Being a Writer Podcast—Asking the Big Questions with Jeffrey Boakye

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**SPEAKERS**

Nelima Begum, Jeffrey Boakye

**Nelima Begum** 00:00

Welcome to the Being a Writer podcast from The Literary Consultancy. In each podcast we go behind the scenes of the writing process with a special guest and get to the heart of what it means to be a writer today. Being a Writer is a unique programme of support for writers that prioritises literary creativity wellbeing an emotional resilience.

In this episode of The Being a Writer podcast, we're joined by author, broadcaster, educator and journalist Jeffrey Boakye to explore the topic of asking big questions. Jeffrey walks us through his writing career, from being an English teacher of 15 years to diving into writing books of his own. We discuss his love of literature from early on, how teaching has informed much of his work and the bigger questions that he has sought to answer throughout his writing journey, signifying pivotal moments in his life and helping him to navigate his identity while contextualising the world around him. Jeffrey also shares how every person has a story, and how to ask the big questions that help them surface.

Hi, Jeffrey, welcome to the Being a Writer podcast. How’re you doing today?

**Jeffrey Boakye** 01:09

You know what? I'm doing really, really well. And thank you for inviting me on. This is a real privilege, so yeah, cheers. Cheers for the invitation!

**Nelima Begum** 01:17

The privilege is all ours. Honestly, when I was researching you as an author and the broader topic and how it all fits together, I was just in awe; just thinking, You know what, this guy is so cool. We need to have him on here. We need our listeners to, like, get some key insights from him too… it makes for a really great episode. So, we really appreciate your time.

**Jeffrey Boakye** 01:36

Ah, fantastic.

**Nelima Begum** 01:38

Right, let's get stuck in. Jeffrey, you're a man of many talents. You're an author, broadcaster, educator and the occasional journalist. You also offer training, consultancy and talks as well. But take us back to the start of your relationship with words and literature. What was it about writing that, kind of, lit up a spark?

**Jeffrey Boakye** 01:57

Yeah, I feel like one of the earliest, actually one of the earliest memories I have in terms of writing was copying a picture book, which I did because I had to write a story and I wanted to impress my teachers. I remember taking a picture book and copying it, but changing the characters, changing a few of the ideas and sort of making it my own, but it was essentially just copying it. And I just remember, the response from my teacher was so positive and warm, and I feel like she must have known that I just copied it because it was one that she read to me, basically. But I feel like having that response from something that I had imagined and turned into my own story and is seeing an adult respond so positively to me, that that was one of the earliest moments I thought, Oh, this writing thing is a great way to connect with the world. So that was one thing. And maybe that's a core—maybe that's a core memory. Who knows, who knows?

**Nelima Begum** 02:59

It might be. It sounds like it could be. I feel like our positive core memories, like the early years especially, when they are filled with that much warmth and feeling—I don't know, I guess accepted and welcomed into a space, those do form really good, core memories for us, especially as children.

**Jeffrey Boakye** 03:16

Yeah, 100%, 100%. And I feel like the flip side of that is that no one ever believes me when I say because I do radio for a living, and I talk to people all the time, and I lecture and so on and so forth, but I have a stutter, and as a child, it was really pronounced. It was something that was quite debilitating at times. And having a stutter is a real problem when you're trying to engage with the world, because it essentially means that you can't communicate as clearly or as articulately as you would like. But at the same time, what it does, is it makes you really, really think hard about how words work, because you're constantly obsessing over the fact that you can't use words fluently. And that, in a way, it pushed me to become a real thinker of language, or a writer, because I was always thinking about how words worked and how they connected and how to shape them. And also reading was something that I could do fluently. I've been lucky enough to be a fluent reader from a very young age. So, in that space of the written word, I could really get into communication in a way that I couldn't do verbally. So writing was naturally going to become an outlet for me to express myself in a way that I couldn't do so well verbally. It’s deep, isn't it?

**Nelima Begum** 04:35

It's very deep. And also such a great answer, too. I think it sounds like you, kind of, were able to explore your relationship with words not just from a creative perspective, but also from a very, like, technical one, too, in that you were, I guess, figuring out sentence structures and certain ways that things could come across and really diving into meaning, too, just to be measured, I guess, in what you were saying and what you were writing.

**Jeffrey Boakye** 05:00

Absolutely. It's the lovely meeting point between the craft of language, the emotional and social expression of thought and feeling, because that's what writing is. It is very technical. You have to construct sentences, paragraphs, in order to say what you want to say. But it's entirely emotive and intellectual at the same time, it's thoughts and words and feelings, and actually not being able to speak fluently, it forces you to think about the craft a lot. And that's what you do when you write, you think about the craft, because it's not just, you know, random words coming out. It's not just random feelings on a page. It's these little squiggles that are avatars for feelings and thoughts. So that is something which, as a writer, you're always doing. That's the wave you're surfing; you're trying to make these words connect to your audience and actually bring your thoughts and feelings to life. That's the mission, which is actually quite a magical thing. But I was thinking about that a lot as a child, because of this thing that I couldn't do.

**Nelima Begum** 06:11

And I think, you know, you're saying that there were times where the stutter was debilitating, but in other ways it sounds like it, maybe, propelled you forward in your actual writing career, or started it.

