

Patrice Lawrence

in conversation with Roopa Farooki

Roopa Farooki: We've been walking up the sunny, north side of the Thames and come down into the dark silence of the Royal Literary Fund basement to chat about Patrice's amazing books. I've been wanting to interview Patrice for ages because her books are incredible.

To tell you about Patrice, she started off writing middle grade, with beautiful books full of heart that drew on her Trinidadian heritage and a few years ago, she exploded onto the YA scene with *Orangeboy* which won the YA Book Prize, the Waterstones children's prize, and now with *Indigo Donut* as well, which has also been an amazing prize-winning novel.

And these YA books, they do something completely different. I feel they're game-changing for young adult work. They talk about a contemporary London that is absolutely true to the struggles that certain groups face that I felt hasn't really been represented in fiction beforehand.

So, I think it's appropriate that we're here in a basement in Fleet Street because we're just a stone's throw away from the busy and hectic streets where Patrice's books take their shape.

Patrice, welcome to the basement.

Patrice Lawrence: Thank you. It's a very splendid basement.

RF: I just wanted to ask you a little about where you started your writing journey?

PL: I grew up in quite an unusual family circumstance: my Mum was the youngest of 12 children and the only one who came to the UK to study to be a nurse. Soon after she came, she met my father, she became pregnant, and they split up before I was born. So, my Mum had no family here, a child on the way, no partner, was still training to be a nurse, so I was privately fostered for the first four years in a white working-class family in Brighton.

My foster mom taught me to read, surrounded me with books, I joined the library. I think my head was always full of stories, but I always knew, because of my own background, that there were other types of stories. I just always wrote, and when I went back to live with my Mum, my Mum was with my Italian stepdad, and we used to go to Italy for the whole of the six-week summer holidays. So, I knew there were even more stories! And I think my way of articulating my life was to write about it.

I used to write lots of dubious poems about what was happening in my family's life. I was also a really big, voracious reader as well, so stories were always in my head. Then when I hit secondary school, I had some really good teachers who encouraged me to write but also to read widely.

I read Paul Zindel's *The Pigman* and all the rest of his books (I'm a bit of a completist), then S.E. Hinton books, thanks to Haywards Heath library. I realised that people wrote about young people and teenagers and I think that just stuck in my head.

Then in my twenties, my slightly embarrassing phase, I sent off stories to magazines like *True Romance*, and I am the least romantic person in the world, but I got a couple of those published. So, there was always intermittent things that I would send off and then I'd stop, life would take over, I'd send off stories, stop. I even sent off stories to the then women's erotica publishers, Black Lace.

RF: That's fantastic. So, there is no area of fiction that you haven't explored.

PL: Oh gosh, no. I always say to people, you know, just try any genre. You never know where you are going to get published. And then, when I came back to London, I suddenly realised, in my mid-twenties, that there were so many, many more stories, so many layers of social history. It was all a bit overwhelming at first and I started writing again intermittently, and I only kind of got serious after I had my daughter at the end of 1999, and you kind of realise there are so few stories with young people like our families in them and I found that headspace and time to start writing again.

RF: I want to ask you about that first writing experience. I know that you studied writing and you started off with film and TV, but your first published works were in middle grade, and these are really rich evocative books that open up new cultures and experiences to readers – and also complicated family lives. You weren't afraid to shy away from that; to have children with their father, their mother's away, they've got a stepmother who's pregnant, you're willing to look into all of that. Can I ask how you found your way into those stories?

PL: I think first in terms of family structures, because I've never lived in a traditional family structure. I wanted to write the books of families that I would like to have seen when I was little; to know that I wasn't alone and that other families are relevant and work as well. It was interesting in terms of the first two books which were written for educational publishers. I was lucky to get an agent before you had to send in a whole polished book, because if that was the case I'd still be trying to get an agent!

I met Caroline Sheldon, who is my agent, at an event which was the British Book Awards, I'd been invited there by the Arts Council who'd been running an initiative called Decibel Awards. They had a short story competition open to writers of African, Caribbean, and Asian heritage. I actually wrote a short story with a white

working-class protagonist where I basically semi-plagiarised the life of my then partner, which was so different.

