**Being a Writer Podcast—The Private Joys of Writing with Okechukwu Nzelu**

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**SPEAKERS**

Nelima Begum, Okechukwu Nzelu

**Nelima Begum** 00:00

Welcome to this edition of the Being a Writer podcast, a podcast that explores writers’ creativity and resilience. This series is part of The Literary Consultancy’s new programme of support for writers that focuses on cultivating and safeguarding literary creativity. With a range of special guests, we explore what it means to be a writer today. In this episode of the Being a Writer podcast, we're joined by Manchester-based writer and creative writing lecturer Okechukwu Nzelu, to dive into the private joys of writing, with a title inspired by his debut novel, *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney*, this episode takes a candid look at Oke’s **[CHECK CORRECT SPELLING FOR NAME ABBREVIATION]** writing craft, and explores the various elements of his journey thus far. We talk about how writing changes his life, the internal moments of wonder, and what working with other writers and students has taught him about his own work. In a truly thought-provoking, illuminating and utterly brilliant conversation, we get to the very heart of what it means to be a writer.

Okay, welcome to the penultimate episode of season three of the Being a Writer podcast, Okechukwu Nzelu, or, Oke for short, as you sign off in some of your emails. How are you doing?

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 01:15

I'm really well, thank you. I'm really pleased to be here. Thank you so much for having me.

**Nelima Begum** 01:19

Oh, we're so thrilled that you can join us. This is a really special episode. As I said, it is the penultimate episode of season three, and there's, you know, so much to dive into with you in particular, because you are a writer of many talents.

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 01:32

Thank you.

**Nelima Begum** 01:33

So, we have our questions, but actually, I wanted to kind of throw in one more to start off with because you do have such a beautiful and unique name. I wanted to ask what it means.

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 01:43

Oh, thank you very much. So, my name is Igbo, which is the language of my parents and my family from Nigeria. Okechukwu means ‘god's portion’ or ‘god's gift’, so I try not to take that too much, but yeah, that's what it means.

**Nelima Begum** 02:03

Oh, that's lovely. Thank you for sharing. So, named after your debut novel, *The Private choice of Nnenna Maloney*, this is an episode that I'd like to use to get candid and go behind the scenes of writing as a craft. So let's start from the beginning. When did you start writing?

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 02:19

So I started writing really young, actually. My earliest memory of writing is just after I'd learned to physically write letters and words and sentences. And I know how corny this sounds, but I really thought that writing and narrative was just the next logical step. There was no sort of conscious thing about it, I wasn't, kind of, planning to become a writer at age whatever it was that I learned to write, but I just sort of thought, okay, I can write words now, I want to write a story, I thought that was just what you did. And writing, you know, at the time, obviously, was just something I was doing because it felt natural. And because I think there is just something natural… about story writing that feels natural to the human brain. I think it's a sort of very common impulse that we all feel. If anybody listening comes from an Igbo family, or perhaps even a Nigerian or any African family, you will know that any older relative ever tries to explain anything to you, you will end up with a very long story. So maybe that's why I got it. But yeah, I've just always, it's just always felt natural to me to want to tell a story. And I guess, as I've got older, and I've read a bit more, and I've thought a bit more about what stories can do, and I've been inspired by this writer and that writer, I've learned a little bit more about, I guess, my own ambitions for story writing, and my own aims and goals. But yeah, it's just always something I've really wanted to do.

**Nelima Begum** 03:54

So I find it really fascinating that you kind of attached quite a logical thought process to it from a very young age, you know, really playing into the whole god's gift definition [and] meaning as well, which is great. And also that, you know, the act of storytelling was so, I guess, you know, woven into you from culture from very beginning as well, which, you know, is a stunning way of looking at it really, having stories for everything, as you say.

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 04:22

Thank you. Yeah, I do feel very lucky to come from the culture that I come from. And to have that background. I think, you know, it has to have informed the way I approach story writing. I think I do tell stories in order to make a point, or at least to open up a reader's mind to new possibilities of things. Yeah, I think that must have been something that I've inherited.

**Nelima Begum** 04:46

It's beautiful. So the act of writing itself means something different to each writer. And we've already kind of touched on this in that first question, in that, you know, there's so much more to storytelling than just what you're writing. So for some it's a hobby, for some it's a career, for some it's catharsis and more. What did writing mean to you when you first started?

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 05:09

That's a really interesting question. I think at first, it was just a habit. And, you know, I think, probably like most writers, we write because we enjoy having access to other stories. So I've already mentioned, I guess, you know, family stories and family histories and things like that. But also, you know, you read things, or at a very young age maybe you have things read to you or you watch things, and I think, at the time, it just felt like I was just doing this thing that was just what you did. So writing felt like, at the very earliest stage, and I was just writing, it felt like, it just felt like this natural, comfortable thing to do. Because of course, when you're that young, you're not thinking about plot or character development or dialogue or anything, you're just kind of writing stuff and just letting your imagination run. And, yeah, at the time, at the time, it just felt like this natural sort of movement of a muscle that I didn't even really give any second thoughts too. And obviously, as you get older, you think about things, I guess, more specifically, and maybe more strategically, and you develop aims that, you know, a five-year-old simply can't have, or I couldn’t have anyway at the age of five, I’m sure. And, yeah, it's interesting, because I think I do try and keep some sense of innocence about writing. I think it's important, certainly in the early drafts, to keep that sense of innocence, because when you are, you know, any boundary between the, sort of, initial input, initial impulse of writing and the editing process is always going to be quite porous, and you can never fully switch off your inner editor, I think, and nor should you, and you can never, or hopefully, you'll never completely let go of that first impulse that first made you want to tell the story. But I think that I do try and maintain that innocence of purpose, and that, sort of, initial joy when I’m writing, because I think if you lose that, you know, even if you are in the editing process, it can become a chore, you know? I think we all have got to the stage where we're writing something, whether that's a narrative or an essay or whatever it might be, and you just can't look at it again, if you've looked at it 1000 times. Exactly. And you just want to step away from it, because it just feels like you've just worn down a patch of skin or something until you can't bear it anymore. And I think that's the point when you start to lose that initial sense of joy. And I try and maintain that for as long as possible and to, you know, celebrate it and enjoy it, because that's where the energy for telling a story comes from for me.