**Jeffrey Boakye** 06:26

Yeah, definitely, definitely. It made me read a lot. I was always… I was always a big reader. And at the same time, because I'm generally a sociable person, I like connecting with people, I like the energy of people. Some people can't stand being around other people, but I was a teacher for 15 years. If you hate people, there's no way you can teach.

**Nelima Begum** 06:50

Especially young people.

**Jeffrey Boakye** 06:52

Oh yeah, it's a total headache unless you enjoy the energy of other human beings. So having that thing, where I wanted to be in and around people, but at the same time I was, kind of, in my own head of words. It's an interesting space. And I feel like my next, what is it, my next novel for kids, my first novel for young readers, actually, my first novel full stop, *Kofi and the Rap Battle Summer*, there's a character called Kelvin, who has a stutter. But he's an amazing writer, and his superpower is his ability to manipulate words. And that's definitely drawing from my personal biography there. You know, he's a very understated character, very introverted, but he's got this thing that comes out of him through language. So yeah, I can sort of see how all of these different elements have led to where I'm at now.

**Nelima Begum** 07:46

Brilliant. I mean, it's connecting the dots as you look back at its finest, really. So, tell me about your earliest memories with books. What did you like to read when you were growing up, because you said you became an avid reader quite early on?

**Jeffrey Boakye** 08:00

Yeah, I was very lucky that there were books just lying around at home a lot. My dad's always been a big reader, and he just had books lying around, so I just remember picking books up and just flicking through them, even before I could read fluently. And then it really, through my dad—my mom was always pushing at school and she was making sure that I read a lot—but my dad would take me to the library, physically. And I remember getting my library card, which was, back in the day, an actual card, you know, a piece of cardboard, and you'd get two books. And then when you got a bit older they’d let you have three books, and this was a big deal. That, kind of, culture of being around literature was something that I grew into, and I really valued it. I also had two older sisters and they were reading stuff that wasn't aimed at me, but I’d just pick it up anyway. So when they were reading, I don't know Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys I would read Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys. When they finished with Judy Blume books I would read Judy Blume books.

**Nelima Begum** 09:00

I love Judy Blume!

**Jeffrey Boakye** 09:02

Yeah, who doesn't love Judy Blume?

**Nelima Begum** 09:05

Honestly, who didn't grow up with Judy Blume?

**Jeffrey Boakye** 09:07

I’m telling you! Massive, like a real cultural lynchpin.

**Nelima Begum** 09:14

But do you know what, I have four older siblings, and [what] I love… about being the youngest is that you get to live vicariously through your siblings in so many ways. And you kind of have the upper hand where books, music, movies, all of that is concerned; You're like the cool kid because you get that access before anyone else.

**Jeffrey Boakye** 09:33

Yeah, exactly. You're the baby too? I didn't realise that!

**Nelima Begum** 09:36

I am the baby too, and I love it because I feel like, you know, you're always two steps ahead of the curve, almost, when you have older siblings and they've got great taste and they're there to, kind of, like, guide you and tell you, like, no, this is really good. You should get into this.

**Jeffrey Boakye** 09:48

It's so true. I mean—

**Nelima Begum** 09:51

It’s such an enriching experience when you're growing up as well.

**Jeffrey Boakye** 09:54

It is, and you know what, like, a lot of what I've written about in terms of non-fiction, delving into big ideas, ideologies, you know, social critique, a lot of that curriculum started with exposure to popular culture through my older sisters. So, kind of, exploring music or different genres and hip hop, or exploring what's been called the Black Atlantic—this connection between the UK, the US, parts of the Caribbean and black culture, as explored, like, through these channels. I was doing a lot of that through my sisters, because they were a generational half-step older than me, living these realities, and I was watching it and then being immersed in them way earlier than a lot of my peers were. And a lot of work has now… fed into what I do now with my critical writing, my essay writing, a lot of the stuff that I do when I visit places to, kind of, talk and do training, it kind of started there, you know?

**Nelima Begum** 10:53

It's so cool. And I always say older siblings are, like, basically that middle ground. So sometimes there are things where maybe you can't necessarily talk to your parents or your parents might not get it, but your siblings, kind of, bear that water between you and your parents, so they take the best of both and make it easier for you to, kind of, live through.

**Jeffrey Boakye** 11:12

Yeah, yeah.

**Nelima Begum** 11:13

They basically fuse the culture of your parents into the Western life, you know, the Western environment that you're growing up in.

**Jeffrey Boakye** 11:20

Right, right.

**Nelima Begum** 11:21

And it’s so much better; so multifaceted.

**Jeffrey Boakye** 11:23

You know what, that's a, that's a really big, big idea, which really hasn’t been explored much. Because when you've got, you know, you’re the child of an immigrant family, and your parents are speaking a second language and living in a country that they weren't born in, but your older siblings are the first of that new generation. You're absolutely right. There's a very essential, sort of, bridging that those kids have to do. They have to navigate spaces that their parents never had to navigate, like the education system, for example, so then the younger siblings and the next generation have got this foundation somewhat, you know? This is why the older siblings always think they're right, as well… no matter how old you are. I'm like 40, and they still tell me that they’re right about everything, yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Nelima Begum** 12:18

I know best, I've been there and I've done it and I've got it ready for you. My siblings came to all my, they, like, came to my parents’ evenings and stuff growing up, because they just got it a lot better than my parents did sometimes. But yeah, older siblings, unsung heroes, honestly.