He was eleven months younger than me, but he grew up in Hackney surrounded by people of all different backgrounds. I grew up in Sussex, surrounded predominantly by white communities. So, our lives, our music, our points of reference... he cooked Caribbean food, I cooked shepherd's pie – it was really interesting. Some of the stories that he told me about growing up in the estates in Hackney in the seventies and eighties were really eye-opening to me and I think also influenced my later writing as well.

I met Caroline there and the first ideas for books I put in weren't good enough to send to publishers, so it took a while, and one of the things she gets, in a sense, are proposals by publishers saying, 'Have you got a writer who would be willing to write...?' And one of them was A & C Black who wanted more books that were, as you would say, 'diverse'.

It was interesting with that because I was born in Brighton, but if you're going to pay me to write a story I shall do that. Also, when I got the suggestion of that, I put in a proposal set in Trinidad because I'd recently been visiting my family there. I've always been intrigued in the folktales of Trinidad. I've always found them absolutely fascinating. Also, there's something about the maternal line in my family that can't ride bicycles. I can! I broke that line. I wanted a story that was based a bit on my aunties and my Mum and the stories of Trinidad, but also, you know, what if you are a streetwise boy from London who thinks London's better than Trinidad and you want to show how much better it is to your cousin. I wanted to include all of that in there as well. I really enjoyed writing that book. *Wild Papa Woods*, half of it uses the folktales of Trinidad about Papa Bois, who's the guardian of the woods and changes into a stag to chase people, so a sort of environmental message going on there. The other half is set in Lamu in Kenya and, again, only because I really recently had been on holiday there but also I was really fascinated by the Swahili culture. I've been there a couple of times and just wanted something that represents that amazing island.

RF: Your idea for your first YA book, I understand that came through an Arvon course, is that right?

PL: Yes, it was. Basically, I kept trying to write books for younger children, but I just wasn't able to write a book. I just didn't have the skills to write a full-length book. Good at ideas, good at concepts, great at characters, but to string a plot together to make it work over a book, I just thought, 'Do you know what, I can't do this, so I'm gonna write crime novels because I've always loved crime.'

I thought I'm gonna write a crime novel set in 1940s Trinidad with female protagonists in their 40s. I did all my planning and loads of research, go on a crime-writing course at Arvon to work out how to do it. And then, one of the things that they did was that we all had to take a prompt out of a bag, and they said that because in crime writing, you have to hide a clue, you have to write a paragraph or two and hide that prompt. My prompt was: 'He woke up dreaming of yellow.' What the hell? So abstract, it's like *Apocalypse* and *The Simpsons*. It was like, I have no idea.

And then I thought... there'd been a teachers' strike a couple of weeks before, and being a really responsible parent I had taken my Year 7 daughter to Hyde Park's 'Winter Wonderland'. I suddenly thought: fairgrounds, tokens for fairgrounds. I thought mustard and just imagined a sixteen-year-old boy watching this girl put mustard on a hot dog for him. He hates mustard, but she's way above his league and he likes that girl and he's damn well going to eat that hot dog. And then suddenly that stuff must have all been in my head. I wrote that whole bit of them being in the fairground, going on the same sorts of rides that me and my daughter had looked at, and then because it's crime, you have to raise the ante. So, what if he's got something illegal in his pockets, so that makes it more tense. He's taken a quarter of an ecstasy tablet, so you sense that he's never done that before, and I thought, OK, so there has to be a crime. Get to the end of the chapter – the girl dies.

And I never even thought it was actually going to be a novel. It was just a piece of writing, and then when I wrote that, I thought, I really want to work out what happens next. So, it was totally a surprise to me. And I also didn't know that it was a young adult book. I just thought I was writing a book with a sixteen-year-old protagonist. I didn't know YA existed as a separate category. It was a really interesting process.