**Nelima Begum** 08:04

It's really interesting that you've mentioned the phrase ‘innocence of purpose’. I love that. And I think that's a brilliant way of looking at it. It also kind of echoes how, you know, as you said, when we're young and we're writing, there's no logic to it, there is no plot device or really intricate character arc or anything like that. We are just writing for the sake of writing expression and getting stories done. And obviously, the older we get, the more, I guess, pressured we feel by, I guess, having more of a formula for our writing and following a structure and making it very logical and even though writing is very much a creative endeavour, there is still a formula to it in terms of, you know, beginning, middle and end, and having a protagonist and things like that. But I think sometimes it's nice to echo, I guess, the spirit of writing, while you're really young and you have no restraints or formulas or labels or structures, and you just get it down on the paper.

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 08:59

Yeah, I think that's really interesting. And I think that, you know, speaking of formulas, and I know that TLC doesn't take a formulaic approach to anything, but I think that increasingly, certainly as a creative writing teacher, I am trying to just examine our ideas of, you know, what rules we have. I think a lot of lectures are doing that. Certainly, my colleagues are. We're trying to be as open minded as we can to help students just be the best that they can be without imposing irrelevant or unnecessary, sort of, strictures on them, you know? I've been reading a little bit about this; I've been reading and Craft in the Real World by Matthew Salesses, who talks about where our ideas of, you know, what makes good, say, plot or character or dialogue, [and] where those ideas come from, and that, obviously, they're very culturally specific and we need to think about, you know, I think a lot of people are thinking right now, about dominant cultures and hegemony, and what that does to our sense of taste and our sense of what is right within a story and how absolute those things really are. And so it's really interesting because of course to teach writing, you do have to give advice and look at how people have done things in the past. But I think [that] also one of the joys of it is, I guess, going back to that sense of sort of innocence of purpose is remembering that every story is and should be different. And that it's not so much about following rules, it's, you know, Emma Darwin talks about ‘tools rather than rules’, which I think is a really helpful thing to talk about, and a really helpful way to think about it—this idea that it's not so much that you have to do X, Y, Z, it's that, if you're going to write this kind of story, here are some of the tools available to you that might help you achieve your aims. And that just means, actually that's quite helpful because it means that rather than sort of blindly following a set of rules that automatically make a good story, which never ever worked, it's more about you. You, as a writer, have to be very, very thoughtful about what it is you're trying to achieve, because nobody can tell you exactly how to do it. You need to have a very keen sense of what it is you want to write, and then you need to have a very good sense of what tools are available to you, and what tools you might even develop or innovate in order to achieve that.

**Nelima Begum** 11:16

Interesting. So it's more about looking at these things as resources rather than, you know, these other limitations placed on you, or this is the step-by-step manual of how you write X kind of story.

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 11:28

Yeah, yeah, I think so.

**Nelima Begum** 11:31

I think that's a really interesting way of looking at it, and certainly speaks to, like, just the variety of writing as well, because, you know, everyone's story, as you said, is very different. And, you know, only you can write your story, so do your very best with what is available to you, rather than trying to mimic the structure of someone else.

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 11:50

Exactly. And that's, you know, that's part of where the joy is—you finding your way into what it is that you want to write. I think, you know, what can be disappointing about reading something, and I don't mean students here, but just reading anything, is when you think I've read this before, or this is just an example of something that doesn't feel innovative or doesn't feel new. Like I feel like I've read this kind of story quite a few times. That's when things are disappointing. So I think it's really, you know, that's where the fun is to think, what can I do that's different? How can I tweak things and innovate and reflect on what's gone before?

**Nelima Begum** 12:31

This brings me really nicely into my next question, actually, because you've touched on the teaching element of your writing career. What purpose does writing serve in your life now, and how has it changed over the years?

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 12:44

That is a good question. I think writing has changed my life completely.

**Nelima Begum** 12:48

I love that. I think that's beautiful way of looking at it.

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 12:54

Yeah, thank you. I feel the change has just been huge, you know, I've always written but in the past few years, essentially, since my first novel came out with Dialogue, my life has just completely changed. You know, I was teaching secondary school English, which I loved. I was doing that for about seven years before I became a creative writing lecturer. And, you know, my job is different now. I'm not, I'm not teaching English, I’m teaching creative writing specifically. And I love being able to do that. I love being able to focus on that. I love being able to talk to students about what works for me, and what might work for them. And, you know, talk about the things that I'm reading. And I love being able to share that and to be able to focus on that very specific part of my life that I really enjoy. And, you know, being published obviously opens up a whole world, it's not just the fact that your books are out there, it's the fact that you get to have wonderful conversations like this. And you get to think about things in such depth and detail and talk to, you know, intelligent and talented people about what you're passionate about. And I've been able to travel and do all sorts of things that I wouldn't have been able to do before. I feel really, really lucky.

**Nelima Begum** 14:10

That's amazing. And also, [what] I think comes with it, you know, [is] this incredible network of other really talented creatives as well [and], like you said, having those really enlightening conversations and they're thought provoking and there's an exchange of, like, creative energy and reflection there on the craft itself.

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 14:33

Yeah, absolutely. The friendships that I formed with other writers are really important to me, because, you know, it's such a, well, let's be honest, it's a rarefied job. It's not just that not very many people do it. It's that not very many people are given the opportunity to do it for all sorts of reasons that really ought to change. So the fact that I can talk to people about, you know, what I'm reading or what I'm writing or my opinions about things and their opinions about things and to be able to, you know, I've even had the opportunity to interview like the odd writer that I really admire. So that community is really valuable.

**Nelima Begum** 15:15

That's lovely. And I think, I guess it partially answers the next question wishes, in what ways does writing bring you joy?

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 15:23

Yeah, I think that is a big part of it. You know, I always say that my favourite part of the job, I guess, is talking to people about writing. I should probably say that my favourite part is the writing itself. But, yeah, just talking about the writing.

**Nelima Begum** 15:40

I mean, there are perks that come with the writing that you also get to enjoy. So yeah.

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 15:45

And that's huge. And I'm really grateful for that. And it's funny to think about writing bringing you joy, because I think, as we all know, there are times when writing is just difficult and challenging, not just in terms of, you know, how do I make this dialogue work, or how do I make this ending work, or whatever it might be. But in terms of the challenges it presents you as a person, particularly as a black queer person, I think in Britain, especially today. You know, it is not easy to be a minoritised writer, and there's a lot of evidence and research behind that. But, you know, again, I guess to go back to what we were talking about before, that moment of writing when you have an idea [and] when you when you think about the characters and the dynamics between them, you know, when you write something that you're proud of, there is no better feeling in the world. It makes you feel—it's this funny thing, it makes you feel both as though you've done something amazing, and also that you can do amazing things. To make something that you are really proud of, even if nobody else has seen it yet, it's a fantastic feeling that makes you feel strong and capable and purposeful. And, yeah, I think probably like most writers, I guess I chase that high, you know, through all my work.