**Jeffrey Boakye** 12:33

Unsung heroes. Exactly, exactly.

**Nelima Begum** 12:38

So, you mentioned that you, you know, started as a teacher, you've been a teacher for 15 years. Did your work with young people inform or inspire your journey towards becoming a writer in any way?

**Jeffrey Boakye** 12:49

Oh, absolutely. Because the thing about teaching is that it's all about relationships, right? Relationships with people, obviously, because you spend years of your life just living with groups of young people, and you grow with them. So those relationships are vital. But it's also about relationships with the world, and relationships with ideas. And that's a crucial part of the teaching, sort of, triangle, you know—student, teacher, text, and text is the world around you. When you are in teaching, you're constantly pushing and pulling at conversations that the world is having around you, at ideas that have been presented to you, at tensions or frictions, especially when you teach literature, right? And so, as a teacher, I'm doing this thing where I'm asking questions, I'm provoking, I'm listening, I'm responding. And these are all the same energies that I feel I'm using when I'm writing, because writing is often making sense of the world around you, or trying to express something of a perspective that you have. And so, in a weird sort of way, it kind of comes from the same engine. And the other thing is that, also, teaching is all about, kind of, connecting with this audience of people who are exploring an idea or exploring a skill. And when you're writing, it's all about the connection with the audience, like, I write for people to read. That's why my writing tends to be fairly commercial. It's not because I'm grabbing money. Because, you know, it's quite hard to make a living of writing. I’m speaking to real people, and I'm very aware that these are people who have lives and I want to make sure that I can connect with them. And when you're teaching, you have to connect with the people in the room. You can't be in your own head. So yeah, I feel like they actually complement each other really well.

**Nelima Begum** 14:49

Yeah, and I guess in both capacities it's a conversation with someone, or people, a group of people.

**Jeffrey Boakye** 14:57

Yeah. 100%. And that conversation is—I've gone deep, actually, into what even is a conversation, because you need, to be in conversation with someone, you need to, you know, respect them enough to actually want to engage with them. You have to listen as much as you talk. You have to have core values that you know that you want to express. You have to be willing to engage an element of risk, too, because you might say something that isn't received in the way you wanted, and you might hear something that might make you bristle slightly. So, this idea of being in conversation with the world around you, that's what writing is, you know? When you finish that manuscript and you put it into the world, you [will have] deposited something that is going to be not just, kind of, set in stone forever, but it's going to be part of a wider conversation.

**Nelima Begum** 15:47

As part of your legacy, it's a conversation starter; it's people getting to know you and your thought process and what you're putting out for them to engage with as well.

**Jeffrey Boakye** 15:57

Yeah, definitely. There's a vulnerability to it, which I like. I sort of lean into the vulnerability of being in conversation, because when you start talking to someone, you don't really know how it's gonna go, you don't really know where it's gonna end up, you're just hoping you can reach some level of synthesis. So it's very optimistic, but you put yourself out there. And it's the same with any piece of writing. I feel like every book that I've worked on, there's that slight fluttering of the heartbeat when you realise that okay, this is me exposing what I think about this, my feelings, my truth, and I'm going to put it into the world and I can't control how it's received. And that's the end of that. So why do I do it? It’s because it forces me to cut back to the true core honesty, and I like that; I like being out on the precipice, because it makes me be as honest as I can, which I feel like is a healthy place to be.

**Nelima Begum** 16:51

That’s an incredibly interesting take on things, and also just, you know, your point about vulnerability, you kind of welcoming it and opening up to it and taking it in your stride I think is very cool, because it's something that, you know, could otherwise make writers very nervous—to, kind of, put themselves out there in that way.

**Jeffrey Boakye** 17:07

Yeah, exactly. I mean, you have to… expose something of your core self when you bring art into the world. And sometimes writing is seen as something which is very controlled and cerebral, intellectual, sometimes very academic if you get into non-fiction, but all that is, it's all just armour to protect the real, you know, the raw person who is probably quite insecure and nervous. So I like stripping away the armour. I'm not trying to be, you know, impressively intellectual, or I'm not trying to show off my writerlyness. Sometimes it's just about, can I show my true self because I want to connect with the world? And that's what people respond to. We love art that is, you know, human.

**Nelima Begum** 17:59

Relatable.

**Jeffrey Boakye** 18:00

Yeah, relatable. 100%. 100%.

**Nelima Begum** 18:03

It brings me very nicely onto the next question, because last year, you wrote a piece for The Guardian about books on the English school curriculum being, you know, dominated by the classics—things written by white men. I remember reading that last year and just thinking, Oh my God, this is so true. Where was this, kind of, viewpoint, seven, eight years ago when I was studying? And this is something I've felt for a while, so it'd be really interesting to, kind of, explore this a little bit further, especially since you've taught these very books to students for a long time. Can we talk about, I guess, the feeling this creates for students who maybe don't identify with these writers at all? Because, you know, we briefly just touched on there, how it's nice to relate to things; to find things authentic, find a connection with them.

