

WHY I WRITE

HANIF KUREISHI

‘One morning at school, staring out of the window, it occurred to me to become a writer.’

Hanif Kureishi, *What Happened*

So I looked out the window and I thought, ‘I can do this all the time. I can do this in the future. It’ll save my life.’ Not only am I a kid scribbling on his desk at home, I can actually think about this seriously just like other kids who got out of their hometowns by playing guitars. And that really focused me, it really saved my life. It gave me a sense of purpose and direction and a way out.

Of course, what I was gonna write about I wasn't really sure. But then it began to occur to me that I could write about let's call it my own situation. About race, about my father being an Indian marrying a white woman, living in the suburbs, growing up in the sixties: race, racism, Enoch Powell, all that stuff. That was a good start. So I started to sit down and I wrote mostly in the evening when I got home from school. But all the kids that I knew were into fashion, you know, clothes, dressing up, and started taking photographs. It was very very creative, although we hated it and called it dead. When you look back on it, the end of the sixties, it was really lively down there. But I was the only one who wanted to be a writer. They all thought that being an author is a bit old fashioned. But that's what I was good at and that's what I wanted to do. And that's what I thought I could be exceptional at.

I was taken to a publisher called Anthony Blond when I was about 15, and there was an editor there called Jeremy Trafford. He was a teacher and a very very kind man, very clever man. He would come down to my house on Sundays all the way from Earl's Court where he lived. And he would go through my writing with me. And Jeremy was an influence on me because he took my writing seriously. And that really helped, to be taken seriously. And he would go through my stuff with a pencil and we'd have long conversations on the phone.

And he was very interested in character, and that helped me a lot. He said, 'Write the characters. People like the characters. It's the characters who make the books.'

And then when I was 18, I went to work at the Royal Court Theatre, which again, I was young but that's when life really started for me. It made me think, made me aware that you could be an artist. That you could be communal, you know? It could be a collaboration.

But when you start to write, you write for yourself. I write for myself. I mean, I look at a sentence, I look at a paragraph, I look at a page and then I'd say, 'is that all right?' And that's according to my own judgement. You know, do I like that? Does that sound like Hanif? Does that sound like me? Is that how I want it to look like? And then you show it to other people.

I like writing, I still do it. You may be inspired by somebody else but in the end you do it because you're really fascinated by it. The other day I was walking up my street and a guy in a motorbike came up beside me and he stopped, and he took his helmet off, he got off his bike and all that. He was a young Asian kid, and he said to me: 'I loved your books and your films and stuff when I was young.' And I thought, well, that's why I did it. I did it for you, for that moment, for him.

You don't know who's out there with books. When I first began to write there weren't really any stories about mixed race kids and all the books you read were by posh people.

The world feeds my writing. I grew up the end of the fifties, through the sixties, through the seventies, through the eighties, nineties. God almighty it's been a long time, but I'm really interested in the times. I'm interested in race. I'm interested in creativity and music, sexuality, politics, class, the world feeds me. So I'm inspired by what's around me. Then I'm inspired by what happens to me, who I'm living with, what my kids are doing, what age they are. What's it like to be a kid? What are my friends doing, what they're thinking about?

The world still interests me. I mean, we live in a very public world, a world of the news, and we live in a public world of big events, particularly recently because social media is so relentless. But what I'm interested in is an individual in a public world. So you may or may not want to talk about racism, but I want to talk about that person. I'm obviously

interested in racism as an idea, but I'd look for an individual in a world and how they do or don't cope with it.

Psychoanalysis always looks at the individual. And so psychoanalysis and literature have the same scope really, which is to take this particular person in this particular world and see how the world is lived out through them.

It's just practise. You write and write and write and write and write, and then you look through it and you might see a bit of this and a bit of that is a bit lively. A lot of it will be nonsense or rubbish. But you know, the process of writing is writing a lot and then finding a little bit you're panning for gold.

What makes a good writer? That's a really tricky question. Whether they turn you on, whether they interest you, that's all. Whether you feel that they have a view of the world that hooks you. I mean, I teach writing, creative writing as is called, I don't know why it's called creating writing but it's just writing really. And you turn the pages of your students' work and you just look for something that, oh, that's good. That turns you on, gets you going. There's something about their view of the world that's unique or really it's liveliness. There's something alive about it. Something you didn't know before or hadn't heard about before and suddenly you think 'I want to be in that world.'

It's intangible and it's magic really.