**Nelima Begum** 17:11

Yeah. I mean, this is something that comes up at TLC quite often as well. We're quite big on the culture of, well, you have written and that in and of itself is such a great joy and such a great triumph, because I don't think people understand—people who aren't writers—the struggle of having to put pen to paper. It's not always this really easy linear process of just transferring what's in your head to the sheet of paper. There's a lot of, you know, self-doubt, and writer's block and anguish, and just, you know, comparison as well. Comparison is the thief of joy. And when you see your peers or other writers doing brilliant things, and maybe you're not quite there yet, that can really knock your confidence at times, too. But when we have writers who submit their manuscripts for, you know, particularly the manuscript assessment service that we offer, and it's a full-length piece of work, that's so impressive, you have written about, you know, 60-plus thousand words on a story that you felt passionate about, that you really felt compelled to write. And, like I said, that is like sticking your flag in at the top of the mountain. Really, it's such a big feat that I don't think enough writers celebrate, [the] act of being able to write and complete something.

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 18:26

Absolutely, absolutely. You know, I think if you have, like you said, if you've managed to complete a long, just writing a long document that even halfway makes sense, is a huge achievement, especially if you bear in mind the fact that maybe you have childcare responsibilities, or you're working full time, as most people just have to do, you know, that is a huge achievement. And I think that joy needs to be protected and celebrated. Because, of course, you know, being published is wonderful, but it's also, as well as an artistic achievement, it very much has a commercial dimension to it. And, you know, before you start thinking about your work in terms of what it might be worth on the market, I think it's important to think about it as what you have achieved and what you have overcome and persevered through. And then you can start thinking about the things that inevitably we all have to think about in terms of, you know, what's the genre, which agents or publishers might you submit it to, and, you know, what might the editing process look like for you. Those things are really important, but I think, yeah, you're right. It's such an important thing to hold on to.

**Nelima Begum** 19:38

Yes, and like you said, it should power you to carry on and feel strong enough to keep writing and keep telling your stories. But we've briefly touched on a few challenges in the last couple of questions. Things like writer's block, feeling uninspired or perhaps just generally not being in the mood to write which can happen to anyone and everyone. How did you overcome those feelings? Because, you know, those are moments where writing does not necessarily bring you happiness or joy. Quite the opposite, actually.

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 20:09

So one thing I will say [is that] I suppose I'm quite fortunate, I guess, in that I've never, I don't really, I don't remember having writer's block, ever. And I think the reason for that is I just try to keep myself, I guess, immersed as much as possible in an exchange of ideas. This, you know, I can't remember who it is, I think it's Jenn Ashworth, who I work with, but it might have been somebody else who said this, that… it's helpful to think about writing, or creating anything artistic maybe, as a sort of a two-way process. You are taking in ideas from the world and the books you're reading and the conversations you're having and the experiences that you've had, and the art that you've been to see or the cinema that you have been to see and you take it in and it goes through you, and then you breathe out your own work. And I think what I try and do is try and, I guess, keep myself in conversation with things that help me do that. And that can be, you know, something that everybody has to calibrate for themselves. I always advise students, when they come to me and say I've got writer's block, I say, maybe what you need to do is, actually, you know, don't stop reading. But if you've only been reading books in the genre that you want to write in, maybe try looking outside of that. And in fact, why not go and see a film or go to an art gallery, or, you know, try to immerse yourself in something that reminds you how fun it is, and how amazing it is to be creative, but doesn't encourage you to compare yourself with another writer. I think that can be really one of the worst things about writer's block [and] one of the causes, perhaps is that you start thinking, I have this idea but no, it's just not good enough. Like Nabokov did this really great thing that I'll never be able to touch or I've got this really fantastic story. But no, like, Zadie Smith has done that wonderful novel, I'm just never going to be as good as her. And I think it's so important to remind yourself that you will never be able to do what anybody else is doing. And you shouldn't like because they can't do what you're doing, you need to focus on what feeds you. And that might mean that you need to expand the art forms that you're interacting with on a daily basis, it might mean that you need to make some of changes in your life or your process. But that is the thing to be protected, I think, when it comes to writer's block.

**Nelima Begum** 22:39

I think that's such brilliant advice as well, because it pops up quite often not just in writing but, you know, people will be doing something or engaging with an idea that they have, and then they'll talk themselves out of it because they think, oh, this is an oversaturated market and there's no place for me in this particular genre. Or this writer has already done this and they've won all the prizes for it, too, so I don't have a place here anymore. But no, it goes back to what you said at the start, that only you can tell your story. So go for it. You only miss the shots that you don't take.

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 23:12

Yeah, absolutely. And what you said earlier about comparison being the thief of joy, it's absolutely true when it comes to, I think, the very initial stages of writing, you know? If I'd been comparing myself to other black British writers, I'd never have got started. What am I supposed to be measuring myself against? Carol Phillips and Zadie Smith, and all these incredible people? You would just never get anything done. And it's easier said than done, but I think for me certainly that's a really important part of the process. You have to separate yourself from that urge to compare all the time.

**Nelima Begum** 23:43

Yeah, absolutely. I think sometimes we often mix up inspiration for comparison. So you should absolutely feel inspired by these other writers because they've done fantastic, but you shouldn't feel intimidated by what they've already done. Because, as you said, they can't do what you're about to do.

So, are there moments or, I guess, snapshots in time or things that writers themselves don't really speak about; private joys that maybe the rest of the world don't conventionally see for a writer?