**Jeffrey Boakye** 18:51

Yes, yes, absolutely. It's about dominant narratives, largely. It's about who gets to decide where influence comes from. So, the whole ‘dead white men’ curriculum, which is part of the English canon, like the English literature canon, it's not accidental. It’s because these are perspectives that are historically dominant. That's why their stories and narratives are iterated and reiterated to successive generations. Once you have that in your head, it very quickly becomes problematic because you're marginalising other perspectives, because there are many people, many different identities, that fall outside of those parameters, you know? And it's a long list: it's race, it's ethnicity, it's sexuality, it's disability, it's class, it's, it's religious beliefs, it's generational, it's age. There's a long list of things that decentre someone. So, the curriculum is essentially speaking to its own power. That's the issue. That's really the issue. And when you are invited as a young person to become well-versed in these narratives from these perspectives in this canon, which itself has a context, you're being invited into accepted realms of power. So I got all the way through my career as a student, all the way to university and beyond, with a very limited scope of what literature is and how humanity has been explored from different perspectives. And it was fine for me, but the problem is, is that it's so limiting. So it's not just about making sort of, like, tokenistic diversity… it's not about that. It's about understanding that there's a breadth of perspective, which is incredibly enriching for all humans, and that the curriculum is a space to dip into all of these rivers. And actually, there isn't enough time to dip into so many rivers, you know? You're at school for years, five years of secondary school is a long time. So that's what I’ve really got to say about that, yeah.

**Nelima Begum** 21:10

No, I completely agree with you. And I went through my secondary school and also just A levels as well reading these classics. I can't tell you how many times I had to read Chaucer, and I hated it but I had to live and breathe it ‘til I passed those exams and stuff. Then I got to SOAS and the curriculum was so diverse, it was honestly just mind-blowing—to suddenly read literature from Africa, from South Asia from the East Asia, the Middle East was incredible. Where was this for the last seven years?

**Jeffrey Boakye** 21:38

Exactly. And what frustrates me as well is that you very quickly get into conversations where people say yes, but we're looking for these universal truths, and the texts that have survived in the canon express universality. But you can find universal truths in lots of specific identity, like, perspectives. You know, you can find universality in *Things Fall Apart*, in *The Colour Purple*, you know, in whatever, like, you can go all over the world and just keep on looking. So, it's… a frustration, and also it stops people from exploring, which I think is the big tragedy, because, as a teacher, when I started to explore ‘other’ perspectives, that's when my teaching just exploded into all sorts of exciting new directions.

**Nelima Begum** 22:38

That’s so cool. And I'm glad you mentioned *Things Fall Apart*, because it's my favourite book of all time. I have to read it once a year, every year. It's just, it's the best. I love it.

**Jeffrey Boakye** 22:48

Look at that! There are no accidents in the universe, there you go!

**Nelima Begum** 22:52

Great! So, the topic of this podcast is all about asking big questions. What, kind of, big questions did you have that, kind of, propelled you to start writing yourself? Because obviously you've been reading and teaching, [so] what were you trying to find answers to?

**Jeffrey Boakye** 23:07

Great, that is a big question! That's something which I only really can start to make sense of now, because the initial motivation, so say, I've been writing a blog for like years, and I've got notebooks full of things that I've written—short stories, poetry, essays (I've always liked writing essays just for fun), and then the first book was like this selection of essays about popular culture and music focusing on grime as a genre, so it's like Black British culture. And in hindsight, you know, if I'm thinking what are the questions I'm trying to answer, it’s actually trying to make sense of identity. And actually focusing on the parts of my identity that I've been told are marginalised, you know? So really, I'm asking big questions about what does it mean to be marginalised by your race? You know, this construct, which has very real ramifications. What does it mean to live in a paradigm of white supremacy, when you are not racialised as white? These are the biggest questions that I'm asking, because that's the thread that runs throughout a lot of my work. And then through answering those questions, you get to explore lots of different situations and contexts in different ways. And some of it is very celebratory, some of it’s incredibly pointed, some of it’s provocative, some of it is actually journalistic, you know, so I think that's the big question: what does it mean to be marginalised, quote-unquote,

**Nelima Begum** 24:47

Interesting. And it's so, you know, it's really thought provoking that it's these questions that help you navigate your identity and your place in everything.

**Jeffrey Boakye** 25:00

Yeah, yeah, yeah. That's the real journey, you know—it's about making sense of one's self. And along the way you gather insights. And I think that's something which they don't really tell you at school—[that] you go through life and you're constantly gathering insights, and part of the game, to me, is knowing when you've got a valuable insight, because it's so valuable when you think you've learned something about the world, from your unique perspective, and then you can craft it into an idea and just keep hold of it. Part of me writes books because I want to, sort of, consolidate my insights, my learning, and take a pause for breath, to craft it into something solid, and then keep on learning. And each one of these moments tends to become the new project, be it a book, or it could be something else. But yeah, for me, it tends to be books.