RF: Your novels are really celebrated, I think justly so, for this uncompromising dialogue, for the uncompromising themes, you're giving a voice to these teenagers that I think we don't often hear, or we certainly don't hear enough. We're talking about children of colour, children who've been involved by gangs, children from the care system. These were really tough themes. Was it difficult for you to broach them? Was it a mission?

PL: No, it's automatically what I write about. Mainly, before the books were published, I worked in the voluntary sector, for charities, for twenty years. I've worked with families who were going through child protection, did consultations with young people in the care system, work in prisons, and with the families of prisoners.

My own father, even though I never lived with him, he eventually had a breakdown and became an alcoholic, became homeless and was in prison himself. So, a lot of these things have affected our family and I know they affect many, many people's families. I just think it's so easy to stereotype people and all of those people have got fantastic voices. Every school is going to have young people who will have been affected by the care system or by family addiction, or by family imprisonment and I just think it's really important that their stories get told.

I think it's my automatic default to tell those stories. Also, I just listen to young people, they are so funny. I just love the way they drag each other. I just love their vocabulary. I just think they're fantastic to write about.

RF: Do you feel it came organically out of your experiences so everything that you've lived, you could find you could pour into this piece?

PL: Absolutely, and because I think I wasn't doing it for anybody just for myself, I felt quite free to do it. And I think with *Orangeboy*, it took a while to find the story, I knew the character, and I remember writing that first chapter, then I thought I'll write a second chapter, so the mum appeared. Jonathan the boyfriend appeared, then Andre's in supported housing – I have no idea why. Then, Tish, I really wanted to write a fifteen-year-old girl that I wanted to be.

RF: I love Tish. I think she is everyone's dream fifteen-year-old. She is like the best friend you always wished you had.

PL: No spots, wicked hair, everything. So, there was all these elements and it took a while to put them in the right place for the plot. But they were all there and they just came out of nowhere, in a sense.

RF: I guess with these books, they were all in your head from your own experiences. You kind of wove them from your own blood and bone and then suddenly they're out there in the world and then people are looking to you, I guess, as a commentator in some ways about what's going on in society. You have amazing personal stories and these cross-cultural societal references as well.

I mean, do you have any thoughts about that? Do you feel that in some ways that even if you didn't start off perhaps thinking it was political that in some ways these books are?

PL: I always thought it was political. I always thought that putting a young black boy at the heart of a YA story in a very white female publishing industry is political.

I think all books are political even if the white writer is writing about white characters, I think that is a political decision. And I think having perhaps worked in organisations that promote social justice and having before spoken in conferences about it and workshops, I was in the right place for it because these are things that I passionately believe in.

So, I also believe if you're going to take a story of a young person who has been in care at the heart of your book, you should be prepared to have some words about it. Be prepared to say what you believe about it. Otherwise, you are just making money out of somebody else's experiences. I think, definitely, they are political books, and they are very much giving voices to marginalised young people and also about showing how fantastic and resilient, and creative, and funny young people are as well. Working-class people, poorer people, young people of colour, I wanted that as well to be very prominent.

RF: I think that's so true, because what I said at the beginning – how we walked along the sunny, north side of the Thames and now we are in this dark basement – we are going to leave this place eventually and I think in your stories, your characters, they do go through a dark place, and I think that's normal. For young people it's really important for them to see and feel themselves. Yes, it is all right to go through a dark place because also, ultimately, your books are hopeful. You don't have to write them that way, that's a decision you made. They can come out into a better place. It's not that everything is resolved with a nice tidy bow, but you know that if you are a strong person, you can get through, with the help of your family and your friends and everything else.

PL: Absolutely! I think for me it's really, really important to have hope at the end of books and particularly if you're writing for a young person who's going through the care system. When I started writing *Indigo Donut* it was at a time where, if you were 18, in foster care, you had to leave your foster home. It's changed now to 21, but not if you're in residential care. I remember thinking about when my daughter was coming up to being 18, it was a time for celebration and she is very

self-sufficient, she can cook, she can monitor her money, all of that, but the thought of saying on your eighteenth birthday, 'OK, your family is done now, off you go...' It filled me with such anger that some young people have to go through that, so that anger was absorbed into Indigo's anger when I wrote the book. But, again, I really wanted good things for her, I really did, but also I didn't want to write a fairy tale because actually young people who are coming out of the care system are dealing with so many things both practical and emotional, and you want to show some of that. But I also wanted to end with her capacity to love and be loved as well. I just thought, that is such a hopeful ending.

