

Sara Collins:

And writers like those two, and I put them in the pantheon with Toni Morrison, and the thing they did that was so profoundly impactful for me was they reclaimed those adjectives. They made them badges of honour rather than markers of segregation. Black, British female writers telling black, British female stories and being taken seriously for doing so, but beyond what it meant for me professionally, there was the personal angle. I suppose even closer than Arifa, I am Jamaican, of Jamaican descent. I grew up in England, went to boarding school in Sussex. I felt a profound love for both places, but there felt like an unbridgeable gap between them, in spite of this old colonial relationship.

And Small Island smacked me in the teeth, not just because Levy had told Jamaican stories, because there were many wonderful novelists who had told Jamaican stories before, but only Jamaican people seem to pay attention to them. Here was Levy, everyone was talking about her. As Arifa says, it was the book club book. It was huge, well reviewed. It was a prize winner. She was putting a kind of writing on the map which paid attention to stories like my grandmother's and my mother's, and made them seem like lives that were worthy of attention and respect. That's the power of storytelling. I think the Times literary supplement said that she provided a corrective to the historical record. And for me, that connected in a way that was electric. I'm sure I've said this about Toni Morrison, but I think it applies also to Andrea Levy.

Speaker 2:

She would be so thrilled to hear that, because she was an incredibly generous writer. So when she was long listed for the inaugural women's prize for fiction in 1996, she came to judge it in 1997 in order to absolutely help other voices to come through. And, of course, obviously, had won it. Ade, welcome.

Ade Solanke:

Thank you. It's lovely to be here. It's a pleasure to be part of this conversation. I've just got some general thoughts, which we'll probably come back to as we discuss the impact of her work on our work as writers. Just to say, sadly, I didn't know Andrea, the person. I've known lots of people who've known her, and at her funeral in March last year, it was actually the same day as we did a launch of, as you know, Margaret Busby's amazing, groundbreaking, Daughters of Africa. Margaret came to the launch at WOW, the women of the world festival, from the funeral, so it was a sober affair. We were celebrating this anthology, which is a showcase and a celebration of African women writers, and that day was her burial, one of our leading writers. So as Andrea was laid to rest, we were thinking, we're birthing a book that her work was not only part of, of course she's included in the work, but it's a book representing a culture of literary production, as Sara has just said, amongst Black women that she, more than and as much as anyone, helped usher in that culture of us, as Sara says, having been able to tell our stories. So it was bittersweet to launch the book with her not with us. She's inspired countless writers, myself included.

I think her writing cemented the impact of writing by Black women in society. Last year, I actually organised a tribute to her at the Greenwich book festival. [inaudible 00:03:40] and so many people said they'd come because of the Windrush scandal and the way in which her book had brought to them and given them insights into that whole world. So I think the book remains, and may be so for many years, the go to rendition of, if you like, the agony and the ecstasy of that generation of Caribbean migrants and their historical migration to Britain.

But I also admire her work, and I'm sure we'll speak more about this, because of her skills as a literary artist. And some of the prose qualities I particularly enjoy are her liveliness, I think, her wit and her humour. She sees the funny side of tragedy, as Arifa mentioned, and her take on slavery isn't dirge-

like and dreary, as horrendous as that institution was, but it's alive. Her long song is alive with the agency of free thinking and proactive, shrewd people. As much as their bodies are enslaved, their minds are free. The other thing I admire is her prose style. I'm a former journalist, and as a script writer, we're not encouraged to wax lyrical. And there's something about the clarity and smoothness and simplicity, actually, of her sentences that appeal to me. It's my taste more than anything else, but I think that's also part of the appeal. As I thought more about her work and read more about her, she, I think, started reading novels in her twenties and had been watching TV for many years [crosstalk 00:05:01].

Speaker 2:

Yeah, didn't really read.

Ade Solanke:

So then, style has been influenced by televisual storytelling, visual writing, basically. So I admire Andrea the dramatist, and I know I'm looking forward to the show at [inaudible 00:05:14] next year. I think her plots and her characters are particularly successfully adapted because she's already got that visual quality. They work well on screen or on stage. I'm sure they will, because she's already captured, I think, the essential ingredient of dramatic writing, which is the poetry of action. Her characters are always moving. And, of course, mental movement is the key to prose, the dramatised consciousness, et cetera, what characters are thinking. And she does that naturally, expertly, but drama means to do, and what she has her characters do are interesting things, and she designs the structure of the story as much as she designs their mental landscapes. I think that physical movement gives her work that the vitality and liveliness that makes it work so well on stage.

I think she's also quite rightly celebrated as a historian, a chronicler of the Windrush generation and also my generation. I'm a few years younger than her, and I grew up in London, too, but in a different part of London, and I had a totally different experience. So as I'm now writing my first novel about growing up in Knotting Hill, I'm so informed by her story of her childhood and in particular, the way her parents felt about their heritage, because I'm Nigerian British, British Nigerian. My experience was completely different. Nigerians are not known for being shy, put it like that.

Speaker 2:

Very successful novelists, Nigerian.

Ade Solanke:

Absolutely.

Speaker 2:

There's a lot of very good writing.

Ade Solanke:

Absolutely. What I'm saying in terms of the British Nigerian story, she was very candid about the way her parents weren't keen at first, I think, to celebrate their heritage, but our experience was the opposite. I think she has, through her stories, given me a wider picture of black British life of my generation, because I was around in Ladbroke Grove, lots of Caribbean culture, but it was very much what we called a rebel culture. And we were into Bob Marley, we were all growing locks. I wasn't, but lots of my friends were. So she's given me a more complete picture of the range of Black experience of my generation.

Sara Collins:

And I think the next wave for Black female British writing is going to be reclaiming that space, is going to be asserting the universality of our concerns. And I think the problem is that the publishing industry assumes an ideal reader, and assumes that ideal reader will only be interested in stories that depart from a certain norm, the default being white and possibly male, as matters of special interest. And I think what we need to do is to a point where these stories are not seen as special interest stories, or advocacy, or protest, but simply stories, and we're not there yet. And until we are, we're still going to be seen as Black British writers as contributing something to the discussion on race, but not necessarily the discussion on craft.

Speaker 2:

Yes, and I think it's one of the reasons for setting up the women's prize 25 years ago was precisely this, the idea that there was this mythology of a neutral, literally, creative voice, which we have decoded is a white male voice, and usually bearded in those days. [crosstalk 00:08:40] don't get me wrong, and that everything else around that was niche. So the idea that women only wanted to read women, people of colour or Black women only wanted to read Black women, but somehow everybody else there was a universal experience, and blowing that open is what we're all about, isn't it?

Sara Collins:

Absolutely.

Speaker 2:

[crosstalk 00:09:01] so much, both reviewing as a journalist and as a publisher. So presumably, what Ade and Sara are saying is chiming very strongly with you.

Arifa Akbar:

So that chimes very strongly indeed. I want to look at this in the theatre world, actually, but yeah, what you both said is, I think, in a nutshell, is that there's the expectation, but there's also a, one can't escape one's identity, a white man can't escape that identity and will be writing, in some way, from that point of view, and I will be writing as a British, South Asian Pakistani, and I will infuse some of my writing. I don't do creative writing, but I will infuse my writing, my columns in the Guardian, my criticism, I will bring elements of that part of my heritage to, that insight as well as the British side, as well as all the other sides. So I can't escape the politics of my own identity, and neither would I pretend to, or want to.