**Nelima Begum** 26:02

That's really interesting, because to me, what you've just said sounds like it has a bit of a journaling quality to it. So, it's your thoughts, your feelings, your self-discovery, and the product of it is a book that you've poured all your insights and learnings into for other people to take the same value from as well.

**Jeffrey Boakye** 26:20

Yeah, 100%. Like, listen, I know full well that the process of writing a book or manuscript is partly putting myself under pressure to marshal my thoughts and feelings into something which I think yeah, that is what I believe. It's partly to just log it, you know, like, I'm very satisfied by a body of work. It's the best of me and the worst of me. I like having the remnants of my life organised in artefacts that I can return to. So the journey of writing books is largely that, and if you read everything that I've written from, you know, from 2016 to now, there's a journey in there. There's an actual journey of discovery, I'm not just saying what I think and then telling you more of what I think. I'm reporting back on the embers of my life, as I've grown, you know, and I feel like some of that is really valuable,

**Nelima Begum** 27:22

What a beautiful legacy to have, as well. To have all these books that you've written that, you know, track your journey throughout life, and tell your readers a little piece about you at any given time when you were writing.

**Jeffrey Boakye** 27:35

I think so, yeah. It's a gift to myself. And it's what I tell young audiences all the time—that the world needs your story. It's not just a case of it's a nice thing to have and it can make you some money. It's like, no, the world needs your perspective, so it's a gift to the world. And it might not be writing books. I just happen to write books, but it could be any number of ways you can express yourself. And the world will benefit from your effort in shaping that, like, trust me. And I always tell audiences that. Always.

**Nelima Begum** 28:12

I'm feeling very inspired to just start writing a novel right now.

**Jeffrey Boakye** 28:15

I'm telling you! Your story, it's going to be so interesting, first of all, because everyone's story is interesting, and it's going to be so useful because it's another perspective. Imagine an object hanging in the air and you've only got one perspective on that object. You don't know what that object is. Imagine infinite perspectives of that object from inside from outside from far away. Suddenly, you've got this understanding. And that's surely what we need to be doing right?

**Nelima Begum** 28:45

Absolutely. I like this. This is deep. We're going good.

**Jeffrey Boakye** 28:49

Yeah, I'm not messing about with you people.

**Nelima Begum** 28:54

So you started writing *Hold Tight* in 2015, almost 10 years ago now. What inspired that story? What was the question that made you put pen to paper for that book in particular?

**Jeffrey Boakye** 29:06

Grime music, right? Grime music was, sort of, 2003 was roughly the birth of grime, but it was starting to really see a renaissance in 2014-15. And it was hitting the mainstream in a way that I was like, wow, how can this very, very, kind of, subgenre of black music be hitting the mainstream? You started to hear names like Stormzy, like, becoming—

**Nelima Begum** 29:33

Yes, and you had, like, Channel U and stuff, yeah, that renaissance did happen around then. I remember being at school when all of that was coming up. It was a cultural movement.

**Jeffrey Boakye** 29:45

Oh, huge. One of the, if not the biggest cultural exports to come out of the UK in recent times, because it's spawned an entire ecosystem. So when that was happening, I thought, Hang on a second. All these journalists are writing about grime like it's this new thing, but it's got a legacy. And it's got roots that go into the black diaspora, like deep roots in various directions. And I thought, Who's writing about this? Who's documenting where it comes from? Because I understood grime before had a name, because I understood the legacy of UK garage, jungle, dancehall culture, reggae, protest music, you know, all the different things that fed into it. So I thought, I need to write something about this genre from my perspective as someone that has grown up with black music as a geriatric millennial (as I am). And so then I sort of just wrote these essays about individual songs, and I just thought, Okay, if I write about enough songs, and these essays like 1000, word each, that might be like, 70 80,000 words, and I think that's got to be the size of the book. And that was it.

**Nelima Begum** 30:52

Oh, that's so cool. That's really cool. What was… the process, the transition from teacher to author in that capacity? Like, can you… pull back the curtain on your process for that [and] the challenges of it as well?

**Jeffrey Boakye** 31:09

Yeah. Very, very long and slow overlap of both professions. So, I was full time teaching, and stepping into writing for many, many years, so there was no, kind of, like, now I'm not going to teach, I'm not going to be a teacher anymore, let me focus on writing. I was just doing both. And it was also at a time when my wife and I started our family. And it was partly, I think the lack of time was the motivating factor, because I thought, you know what, if I'm not going to have any time, I need to say what I want to say, and I'm going to use my time, whatever little time I have, to, you know, to create. So I was very much teaching and writing at the same time. But what's great about that is, it's like what stand-up comedians always say, that you can't have material without life, right? Writing is feeding off the embers of your life. So my life as a teacher, as a father, was fuelling my thoughts as a writer, and that was something which I feel I needed, actually. So if you read, like, *Black, Listed*, which is my second book, a lot of that is, kind of, you can tell that I'm living the life of a father and a teacher at the same time. And I'm using these insights to fuel that particular project. So yes, sometimes writing is, you don't need to clear the decks, it can happen in the busyness of your existing life. To me, because I always keep busy, I'm always writing when I have the least time to write. If that makes any sense.

