important to us understanding who we were as a British empire. How it sort of all worked and came together, and it can't be written out of history.

Speaker 2:

So you're hoping, and it looks like you're succeeding that *The Long Song* will reawaken the debate.

Andrea Levy:

I do hope so. I do hope so. It's a difficult one. It was difficult for me as well to sort of even think about writing this book. I didn't really want to write it. It's a real confrontation. It felt like I was going to have to confront the society that I live in and enjoy and love.