RF: You know, you are such a powerhouse of a writer. I mean, since, if I've got this right, *Orangeboy* came out in 2016, then we've had *Indigo Donut* and you've got another book coming out quite soon, this year, and I think you're working on another - I think I read that somewhere – and you have written amazing pieces for World Book Day and you're doing all the festivals and talking to all the readers, and you have come here to talk to us... How are you keeping up your writing in this hectic world? Because, I guess, when you were starting off, you were just writing for yourself.

PL: I think, luckily, I've come to it relatively old I suppose. Like most people I've always had to multi-task anyway. I did my Master's in my early 30s. I was pregnant when I started and had to give it up then finished it when my daughter was a year old, while working as well, so I was literally writing my dissertation while breastfeeding at the same time, and working. I've always done that. I wrote *Orangeboy* and *Indigo Donut* while working as well and when my daughter was taking exams. So there's always been that multitasking.

It's been harder to adapt to freelance life, I suppose. I've always worked, not quite 9 to 5, but paid employment. So it's really strange to see writing time as a job as opposed to something I'm fitting in between everything else. I'm still getting used to that. Luckily, I have had quite a lot of commissions from other publishers as well

as writing the young adult books – *Toad Attack!* for Barrington Stoke for a younger audience – and I’ve also been commissioned to write some short stories, including ‘A Clean Sweep’ for the Stripes Publishing *A Change is Going to Come* anthology, a story for Pan MacMillan’s *Back to Wonderland* an *Alice in Wonderland* anthology, and most recently the reboot of the Enid Blyton *Malory Towers* books – I have written a short story for that. So I’ve been lucky enough to get quite a few commissions.

I still haven’t really got into a pattern, which I think I need to, and I still write on buses and public transport, which I enjoy doing immensely. I haven’t quite got out of that habit yet, but I just feel really grateful that I’ve got the opportunity to do this because, in a sense, that’s what I’ve wanted to do since I was four but could never really articulate that someone like me could be an author.

RF: Now, let’s talk a little about your blog because you have got this great blog called ‘The Lawrence Line’ and I feel it is very much about encouraging other writers, and particularly helpful for writers of colour. I guess it helps new writers to know someone has been through this and they’ve gone through this difficult journey, but also that their stories are important and that whatever story you have to tell, it deserves to be told, it deserves to be heard and you, I guess, have navigated that quite complicated way. How would you encourage writers who are listening to this who are where you were many years back?

PL: I think one is quite literally write for yourself initially, write the things you love writing but try all the different genres. I’ve tried all sorts of things. I’ve tried writing sci-fi. I’ve tried writing romance stories, older stories, younger stories... just try so many different things and see what you enjoy doing.

There’s lots of things happening around non-traditional publishing that is really exciting. For women, there’s *gal-dem* magazine, which I think is really interesting and there are other zines and magazines where writers of colour are being invited to submit.

Depending on where you live, look at your local writing development agency because there's lots of different schemes. So, in London it's Spread the Word, in the Midlands, Writing West Midlands, I think, in the south-east, it's New Writing South. But if you look at them there's lots of opportunities and ways to kick-start your writing or ways of maybe thinking about... maybe I should write about crime, or maybe just ways to think differently from how you are.

Don't feel upset if you can't write every day – nobody can – but what is useful sometimes is just to make a note of something that you see every day, a little snippet or memo on your phone. Also, keep an eye on the BookTrust Represents initiative, which is to support writers and illustrators of colour, no matter what stage of your career you're at. So ways of bringing you in contact with the publishing industry, with other writers, learning the skills to survive as a writer, but also creating that safe space where you can have that discussion that you might not have in wider society.