**Nelima Begum** 32:57

That's really interesting, because I know that one approach to writing is, like, no, you gotta give writing all or nothing, you need to carve out time and space for a specifically. It's really interesting, and also just quite reassuring, to hear you say that, you know, life happens and your writing happens alongside it, you know, they're not mutually exclusive, there's overlap. And sometimes you need that overlap, because, as you said, your life's experiences inform your work.

**Jeffrey Boakye** 33:20

Yes. And the skill, I suppose, if you want to call it that, is in knowing where your influences are coming from, and knowing where you're drawing your energy from, and having a focus. So sometimes, when I'm deep in the middle of a project, I might be watching a Netflix series every night, but as I'm watching that Netflix series, I'm drawing from it things about characterisation or structure, you know, or thinking about how the story is progressing and things like that. So sometimes… it's not about, like, clearing the decks; it's about giving yourself the focus. So, I'm in a project, what can I draw on from this experience? Kind of like a stand-up comedian. I love stand-up comedy, because they mine their experiences for bigger things. And sometimes these things are so minute, like, you know, have you ever been in a queue for a barbecue and then it's like some tiny thing, but they draw these interesting life perspectives from it. I like to live my life like that. I'm always on the lookout for, or on the feel-out, for, like, things that can inform my work.

**Nelima Begum** 34:32

Sometimes it is the most mundane things that become really extraordinary when you're telling, like, a wider story, a bigger story, about something.

**Jeffrey Boakye** 34:39

100%, definitely, definitely. There's no such thing as mundane when it comes down to, you know, connecting to your worldview, you know?

**Nelima Begum** 34:48

So being someone who is actively exploring issues like race, masculinity and education through your work, it comes with, you know, I imagine its own set of pressures. How do you deal with things It's like overwhelm and challenge in that sense?

**Jeffrey Boakye** 35:03

Yeah, I feel like it's very important to be gracious to yourself, actually, to be kind to yourself and to make sure that your life, as in your real life, like the connections you have, the friendships, the relationships with your family, that stuff, is sort of, like, paramount, because that's your health, you know? There's no point being so steeped in a project or so steeped in an idea or a conversation, that it's to the detriment of you getting through the week. So I always, always centre, like, my family. I've made, I've structured my life in a way that I get to spend lots of time with my kids. Like, I can drop them off at school and pick them up and stuff if I'm not travelling, which is an amazing privilege, because I couldn't do that when I was teaching. So those things ground you. And then just, like, keeping all those, like, social media, big arguments and debates, keep it at arm's length!

**Nelima Begum** 36:22

Yeah, keep them at bay, they're not important.

**Jeffrey Boakye** 36:24

Yeah, yeah, yeah, you just drown in that kind of stuff. And I've seen people that just get lost in that soup, and it's not good for them. So you know, you've got to know what is your real life, [and] protect that. And, you know, don't lean for the poisoned chalice of notoriety and things like that.

**Nelima Begum** 36:48

Interesting. So you briefly touched on being kind to yourself and taking care of yourself as a writer. The Being a Writer platform is very much focused on wellbeing as much as it is creativity. How do you protect and care for your own wellbeing as a writer?

**Jeffrey Boakye** 37:05

Hmm. I feel like I tend to be very, very kind to myself in terms of working on projects. And what I mean by that is, if it's not working, because I start so many projects, I don't know, you can probably tell—

**Nelima Begum** 37:25

I was gonna say, it sounds like you've got so many things on the go at the same time.

**Jeffrey Boakye** 37:29

Yeah. And if you knew how many things I started, and I don't just mean started, like, written down an idea. I mean, like, you know, 10,000 words, 20,000 words.

**Nelima Begum** 37:39

You’re right in the thick of it.

**Jeffrey Boakye** 37:41

Yeah, I've started so many projects, most of which you will never see. But it's okay. Because it's all process. Sometimes I don't write for, like, weeks, I'll be just thinking about things and making a few notes here and there. But then when it's go time, it's go time—when the idea is so hot that you can't help but write it, then I'm on. I'll lose sleep over it. But I feel like being kind to yourself means knowing that writing isn't always about words on the page, writing isn’t always about completion. Writing is oftentimes thinking and feeling. That's all writing. Walking around and living your life is writing, you know? Reflecting quietly on your own, that's all writing too. That helps with my wellbeing quite a lot. And also doing other things that aren't writing. Just, you know, you can't obsess over one thing, have a breadth of things you like to do.

**Nelima Begum** 38:41

Spending time with loved ones. Reading other things, watching something on TV, listening to music, all, like, feeds into this creative process.

**Jeffrey Boakye** 38:51

Fully, fully. So that that helps quite a lot. Yeah.

**Nelima Begum** 38:55

Interesting. I'm sure there are many writers out there who have, you know, these big questions… that they'd like to explore their work, and sometimes that comes with things like impostor syndrome, or just not feeling like they're the one to tell the story. What would you tell those people? Where can they start?