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 24:17

Hmm, yeah, I think that, I guess there are two things that come to mind. The first is what we sort of touched on earlier, which is that moment of [having] just written something that you're really proud of. And for me, it's a bit like—I'm trying to find a metaphor for this, [but] when I was a teenager, I read a load of books about witchcraft that were like, that talked about how witchcraft is kind of like physics in that you, sort of, take, say, energy from I guess the earth or from ley lines or whatever it might be, and you sort of absorb it into yourself and you kind of, it's like you become this battery or conduit—I'm not a physicist—and you're storing energy [that’s] kind of buzzing around you. And that, for me, is what writing feels like when it's going well. I won’t talk about what it feels like when it's not going well, because that's not a joy. But [when] it feels like it's going well, you feel like you're full of this wonderful energy that, and I know how hyperbolic this sounds, but when it's going well, it feels like you're full of this wonderful energy that connects you to something really powerful. And nobody sees that because… that's not a feeling that you can, you know, it's so internal and so private. And like the feeling of responding to art that you really enjoy, you can talk about it, but that feeling stays within you. And that is really precious and wonderful. And I think so essential to the process. And I guess the second thing that comes to mind is, you know, the conversations that I have sometimes with readers have been amazing. And they tend to be, well I guess a lot of them are, you know, somebody might email me through my website, or send me a message on social media or come up to me at a reading after a Q&A to say something, but I've had wonderful experiences just listening to people, sort of, share their stories and their experiences with me and say what my stories have meant them. You just never know how your writing is going to move people. I think that, you know, a lot of the time perhaps some of the more conventional conversations that we have in publishing treat us as though, you know, empathy is not a real thing, right? As though if you're not, say, a black British queer man, you have nothing to gain from reading the stories about black British queer men, or whatever it might be. But actually, you know, I've been very fortunate to have heard from black queer men who have said what *Here Again Now* means to them in terms of how they think about their lives and their own experiences. But I've also had wonderful experiences listening to people who are, you know, white women who have said what my writing has meant to them in different ways. And there's something really precious about that, because you forget, sometimes, just how far your writing can reach. And that is really, really wonderful.

**Nelima Begum** 27:29

And it sounds really magical as well, because as you said, you just never know how the words that you wrote down will impact someone else, or how it will sit with them. And I think that creates such a feeling of just wonder between you and your reader as well.

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 27:45

Yeah. And you know, to think about how that might—I guess, yeah, you just never know how far that's gonna go. I think one of my favourite writers, for example, is Jane Austen, and I don't think anybody, I don't think Jane Austen, when she sat down to write was writing towards a gay black man living in Manchester in the 21st Century. But I do think I do really love her writing, and I think… to know how far your writing can go in terms of, I guess, to think in basic terms of demographics and communities, is wonderful.

**Nelima Begum** 28:22

It really is. It's a beautiful thing to imagine just how far those words will go and how many people they'll reach. And some of them you might not even know about. But it's a really interesting process, I think. Also, you touched on reading books about witchcraft. I think witchcraft is making a comeback actually.

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 28:40

Did it ever really go away?

**Nelima Begum** 28:43

Well, maybe not. I think it's really fascinating, like on TikTok especially, I think, the fascination the focus on witchcraft has become a realm of its own. But that's a chat for another time, I think.

Were there, I guess, private joys, you know, like those moments of wonder that… you’ve touched on how some of them were very internal. Were there ones that you perhaps didn't anticipate, or were quite unexpected in your writing career. Something that, you know, watching other people get published or just reading books that had been published, you didn't associate that moment with them necessarily? It's just something that was so totally unique to you that you thought oh, I didn't know that this was another thing that would come from my writing endeavour.

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 29:31

You know, I think it's funny because basically everything about writing has been a surprise to me. [Everything] about being a published writer has been a surprise. I mean, I worked for a publisher when I was in my sort of mid-20s, for three years. It was a poetry publisher, though, so it's very different. And I think I thought, oh, I kind of know how publishing works, and most of the basic processes—some of the basic processes—do carry across, but, you know, I was working at a very small poetry press. And now I'm published by a division of a very big publisher. And that just changes everything. It just changes so much about, you know, because the resources that you have, and fiction is published in a different way from poetry, and the editing process is different across those two forms. And so much of it has been a surprise to me, I mean, you know, the editing process, having somebody who is very, very intelligent and very, very invested, read your work carefully, multiple times to prepare it for publication is a gift and a surprise. I hadn't had that before. And I think, if I could also maybe touch on something that wasn't so joyous, I think that one of the things that surprised me about being published was just the experience of having my work out in the world, for people to read and talk about who didn't know me, and never [having] had that before, certainly not on that scale. I really think that there is something, there's nothing that can really prepare you for that feeling of being published, apart from maybe just being published. I remember feeling very exposed, and feeling just very surprised by my work being out in the world, and I think that's partly because I was, I hadn't quite learned to think of my writing is my work rather than myself, you know? Writing is so personal, obviously. It is something that you make, and you spend a lot of time on it, and you are hopefully very invested in it, and you really care about it. But I think all artists are prone to conflating the work and the self, you know? My work is not me. I am not being bought in bookshops, my book is. I am not being reviewed, my book is. And so it is, I guess, that distinction was something that I had to learn to make, because I did feel, and I think a lot of writers that I've spoken to have felt base, you just feel incredibly vulnerable when your work is out there for the first time. However you feel about it, you feel really vulnerable. And they've had to sort of work to, to move on from that.

**Nelima Begum** 32:31

I think it's really brilliant advice, that you that you speak about making that distinction, because I think that's something integral to, I guess, maintaining good mental health throughout that process, because it is exposure in every sense of the word, like, you to your readers, your readers to you, your editorial team. I guess you have to tell yourself that, you know, it's not you as a person that is being picked up off the shelf, it's your craft, and it's your work, it's like what anyone else would do with their day, it's their work, their work does not make them or, you know, link directly back to them. But yeah, I think it is important to understand that, you know, it's while you are very, very much out there and you are vulnerable. It's not necessarily people picking up pieces of you.

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 33:23

Yeah. Yeah. And, you know, obviously that varies across lots of different types of writing, you know, for example, if I were writing autobiographically, which I very deliberately don't, but if I were, you know, I would probably have to develop a different relationship with my writing from what I do now. And I, you know, I’ve spoken to people who have written autobiographically, and, you know, I affects them differently. And, you know, like I said earlier, you know, I guess the, another sort of, bit of nuance to that is the fact that, you know, readers do sometimes, and sometimes the way that things are marketed are by personality and identity, and so to an extent it can feel like you are being sold; what is being sold as you and who you are and where you've come from and what you look like and what your life is like. Absolutely, those things do play into the marketing of things sometimes, but that just makes it all the more important to keep that distinction, you know. I am me, you know? One of the things I do, I guess, to maintain that is that as a writer, I'm known as Okechukwu, and that is… my full name, it's… my Sunday best name, it's… the name that my parents call me if I've done something wrong. But everybody in my life calls me Oke, and that is to help me sort of distinguish between those two parts of what of my life you know. Oke is who I am day-to-day and I'm the one who does the writing and I do the work, but Okechukwu is the name of this on my books because that's a version or a part of myself that I sort of allow the world to see.