If you can bear it, join Twitter. I just follow the people that I like to follow. I don't particularly join in any discussions if I can help it. So, editors and other writers...see what they're doing. You'll get invited to book launches, you get to network, you get to hang out with other writers. Interesting enough I didn't realise until I was a writer how much networking helps and suddenly so many things that have happened in past jobs, people I've met, have come back to support me in different ways. So, if you can, find ways of networking, even if it's online.

And then, also, I think most writers of colour are incredibly supportive of each other, they really are. You'll find your crew, definitely.

RF: You've mentioned that you have your own sort of tribe, your own writing group. How important is that, do you think? I'm part of a writing group myself so I think they are hard, they are strict taskmasters and make sure you produce something for each meeting.

PL: Absolutely. I think, if it wasn't for mine, I would not have been of the right standard to be published, I think. I did my Master's quite late so I never did creative writing courses really, even though I was writing, and actually through critiquing other people's work it helped me see the things that I did wrong, as much as people critiquing mine. So, even basic things like points of view, you know, I never really thought about that stuff before. So they were all over the place. And how you have a close narrative voice like Marlon has – interestingly, originally *Orangeboy* was written in the third person and my writing group kept saying, 'Oh, sounds like you, Patrice.' And I said 'He's wearing trousers. How could he sound like me?' Jenny, who used to be an actor, suggested rewriting a paragraph in the first person to see if I could really get under his skin, and suddenly I could see him! Great, but now I've got to rewrite 85,000 words in the first person. But actually they really helped with the quality of my writing but also they're there for that support when things don't work out as well.

I would definitely recommend, if you can, join a critique group but have quite clear aims on what you do. So, with ours, two of us go each time and you get two goes a term. You have to send in your work a week in advance, and then, on the day, you get written critique as well as feedback. So, it's quite hardcore but it does make you stick with it, and it makes you produce work.

RF: You told me a little bit about what you are doing next – everything! You're basically doing everything. You're rebooting Enid Blyton, you've got two new YA books coming out. What are you going to do long term? Do you have a different vision? Are you going to go into a completely different area? Are you going to write that crime novel you started?

PL: I'd love to write crime novels. I have got two ideas. I've got loads of research I've done around that. One's set in 1940s Trinidad, one's in 1930s Hoxton Street, mainly because a few years ago I was asked to write a history of Hoxton Hall. Being

a real geek, I spent lots of time in the archives and just found that time and that era really interesting.

I would love to learn how to write radio drama or radio comedy. I listen to a lot of radio comedy and not much of that is particularly funny so I'd love to be able to look at how to do that, and also to be able to write plays because one of the questions you often get is, 'Would you like your book to be a film?' and it's like, 'Actually, not really', but I would like to learn how you could make them into plays because you could be so creative with plays as well.

So, I'd like to look at different types of writing – definitely. I also do quite a lot of workshops and those types of things but, eventually, I think adult crime might be my thing but also looking at different forms of writing for performance as well.

RF: One thing I really want to know is what message do you want your readers to take away from you? What would you want them to really reach for in your stories? What do you feel is something that is you, that you really want to share with them? You're so good with your readers, you spend so much time with them at festivals and so on. What do you want them to take most from your writing?

PL: That's interesting. I think I choose the characters I choose because I want to shatter stereotypes and I think particularly with *Orangeboy* it's quite difficult because there's this internal moral dialogue because I'm writing about a young man of Caribbean heritage who ends up picking up a knife – which could be every cliché.

A couple of months ago, I was listening to a – presumably white – police officer who's also now a crime writer, talking about the knife crime epidemic that's starting again in London and she was saying something really interesting about how the young person who's killed is often just described as a promising rapper or promising footballer, when actually there's so much more to them than that. And I think in *Orangeboy* I just really wanted to dig behind that stereotype to think

behind all of these lazy stereotypes you have about 'prospective footballer', or 'young girl in care' and think of them as human beings and that all those human beings have a myriad of likes and dislikes, and music and fashion, and the way they speak and friendships and love and sex and all of that. And I just want to give a human character to all those lazy stereotypes that other people might read about.

A recording of this interview can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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