

WHY I WRITE

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For me, very often, writing is the painkiller for a hangover-induced headache that won't budge. A throbbing of the temples you can't shake off.

It's early, closing time and Visions, birds out singing, a Sunday. And as the rest of the city sleeps, I'm up like the sun about to board a bus to go to football an hour away somewhere. Getting on, lugging my kitbag over my shoulder, I feel the power of stories all around me, from the bus driver to the granny. My brain fizzes from passenger to passenger trying to get on the inside, pick their brain, ascertain to what extent we are all just the same.

My pen and paper is often my phone and fingers. I love the immediacy of observing the world around me, noting down the action as it happens. I wrote most of my debut, *The 392*, on my phone, on my way to work. From station to station, thinking and pausing, typing and deleting, trying to find five minutes of magic while stuck on the Thameslink. Trying to capture some semblance of authenticity from the world being lived around me. A proper noun followed by another proper noun, Air Force Ones, KFC and Kentish Town, every little detail counts.

Now this morning, I find my seat and start a new journey to the big game. not as a player, but the referee. When I get there I will be a black man in the middle, like the subject of my second novel. I feel a weight on my shoulder heavier than what's inside my kitbag. With every word I write I'm grappling with the burden of expectation from history, from society, from friends and family. How my work will be received on Goodreads and the wider industry. But I write to give back. I write because I'm black and there aren't enough of us in places that I want to see. I write to give characters a voice who might not have been heard in the books that we had to read. Books we were forced to study. As much as I love *Of Mice and Men*, I don't want Crooks to be the first time young black boys encounter a black character in a novel. I write so other writers, better ones than me, can see that there is real

power in sharing their story. I want to use my journey from an estate in Hackney to doing a creative writing PhD as inspiration for others in the margins to succeed.

When I was younger, I can't lie, for a long time I think I liked the look of a book more than the words inside. And the first time I really remember picking up a pen was probably to draw. Now I aim to paint pictures with words, provide enough description of a location so the reader can see it clearly. Inhabit the places and spaces that I had fashioned and have the agency to run free. I perhaps should have read more when I was a teenager, but I much preferred playing a game of FIFA than picking up a book back then.

And when I did start to take reading and writing seriously in my late teens during university, I really wanted to be a poet in all honesty, but wasn't quite bold enough to perform an open mic down in Brighton, Camden or Shoreditch. Didn't quite have the confidence to get up on stage and share the words that I had slaved over. Instead, I wrote in private. Grafted towards my craft. Built up my collection of bus themed sonnets and posted the odd one or two on Twitter to my small following.

I kept my online profile pretty private back then, having just qualified as an English teacher. And even though I rarely shared my early work, being an undercover poet of sorts has made me a better novelist now. Sentence by sentence, I've learned to appreciate the beauty of rhythm and melody. Poetry is the midweek training session in the rain before the top of the table clash on a Sunday. By dabbling with the poetic form first, I've learned so much about language and how words should sound.

Music has played its part too. I can't do the dishes or brush my teeth without the sound of a song playing in the background. Any genre really, I'm not fussy. For me, the question I ask myself frequently is: how can I make my words flow like lyrics? Use all the necessary features the right way. Alliteration, sibilance, loose rhyme to forge a chorus of some kind. As a teacher, undoubtedly, I learned so much from the students I taught. Their way with words, the way they saw the world, their energy, everything from getting stopped and searched by TSG to looking after their siblings and dealing with complex issues with their families.

I knew from early that teaching was something that I wanted to do, help others and impart what I knew. But after five years, making students respond to poetry using PEE was killing me, and the lure of doing a funded PhD was an opportunity to carve out a new, exciting identity. I certainly miss the regular interaction with the next generation. And that life affirming feeling of making a difference daily. You don't always get that when you're stuck studying in your study.

For me, being forgotten would be a failure. I want to leave a legacy. I want to continue to go into schools and share my story. Then become a professor maybe, teaching creative writing in universities.

I can't lie. That image will never leave me. Seeing *The 392* in full view, in Foyles alongside Michelle Obama and Akala and timidly asking the bookseller behind the counter if it's okay to sign a few copies. And yes, winning prizes would be nice. I wouldn't say no, but I'm genuinely delighted when my words continue to be read by those who don't necessarily consider themselves readers. Like that time, a friend of mine, an old one from secondary school said *The 392* was the first book that he'd read cover to cover. I write to receive that strange message request on Instagram, that one from an obscure source that looks a bit dodgy, but I accept it tentatively and skim what it says. I'm glad I do. A young mother has shaken off her reading rut and has reached out to say how much she has enjoyed the words that I had written.

Me, I'm inspired by ambition. I will continue to write for my mother and my brother and members of my family who didn't quite get the rub of the green. Like my uncle, stabbed in the back and face on Murder Mile when he was just 18. He survived, but it's scarred, and not just physically.

Writing can feel like the treat once life admin is complete. Respond to a few emails, chase up that invoice and return to that paragraph I've been slaving over for hours. The one where I can't quite find the right word because I've already used it a few lines before. It makes me feel free. Has the potential to transport me somewhere new like a bus on diversion, seeing fresh sites on these forgotten back streets. It can keep me awake at night too, in bed, half asleep, thinking about lines, a new idea festering. I imagine it is a book before I have written a word. I dream that the finished work has been copy-edited and

typeset, and the words sit on the page just how I like. It's gone twelve and I'm still up, pondering, wondering whether this new idea I have has legs.

Every little detail counts. With every line you write, you're getting closer to completing it. Whether it be a story about a young couple coming over on the Windrush or a gay footballer in the Premier League or something linked to ancient history. There is room in people's hands and hearts for whatever you write, however you choose to write it.

I know it can be hard to keep up sometimes with so many amazing new young writers emerging on the scene, releasing amazing new works every day it seems. But there is room for us all. It takes a community to raise a writer.

I arrive at the ground, south of the river somewhere, a football field in the middle of nowhere hoping the players are going to play ball and respect the laws. I feel a little unsteady, a little unready but I'm here now. And it's showtime.