**Nelima Begum** 35:04

Yeah. That's such a brilliant, unique way of making that distinction as well. I think it's really interesting that you, kind of, it's not splitting, but you have like two elements of your identity that really beautifully come together to help you, I guess be your best creative self.

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 35:22

Yeah. Yeah, I think it's what protects parts of yourself.

**Nelima Begum** 35:26

Yeah. So, we've touched on publication itself, but in which moment, did you maybe solidify or tell yourself that you are a writer? Because surprisingly, that comes quite later for a lot of people.

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 35:43

Yeah, well, any day now.

**Nelima Begum** 35:48

Pending.

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 35:50

I’ll let you know! That is a good question, because I think I'm not sure that there was just one moment. I think, because it's all very well to be experiencing things that are common to lots of writers’ lives, you know—the contracts, the publishing contract, or when you hold the book in your hands for the first time, or when your book is first reviewed, or when you first do an event or whatever it might be. Those things are really important and personal and incredible. But also, it's one thing to go through them, and it's another thing to let the penny drop inside of yourself and to let go of any sort of sense of imposter syndrome, or to really believe that this stuff is happening. I was very fortunate with my first book in that it won an award and was shortlisted for a couple of others. But I remember feeling all the time when that stuff was happening, oh, my God, I don't deserve this, this is not, this is not something that I should be getting, like, somebody else, I can't compete with these people. And it took me a while to get over that. And to kind of think I must have done something right. And to kind of really have that, kind of, faith in myself that I had done something good and that the people, that the publisher [and] my agent who were telling me that were telling the truth, you know. Impostor syndrome can be really difficult in that way. And I really, there was no one moment for me, I guess. I had to keep reminding myself that this is real, and that this is happening and that I've worked for this and I deserve it, and that I'm really doing what I wanted to do.

**Nelima Begum** 37:33

Yeah, I find it really interesting how, you know, writers particularly, we're very, there are moments where we're so heavily self-deprecating, and there's no need for it. Because, you know, it's there, you've written the book, you've done a great job. I think we second guess ourselves a lot. The imposter syndrome can be very aggressive, sometimes.

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 37:59

Aggressive is the word, and I think that's because we, you know, we put writers, as writers we write because we love to read most of the time, and therefore we put the writers that we love on a pedestal and we say, you know, Shakespeare has done this fantastic thing, or whoever it might be. And, you know, the people who inspire us are often the people who, who also awe us, and I think it's a very tricky balancing act that I'm still developing, but it's important to, I guess, to learn to admire without being intimidated, or to at least hive off that intimidation, to the extent that you can just get on with your work. You know, I think of when I became a secondary school teacher for the first time. And, you know, I had come to that job from working in publishing, and, you know, to go from being in charge of books, which are important, to being in charge of children, [is] a big jump. And that's, that's not saying that books are important, because they are, but you know, to be in charge of a child's education and welfare and to have to look out for signs of abuse, and to, you know, to have that level of responsibility is huge. And that is important, and teachers do and should bear that in mind all the time. But if you have that at the forefront of your mind, that you are in charge of 30 vulnerable human beings, you'll never be able to teach them if you just are always worrying about the fact that you have this massive responsibility, you'll never actually be able to carry out that responsibility. And I think writing is kind of the same. It's not that you can ever forget what responsibilities you have or what brought you into it or how important your work is, it's just that you need to, kind of, give yourself a bit of space to breathe and get on with the work.

**Nelima Begum** 39:44

It's really interesting. With regards to your experience as a secondary school teacher, do you, I mean, that, as you say, was such a such a big job to have and such a big responsibility. And just to me personally, it just sounds a lot more terrifying than writing, so do you ever feel like oh, well, I've taught secondary school kids and cared for secondary school kids and been in charge of their learning and welfare [so] I can write anything, I can do anything. Does that contextualise struggle for you sometimes because, you know, it's such a big thing to do,

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 40:22

Do you know, that's a really interesting question. And, I think, I wish it worked that way. Because, you know, I won't go into detail, but I've, I've been through all sorts of things in my life that are that are traumatic and difficult, and that I’ve had to overcome, and, you know, whatever qualities I've developed from that, and whatever strategies I have, and whatever learning I have done, that is not always transferable in any straightforward way, you know. I can say, I've survived this or that, or I've had this experience, I've had that job, when it comes to teaching, but I think that every new experience feels new. You know, I can, when it comes to teaching, I can say, right, you know, when I was teaching, by the time I left, I'd been doing it for about seven years. So I can say, right, I've done this for, you know, six, seven years, I can do it again. I know how to plan a lesson, I know these things about behaviour management, I know who to go to, if I have this problem, or if I have this query, and those things do matter within that, and I'm sure that at a base level, you know, as you just get older, you think I’m 33 years old, I can handle this, that, the other, but I also think that every new experience brings its own separate worries and challenges. And, you know, as much as I've learned and grown from all the experiences and work that I've had before, I think writing is so different. It is such a rarefied thing, you know, just like teaching was. My colleagues used to say, in teaching, you know, in what other job would you say, right, everyone, this is what we’re going to do today, and here, like, 25 people groan because they have to do Shakespeare? You never have that, you know?

And similarly, in writing, when would you ever, in what other job, do you, sort of, read a document that you've worked on to a roomful of people who were then going to give you some money for it afterwards? In what other job do you have people who have never met you talk about your work in a newspaper? In what other job do you have an agent who hammers out a contract for you for work that you've done over years and years in that sort of context? There're so many elements of it that [you] probably do have things in common with, like… lots of [other] jobs, but writing in and of itself is unique and bizarre. And as much as I love it, as much as I love writing, and I'm really grateful to have this job, it is very, it is completely unique. And yeah, I guess it's just about trying to take each day and each experience as it comes into to do the best you can and learn from it.

**Nelima Begum** 43:23

Yeah, also really interesting that, you know, as you've mentioned, writing is unique. But it's also a unique experience for each person that does it, and so experiences and the challenges, and even the trajectory is, you know, it will be very different to each person.

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 43:39

Definitely. And, you know, as I said before, like, your experience with your publisher, for example, is one of the things that might nuance that and I'm very fortunate to be published by Dialogue Books who are, you know, so forward-thinking and so inclusive. And, you know, I remember when the cover came out for, when I saw the cover for the hardback of *The Private Joys*, my first book, and Sharmaine [Lovegrove] was telling me how wonderful it was that she, you know, as a black woman was commissioning this cover of a black woman's face on the front cover of a book, and she’d been, sort of, back and forth with, I can't remember who it was, but she was sort of talking about how she had said, you know, actually, you've got the hair texture wrong. It needs to be this. And I feel really lucky that I had a publisher who could do that.