**Jeffrey Boakye** 39:14

I feel like some of the best advice that I've ever been given has come from various editors. It's always the same advice, actually, because I've written a lot of non-fiction. That's mainly what I write, now I’ve started writing fiction for younger readers. But they always said, ‘It's not about how clever you are. It's not about how strong your argument is and how much you can back things up with statistics and evidence. It's your story. That's what people are interested in, and that's what people connect to: what is your story?’ And ultimately, once you cut away everything else, right, you're trying to write a best-selling crime thriller, whatever, you're trying to write the next polemic about the issue that everyone's talking about, whatever, if you cut away that those aims, what is your story? That is what people are going to connect with. Who are you, and what is your perspective? And that is right there in front of you, you don't need to find that you just need to look at it, right? So that, I feel, is that some of the best advice I've ever been given because that's something which can help you. You can lean on that. You can always lean on *your* narrative. What has got you to where you are so far? What are your insights? What are the tensions or frustrations that you have felt due to your identity? How does the world see you, and how do you respond to the world? And that story is essentially what people want from you. And what will give the strongest connection, which is what you want. And essentially, like, that's what people buy into, to use capitalistic language. So yeah, I feel like that's, that's always a great place to go if you're getting lost in the soup a little bit—like, what is my story?

**Nelima Begum** 41:05

That's such an interesting set of, like, guiding principles to have as you’re writing. Thank you for sharing that. Does answering those big questions, kind of, get easier with time? Because you've been writing for a while now? Does it always feel as intimidating and challenging as the first time?

**Jeffrey Boakye** 41:26

Oh what, you mean starting a new project?

**Nelima Begum** 41:28

Yeah starting a new project, going into, like, exploring a different topic? So, you know, you've written non-fiction, now you write for younger readers. What's that like?

**Jeffrey Boakye** 41:37

Yeah, I feel like you have, there's a balance because I have insights that get stronger. And I bolster them as I go forward. And that gives me confidence. Because I feel like I road-test an idea, and I confirm it, and I shore it up, and I, kind of, know what I want to say. So, books that have a thread, if I'm talking about race and identity, there are certain things that I think, No, this is the way things are [and] I'm pretty confident there. But then, at the same time, you'll be met with new questions, with new situations, new scenarios that are destabilising, so you're entering into this, kind of, ignorant space, not as a pejorative but literally ignorant where you don't know. And that in itself is incredibly empowering, because then you have to humble yourself and think, I don't know certain things, but I'm going to explore them. And that exploration can be your whole project. Some people feel like they have to know what they're going to say and then write it. No, no, sometimes the writing *is* the thing; the process of exploring *is* what the writing is going to be, and you may or may not reach conclusions along the way. So, some of my, you know, my last book for adults, *I Heard What You Said*, about my time spent as a black teacher in a majority white system, was very exploratory. I was on a journey. And even as I was writing it, I didn't know what my conclusions were, and it was only as I kept on writing, 90,000 words, 110,000 words, I was like, okay, I can see now where this is going. But it was the process that was interesting, and that's what’s on the page.

**Nelima Begum** 43:33

That's so interesting, to look at it in that way. Because yeah, it is the journey and the process that becomes the centrepiece sometimes, it's not necessarily concluding with one really solid linear answer.

**Jeffrey Boakye** 43:46

Yeah, exactly, exactly. Which is why a lot of writers get out of the idea quickly. There's a long lead-in and then they get out of the chapter, like in one sentence, because the conclusion isn't sure; it isn’t definite. So it's like, right we’re out.

**Nelima Begum** 44:07

What's been the biggest change or development in your work or in you as a writer since you first began? Because we're talking about journeys and processes, have you noticed things in yourself as time has gone on? Big changes, perhaps, or developments that, you know, previously you thought, I’ve never really noticed this about me or my work before?

**Jeffrey Boakye** 44:28

Yeah, lots. I love the fact that, you know… the first book that you write, and you can actually tell when someone's written their first book, is so full of freewheeling joy… it's like a child cartwheeling down a hill on a sunny day. That is what people's first book always feels like. Like, check—it's a really fun game, read someone's first book. It's just, you know, exuberant, it's freewheeling, it's slightly out of control, it's all the energy and ideas of a lifetime poured into one vessel. And it's like wow, you know, *Hold Tight* is absolutely that. If you read *Hold Tight*, that is me just doing pirouettes. And it's got that energy. It’s brilliant. As you go on, that is not the game. Like, you have to find that energy. The playfulness is always there. *Black, Listed* for me was some of that, but it was also me making a decision to, like, you know, nightfall has come, I still want to go on this journey, can’t cartwheel down the hill, right now, I'm in the forest—

**Nelima Begum** 45:45

Need to proceed with caution.

**Jeffrey Boakye** 45:47

Yeah, proceed with caution, I'm making something heavy here. There's a level of craft to it, and so the tone changes. There's a maturity. And then you, sort of, realise that you can get quite, you know, it can feel more mature, more grounded, but at the same time, the joy of writing, you can't lose that. So a lot of my work now is, like, I have to tap into the joy of writing, especially when you're dealing with heavy topics like institutional racism. You know, you’re talking about white supremacy, you talk about identity politics, and all the issues that comes with social justice. It can be quite heavy, but you have to find the joy. Because the joy is, like, what's life without joy? So I feel that that's what I've noticed in myself, I've become a lot more aware of those tensions. And I, sort of, make sure that I tap into the joy, and I'm aware when I'm getting into the more, like, heavier stuff. So maybe I'm more controlled, I don't know.