**Nelima Begum** 44:31

Be mindful of that, yeah.

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 43:33

Yeah. And, you know, I might not have had that elsewhere. And yeah, that's something that I'm just really grateful for.

**Nelima Begum** 44:42

We love Sharmaine at TLC. She is such a powerhouse and a queen. We adore her. She's brilliant, honestly, and just doing fantastic, fantastic work in every way.

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 44:54

Absolutely.

**Nelima Begum** 44:55

So, taking more of a deep dive into your work. Your novels have really powerful stories, themes and characters running through them. So *The Private Joys of Nnenna Maloney* explores identity and belonging, and *Here Again Now*, published earlier this year, actually, is a spellbinding look into family grief and relationships. Where did you get your inspiration from for each book, and what is it about creating those really moving stories that roped you in?

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 45:21

Yeah, that's a really good question. And thinking back to my first novel, I started that when I was about 21, so I kind of have to reach back into the mists of time and think about where I started. I think I was trying to pull together a lot of different ideas, like I was, I guess, in a way that's quite typical for a first novel, you're just so excited by the world and everything that you've seen and read, and you just want to put it all down. And there was a real sifting process, before that novel came even to the publisher. And then when it was being edited, I had to sort of think about which characters do I really need here. But I was thinking about so many different things in that first book. I was thinking about the Bible, and I was thinking about my experiences of being a black British person in this country and thinking about gender and what my life might have been like if I'd been born female, and what it's like to have a relationship with a parent who is of the same culture that you are because my parents were born in Nigeria, and I was born here. And that is a massive difference just in the way that you think about life, sometimes. You know, you do, apart from the age difference, you do just have a very different way of looking at the world. My parents come from a very traditional Nigerian culture, and, you know, if you have, I think it’s something that quite a lot of immigrants can probably, immigrants of my age, children of immigrants of my age, can probably relate to, is that there is a big difference there sometimes in how you see certain things, and actually bring all that together and lots of other different things. And I had to really be quite disciplined with myself and think about okay, what is the story I want to tell here? Which stories, I suppose, of the many stories do I want to really bring out? That was a very different process from the second novel, where I had a very, very, quite early on in the process, I had quite a specific idea of what story I wanted to tell. And then, not long after that, I developed an idea of how I wanted to tell the story in terms of, like, the use of repetition, or what, I think it's Charles Baxter who calls it rhyming action, and they're sort of references. You know, the second novel was actually a retelling of the Book of Ruth from the Old Testament. In fact, I'm not a Christian myself, but I was raised in the church of England, and so I've always kept those ideas with me in terms of how, I guess how I see the world. I was a very intense believer when I was younger. And I think that's never quite left me. So looking at this Book of Ruth, which if anybody's not familiar with it, it's a book about a woman who marries into a Jewish family. Her husband is Jewish, and her, you know, all her in laws are Jewish and, but soon after she gets married, something happens to her husband and the men in her family, which I won't disclose, because it would spoil my novel. But Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi, despite the fact that any formal ties between them have been dissolved, they maintain this very important bond with one another, which actually helps them to survive. Traditionally, Ruth would have gone back to her parents, but she stays with Naomi, with her mother-in-law, and the two of them spend just a very short time in terms of the length of this book, it's only about four or five chapters, but they develop this very powerful bond. And I thought I was so moved by that, and I was so mesmerised by that, because I think as queer people, you know, we think about chosen family, you know, a lot of us get rejected by our parents and or neglected or abused by the people who ought to look after us and care for us the most. And we go out into the world and we find people who can kind of give us the care and the love that we need, even if it's not in the form that we might have expected it to be. And I was just so inspired by that, and I thought could that ever have happened with men? And this story therefore partly became for me one not just about second chances, and, sort of, love, but also about masculinity and the barriers that hold men back from experiencing those kinds of transformational transcendental types of love that really change us forever for the better. So, yeah, I think I, I mean I hope that I would say, from that, that I've grown a lot because I had a much more specific idea with my second level of what I wanted to say and how that I did with my first, but who knows? You know, I'm writing a third one now and it's still in the R&D phase. And you know, who knows how that will turn out. I might have an easier time with it, I might have a much harder time with it. We'll see.

**Nelima Begum** 50:17

I think it's also really interesting… the difference between being a debut novelist and then carrying on that momentum, but across to a different idea, maybe, for your second book. And you've written across genres and formats—what are the stark differences in the approaches that you take? And is there any overlap in the technique itself?

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 50:39

Yeah, that's interesting. I think the biggest difference for me; two of the biggest differences for me, I suppose I'll say, is that in my first novel, I was writing comedy in a way that I definitely wasn't with my second. And I had to… I write a lot of, I think, as most writers do, you'll find that you are discarding a lot of early, early drafts of things. And with my second novel, when I was writing the first sort of few chapters, I wrote loads of different attempts at this first few chapters to figure out the tone and the mood of it. And one of the things I was trying to do is write it as comedy. I was gonna, you know, but then just setting up comedy means that you kind of have to shift things around and think differently about certain dynamics, and what that does to the mood of the story and what that does to what you're preparing the reader to experience in the resolution. And it just didn't feel right. And so having to shift from comedy to a very different tone and mood meant not just that I was doing something that I hadn't done before, but I was going to have to find a new way of doing it, you know? I was like, Oh, my goodness, I really can't just, I mean, I never wanted to be the kind of writer who just writes the same thing over and over again. But I, there was a moment where I was, okay, so I'm not even going to be able to do a different version of what I was doing before, I'm going to have to, like, really figure out a new way of doing something. And I had to think about, you know, what text I was going to be inspired by—poetry and prose, in this case—and scripture, and, you know, had to really think about how that was all going to join together. And that was a real process. And when it came together, and I realised how I was going to tell the story, because with writing, and much like teaching, how you do what you do is very much a part of what it is that you're doing, you can't really separate them. There was this… moment of serendipity where everything just felt like it fit. And, yeah, that was hugely different from my first novel, where it was a much more gradual process of kind of figuring everything out.

**Nelima Begum** 52:53

It's really interesting to see how those come together. And you know, throughout the episode, you've touched on the fact that you're a lecturer in creative writing, [but] you're also working on a PhD, so… is there anything that you can't do?

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 53:08

There is a shopping list of things I can't do. In fact, I just realised I said there were two things that were different about my second book and only named one. So let's start with that.

**Nelima Begum** 53:17

Let's jump back.

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 53:20

The second thing is that I guess the second book is… very much about black British people primarily, and in a very focused way that my first one wasn't so exclusively. It was very much one of the things I loved, actually, about my first book was it was about people with lots of different experiences, you know. It was about a white woman and her mixed-race daughter, and it was about a queer black man, and it was about their friends and lovers and all the people who they interact with. My second novel is very much about three men who are all problematic and messed up and traumatised and messy. And I had to kind of steal myself for that, because I was, I was worried I guess about what that might do to my audience, you know, I wasn't writing about you know, there is a perception and there's research that backs this up, unfortunately, in the sort of rethinking diversity in publishing report that came out a few years ago, there was a perception in publishing that basically everything is written that everything should be written for middle class, straight white women. And I had that perception in mind when I was writing this novel. I thought, what is that going to do to how it's received? And I had to just, sort of, step into it and say, Well, this is the story I want to tell, and I have a publisher who really believes in me and in this story and what I can do, and you know, nothing in life is guaranteed. I don't know what's gonna happen tomorrow, but I have this opportunity now. And I had to sort of step into that and just take advantage of the situation that I had, and tell that story. And that felt like a leap. And I could only have done that if I fully believed in what I was writing and that's the only reason I was able to do that, I think

**Nelima Begum** 55:00

It's really interesting this point of, you know, having conviction in the story that you want to tell as well being equally as important as writing the story itself.

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 55:09

Yeah, definitely. Because how a reader experiences that story is essentially what they take away from it. It's not just this happened, this happened, this happened. But you know, it's how a reader experiences your writing, that they take away from, you know, some of my favourite books… you know, that I read, when I was younger, I can't even necessarily remember everything that happened in them. But I can remember how the pros made me feel, or you know, just this sense of what it was like to be in that author’s presence [and] in their mind. That's what you take away from it.

**Nelima Begum** 55:36

Of course, and you know, how thought provoking is because while you, as you say, might not remember very specific moments in the plot, you remember reading a book that really made you think about things or change your perception of things that you might have already been familiar with.

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 55:51

Yeah, definitely.

**Nelima Begum** 55:53

So how does teaching and working with other writers, because that is a big part of your day-to-day, how does that inform your own work?

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 56:00

It's a huge privilege. I love that I work with other writers now at Lancaster, you know. Jenn Ashworth, who is the subject lead for creative writing at Lancaster, she is a novelist. And to be able to work with somebody who knows what it's like to be working on this long, challenging document over years of time, who understands the process of what it's like to be edited and publicise and all that stuff as a novelist, is really valuable. I've never had that before, you know, and I think, like, I sort of mentioned earlier that having a community of writers that you can talk to about your experiences is really valuable. And I just… feel like I'm learning all the time as well. To be able to listen to someone's experiences and opinions and insights is really, really valuable. And, you know, to teach creative writing is very interesting, because, you know, I've never been a lecturer before, I've taught creative writing before, but not in such a concerted… way at this level. You know, I've done, sort of, guest lectures and things like that, and workshops, but never been a lecturer. And so for this, to be doing it, you know, on such a regular basis for students at this level, is great, because it really, it sort of forces you to… think about the mechanics of what it is that you're doing. And to question any assumptions that you might have. You know, I think it's, as human beings, we all, I think, are prone to developing biases, you know, of what we think a story should be like, or, you know, how we think this technique or that technique should be executed. But I think having somebody else's writing in your hands makes you extra careful about that, and makes you really, sort of, examine what you bring to your assessment of what they've done. And hopefully, that is making me kinder and more open-minded with myself, as well. And it's just lovely to be; I do just think… that teaching is a privilege. To have the care of somebody else's education is a privilege. And that's why it's so important to take it seriously. But that's why it's also important that secondary school teachers are paid better than they are, and given more time to do their job. So I'm just gonna slip that advocation there!

**Nelima Begum** 58:39

There’s some really good advocacy in there too! Well, it is important, and you know, it's as much of a learning experience for you as it is for them. And I think that's such a nice exchange, too. Can you share with us one writing joy and one writing frustration that is quite common among your students?

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 59:01

I think one writing joy is when, so we teach largely through workshops and I think one writing joy that is quite common is when you see that the others in the group see what you're trying to do, irrespective of whether or not they think you've done it. When people see what you're trying to do and that might be because they've read the same thing that inspired you, or because they've had a similar experience, or just because they get what you're trying to do. And that in itself is so wonderful, I think. To feel like you've been seen is a great thing. And I guess a frustration, I think a frustration, a common frustration, I think, for some students, perhaps, is the writer's block thing. And I think, you know, I think writer's block can come from all sorts of things. It might be because you're not used to having feedback on your work and that has made you doubt yourself, or maybe something has happened in your personal life, maybe you've suffered a bereavement that has sort of knocked you, as it would anybody. And I think… that can be so frustrating, because I think if you are either as a student or as a professional writer, you know, if you are dedicating your, your life and your time to writing or to learning about writing, what is more frustrating than not being able to do it when… that's what you've come there for. That's what you're there for. You know, and, and I think… the advice [that] I mentioned earlier that I give to students about writer's block, you know, it sometimes works, but sometimes… if, you know, a student is just suffering grief, or… [is] just not very well, sometimes you do just need to give yourself a bit of time to, sort of, heal and regroup. And I think it's really, what I sometimes say to students is that you need to be brutal with your writing, but gentle with yourself, because they are two different things. You need to be able to, you know, yes, kill your darlings and chop off bits that aren’t working and not let any attachments that you have to this nice sentence or whatever hold you back. But you yourself are not a piece of writing. You can't chop off bits that don't work just because you don't like them. And you can't just get past the bits that you don't like. You need to be patient. And yeah, sometimes that just takes time.

**Nelima Begum** 1:01:38

Of course, and it relates really nicely to the point of, you know, separating yourself from your work and not allowing pieces of yourself to be chipped away at, just because that is, you know, something that you do with your writing.

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 1:01:54

Absolutely. You know, you have to be, you have to treat yourself differently from how you treat your work. And it's funny, because I think sometimes people think about writing as therapeutic, which I kind of understand, in that working through narrative can sometimes help you work through an experience that you've had. But also, I kind of disagree with that. Because writing is, I mean, therapy is difficult enough, right? Like, if you're talking to somebody about your experiences, and you have to properly think about those in depth, then you can't look away, and you have to really examine how you responded to something and what that means and who you are. And, you know, that is difficult in itself. But to think of writing as therapy, I just think it's different. I think writing is such a specific skill, and you're having to think about what you're doing and how well you're doing it and which choices you've made and why you made them and you're having to constantly examine stuff. You know, I think writing requires therapy, I don't think writing is therapy!