**Nelima Begum** 46:54

Very cool.

**Jeffrey Boakye** 46:55

Interesting.

**Nelima Begum** 46:56

Yeah, really interesting. I'm loving the depth of these answers! They're just such a pleasure to listen to, I, like, catch myself at the end of each answer thinking, Oh, wait, I need to ask the next question, because I just get lost in the response. But it's great. To round off this set of longer questions, what are you trying to answer right now at this point in your life? What's the big question that's floating about at present?

**Jeffrey Boakye** 47:20

That is a great, that is a great question. I think the big question is, what is the change I want to see? Yeah, that's the question that I need to answer. Because I could write, I could write another five books that pose questions or that reflect on things or that offer provocations. I could do that for the rest of my life. But one day, at some point, I need to answer that question—what is it that I want to see happen? And then what can I do to push in that direction? So, you know, that's kind of what some of my recent projects that I've been trying to birth, to use that phrase, that's kind of what I've been pushing into, like, what is next? How can we get there? And what do I need to do to make that how happen, you know?

**Nelima Begum** 48:20

Interesting, and such a great way to round off, thank you. We're gonna move into some quickfire questions now. So, for these ones, you don't have to be deep if you don't want to know, [just say] the first thing that comes into your head. What are you reading at the moment?

**Jeffrey Boakye** 48:36

Right now I'm reading a proof copy of *This Thread of Gold* by Catherine Joy White, which is being published by Dialogue Books. Yeah, it’s lovely. It's about—

**Nelima Begum** 48:50

They have the best lists, honestly, their books are just fantastic. Such great work.

**Jeffrey Boakye** 48:56

Absolutely, absolutely. Big up Sharmaine Lovegrove, of course.

**Nelima Begum** 49:00

She is a champ. She's a TLC fave, honestly.

**Jeffrey Boakye** 49:04

Yeah, and she picked up *Black, Listed*, so [a] huge part of my own personal narrative in writing. So yeah, *This Thread of Gold* is all about revolutionary women in the realm of activism, and the history of, like, black women's resistance, which is something which isn't often talked about. So yeah, I’m reading that at the moment.

**Nelima Begum** 49:25

Fantastic. If it's not top secret, can you tell us what you're currently writing? I know you’ve got loads going on, 10,000 words per project so you're deep!

**Jeffrey Boakye** 49:37

Yeah, yeah, yeah, I definitely can't tell you about what I'm currently in, in, in, I definitely can't. There's one that's properly top secret, but I'm just finishing up the edits on the sequel to *Kofi and the Rap Battle Summer*, which is *Kofi and the Secret Radio Station*. And I'm very excited about that because I want to write a series of these books about Kofi growing up. And number two is, I'm so happy with how it's come out, I can't wait for the first one to come out, so that people can get that and then get into the second one. So, yeah, I'm just finishing that up. And it's, yeah, it's very exciting to me.

**Nelima Begum** 50:18

We're excited to see it too! If you had to pick an album to be the soundtrack to your life, what would it be?

**Jeffrey Boakye** 50:31

An Album to soundtrack! I just totally lose it. It would have to be something UK-based; it would have to be something—the soundtrack to my life is tricky because there’re lots of albums that give the soundtrack to where I grew up, and that's, kind of, like, good. So, like, something like *Boy in da Corner* by Dizzee Rascal tells a story of, kind of, the London that I grew up in and the energy of it, but it's not *my* life. It's not my life, you know?

**Nelima Begum** 50:57

It's nostalgic. It defines a period of your life, not necessarily you.

**Jeffrey Boakye** 51:02

Yeah, exactly, you’re exactly right. So, tricky one. An album, oh, I dunno! Come back to me on that one.

**Nelima Begum** 51:09

I'm am. I’m gonna email you about that later. What's the best piece of writing advice you've ever received? You kind of touched on it earlier, but if there's anything different, or anything else, feel free to drop it in.

**Jeffrey Boakye** 51:21

Yeah. I feel like some of the best advice I've ever been given is every character, every protagonist, wants something, and knowing what that want is, what that driving motivation is, is crucial, because it just completely dictates how they're going to act. And even in non-fiction, you've got to make sure that you understand that *you* *are* the protagonist. So what do you want?

**Nelima Begum** 51:50

Great, it’s a pretty straightforward question to ask.

**Jeffrey Boakye** 51:53

Yeah, exactly. What do you want? Because understanding that will make the writing easier.

**Nelima Begum** 51:58

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

**Jeffrey Boakye** 52:03

Oh, wow. It's the manifestation of, like, living. That's what it means to me personally. Yeah. Yeah.

**Nelima Begum** 52:18

A lovely way to round off. Jeffrey, thank you so much for your time on this episode. I'm so grateful that we, you know, we got to sit down and speak with you. I've learned so much from this conversation, and I know our listeners will too, so thank you so much for your time. You're an absolute superstar.

**Jeffrey Boakye** 52:31

Ah, no, listen, thank you. And thank you again for making the time to make this conversation happen. It really does mean everything. So yeah, thank you.

**Nelima Begum** 52:40

Absolute pleasure. Thank you so much.