**Nelima Begum** 1:02:59

You'll be in therapy! No, but you know what? To a considerable extent, I do agree with that, actually, because therapy, it's not aggressive, but it just sometimes feels like there are moments that are very confrontational within yourself, perhaps not with the therapist, but within yourself. There are things that you have to confront, and there are things that you have to come to terms with and you know, be very—there's a lot of unpacking to do there. And I don't think writing necessarily has to be as confrontational or harsh, so to speak, in some areas.

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 1:03:40

Yeah. Am I about to just contradict myself there? Because With *Here Again Now*, when I was writing the second book, because I'm writing about real, I'm not writing about experience that I've had, but I am writing about real things that happen, you know, I'm writing about masculinity and what it's like to be a man and what it's like to be to have a father or to be a father, you know, I had to really carefully examine all of my thinking to make sure I knew exactly why I was writing everything that I wrote. And I think, well, yeah, I guess that goes back to why I say that writing requires therapy. Because if, you know, writing might not be you, but it is a reflection of how you think or how you were thinking in that moment. And if I had written something that I couldn't stand by, then I wouldn't have been proud of it. And I'm not sure that I would have been able to publish it. So yeah, I think, yeah, I'm gonna double down: I think writing requires therapy.

**Nelima Begum** 1:04:39

There's a lot to think about here. But no, it's really interesting to, kind of, explore more than one perspective, because it's not necessarily, you know, contradicting ourselves or anything, but rather the just broadening [of] perspective, and perhaps just accepting that it's not so linear and that there isn't just one way of looking at it.

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 1:04:57

Absolutely. Absolutely. Writing is not linear. There will be moments when it feels like you're taking one step forward and two steps back. And it just takes time.

**Nelima Begum** 1:05:06

So, to round off this set of questions, I do want to ask what do you wish more people knew about writers and their craft?

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 1:05:18

That's a good question. I think I wish that more people knew that writing is graft. It takes work. I think so often, when we, maybe less now than we used to, but I think sometimes when we think about writers and when we celebrate writers, we think about writing as this thing that… happens in a moment. And it when writing goes well, it's just because the writer is just born brilliant and they just have fantastic ideas. In fact, you know, you do need… to be intellectually curious, I think, to be a writer. I think it's very difficult to be a good writer if you don't read a lot. But I also think that we need to celebrate the graft that goes into it, and also to examine… how only certain sections of society tend to get the opportunity to put that work in and have it recognised and rewarded. You know, I think that, you know, I mentioned earlier Dialogue Books, my publisher, is very passionate about inclusivity. And I think that's important, because, at the end of the day, how many people who come from working class backgrounds get the opportunity to, you know, to write and to be published, and to live in that world? You know, when I started teaching I was teaching in very disadvantaged communities, and, you know, how many of those kids get the opportunity? [How many] even go on to do a level of English, never mind, you know, learning to love reading for pleasure, and then learning to write? I think it's so important that we are examining who it is [who] gets to have that life and tell stories and have those experiences.

**Nelima Begum** 1:07:24

[A] really interesting, thought provoking way to round off. I agree, there does need to be a lot more. I mean, Dialogue are doing brilliantly, but yeah, as you say, there does need to be closer examination or a closer look at, you know, how we are offering those opportunities and how we create them for people who conventionally have not received them thus far.

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 1:07:48

Yeah. And that's something that really requires systemic change.

**Nelima Begum** 1:07:55

Absolutely. So, to finish up the episode, we always ask our guests some quickfire questions. Now, [with ] these just say the first thing that comes to your head, don't think.

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 1:08:08

It’s like therapy!

**Nelima Begum** 1:08:11

This is just an extension of writing therapy. So, firstly, what are you working on at the moment?

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 1:08:18

I'm working on a third level, which I'm really excited about. I'm about a fifth, a quarter, of the way through the first draft. And I can't say too much about it yet, because it's very early days, but it's a very different novel from anything I've written before. But I'm just really excited about it. I'm excited about these characters and their journey because I already know what's gonna happen, I know exactly what's gonna happen. Yeah, I'm just learning a lot because I’m having to research a lot because it's very different, but I'm really enjoying that. So yeah.

**Nelima Begum** 1:08:47

Amazing, nice little preview there. One book that you always find yourself turning back to is—

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 1:08:54

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston. Ah, such a brilliant book! In fact, the idea that I got for the rhyming action, the use of repetition in my second novel, came from *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and the way she, kind of, coming back to this idea of the tree that's blossoming as a sort of symbol of Janie's experiences of growing up and maturing.

**Nelima Begum** 1:09:19

Beautiful. If you weren't writing, what would you be doing?

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 1:09:25

Hmm I guess, well, teaching, you know, which is what I was doing before. But I think if I were to do, I guess if I'd never wanted to be a writer, I guess my other dream would have been something like a songwriter. I'm really interested in, like, how songs are constructed. I'm a little bit musical, but not really, and so there's a lot of that world that is very mysterious to me. And yeah, I'm just really interested in how songs are constructed and what it means to put together a melody and write the lyrics to something and I'm just fascinated by the whole thing. So yeah.

**Nelima Begum** 1:09:57

Lovely. [A] really, really interesting, unique way of exploring a different way of writing itself.

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 1:10:02

Yeah, yeah, I'd love to know more about that.

**Nelima Begum** 1:10:06

Finish the sentence ‘writing blank my life’.

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 1:10:11

Changes. I was gonna say changed, but I'm gonna say changes.

**Nelima Begum** 1:10:15

So it's ongoing?

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 1:10:16

Yeah. Yeah. It feels like an ongoing process of constantly shifting things and examining things.

**Nelima Begum** 1:10:23

Great. And finally, what does being a writer mean to you?

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 1:10:31

Being a writer, to me means work, luck, opportunity.

**Nelima Begum** 1:10:39

Fantastic way to round off. Okay, this has been a fantastic conversation. It's been brilliant and thought provoking and beautiful, and it's just such a treasure of a conversation to have had with you. Thank you so much for joining us.

**Okechukwu Nzelu** 1:10:54

Thank you so much for having me. I've really enjoyed this. Thank you.