

# WRITERS MOSAIC

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**Salena Godden**

in conversation with John Siddique

**JOHN SIDDIQUE:** Hey Salena, lovely to see you.

**SALENA GODDEN:** Lovely to see you, too. Hello from my bunker to your bunker.

**JS:** Absolutely. I want to say thank you to you on a very personal note, actually. Reading you again after a long time has actually... I know this is going to sound really strange because I'm your friend but also, I've become a fan again now. I find your work so moving and [it] makes you want to live, that I just want to say thank you for what you do, before we get into this interview. It's wonderful to be doing this interview with you, but I'm also just really touched by who you are as a writer and so I'm very excited by that.

**SG:** Thank you. That's so kind, what lovely things to say. Thank you.

**JS:** Well, it's true. I don't say things that aren't true. One of the things, I mean, you know, it's a kind of typical question but, I've just been reading about young Salena discovering some of the things that she discovered, you know, when she was nine, ten years old, looking back at your biography, *Springfield Road*. Did she know already, at that age, that there was creativity in her and she was starting to do something with it, or does it come later? And how does that begin to flower for you, that creativity and that movement towards being a writer?

**SG:** I think I was really creative as a child. I was a big dreamer. Also, there were lots of things going on in the adult, grown-up world that I was trying to comprehend. The big ones, the big questions: life and death and divorce and all those big, scary adult things. And so, I was trying to navigate that and there was a lot that I wanted to say, so I think I was *containing* a lot of emotion, a lot of feeling that was sort of buried that then started coming out in poems and in songs.

To be honest with you, at that age, when I was a child and teenager, I thought I was going to be a popstar. It was more lyrics and song lyrics and very rhyme-y stuff in those early days; that's what I remember writing. One of my prized possessions was a tape recorder, and just pressing 'Play and Record'. Do you know what I mean? And just making little radio shows... Yeah... [Laughs]

**JS:** And did you have a hairbrush in your hand and everything?

**SG:** Absolutely and lots of gold eye shadow. I do remember that. [Laughs]

**JS:** And what age is that then? It's as innocent as that? You kind of press Play and Record. You're dreaming of being a popstar and yet, here you still are today.

**SG:** Yeah, that's kind of, it was, I always had notebooks and I had this tape recorder. My prized possession was my tape recorder and also my bicycle. And I'd go and record singing whilst cycling around country lanes, that's a memory as well. If we'd been friends when we were kids, basically I would have made you let me record you and interview you, and sort of try and make these plays and things. It was a real *thing* that I loved doing. Yeah, that was like my favourite game.

**JS:** That's really funny because I was such a... I had two cassette machines and I would play guitar onto one and then play that back really loud, and then dub another guitar on top. So, I was kind of doing multi-tracking while you were doing that, so we would've fit together very, very well actually.

**SG:** [Laughs] We really would. That's perfect, that's so clever.

**JS:** Isn't it amazing?

**SG:** Yeah.

**JS:** So, this movement is in you all the time. When do you start thinking, I'm going to take this out into the world?

**SG:** It's tricky, isn't it? The things that we write... which bits actually get to be seen and shared and which bits just stay buried in some diary or notebook? I don't know how that process happens. I don't know how I choose which is seen and which isn't seen. There's something I've written recently that I'm quite shy about. It feels very vulnerable, it feels very raw. There's a certain bravery, isn't there, to sort of showing the little teardrop there, the truth of the thing, the teardrop of the thing, as opposed to the funny, or the shiny thing. Do you know what I mean?

**JS:** You must have been quite young. I remember you, it's got to be mid-90s.

**SG:** [Laughs] Yeah.

**JS:** That's twenty-five years ago.

**SG:** Yeah, it was 1994, when I did my first gig. That's when I was doing things, yeah, doing my first sort of shows.

**JS:** Something I've wondered quite a lot about writers of colour. And you and I are both mixed-race. And there's all sorts of things around that, that we're still not talking about within society or anything at all, we're kind of the biggest unseen sort of group of people there is. But something I think about with that period of time, that taking to the stage thing. Do you think you did that because publishing wasn't available to you, as a person of colour?

**SG:** I didn't really get my head around knowing how to get into books and getting published. So, I very much went the other way, didn't I? In the nineties, I was performing and recording with Coldcut and Ninja Tune. I thought I wanted to put out records and set poetry to music, so I was working with Peter Coyte as SaltPeter. I even did little bits of backing singing for Corduroy and things like that. I was very much trying to make my poetry into sort of more music things, or kind of filmic, sort of soundscapes and putting poetry over that.

**JS:** Oh, I see.

**SG:** That said, a lot of my twenties and thirties seemed to be more gig-y, band-y stuff, and it wasn't until I was 40 that I got my first book published. So, it did feel like a closed shop. I mean I've got piles of rejections. I never threw them out. I always sort of made a joke that I would wallpaper my toilet with all my rejection letters one day. [Laughs] I won't, it's a stupid thing I always think about. But, yeah.

**JS:** So, the cassette dream was true really, in a way, that you ...from pressing Play and Record at the same time, you really did kind of press Play and Record and take that to the stage.

**SG:** Yeah, I think so. I think publishing and books definitely felt like a closed shop. It's changed so much, John. I mean it must be amazing to be twenty now, with the internet, obviously, and with publishing the doors are a lot more open. (Are they? Are they? I think so.) I think it seems a lot easier to be working-class, a black poet. I think it's probably because of people like you and me who have smashed those doors open, to be honest. I think it's a really exciting time, particularly for poetry if you're working-class. Yeah, there's some really amazing work coming through, isn't there?

**JS:** I think so, I think so. I mean, the thing with kind of growing into your career – and yours just keeps on *moving* – and that's something that I'd like to really reflect on. But you know, looking back, just finishing that thought, looking back from the vantage point of, you know, wherever we are now, maybe it looks better because you're kind of in that world. You can never know at the time, we can't go back and be a twenty-year-old right now. So, it's an interesting thing. Something I thought about a lot, because I look at Instagram poetry and things like that, and for me, I can't imagine that as an entry point, but then, I'm a different kind of human being, I suppose. We're the product of our time and I guess we lay the foundations down and others come after us and so on, and you hope to leave a little mark, I guess. Your work has kept on growing and growing. You know, there's the move into novels now. Then, you know, I've been looking through some of your prose stuff and, of course, we go back to poetry and then we go back to the stuff on record, you know, going over into poetry. Do you think there's a thread that holds all of that together? And if so, what do you think that is? Because I can hear something in all of it.

**SG:** Can you?

**JS:** Yeah, but I wonder if you're aware of it yourself.

**SG:** I don't think I am. I think I'm just... I just keep on keeping on and keep making things. There's so much stuff under my bed in boxes that, I mean, if I stopped writing, I could just get all that stuff out. Is there a thread that marries it? I suppose there's a will and an intention in there. There's a sort of rebel yell in there and you know, a 'Come on everyone, we can do this!' kind of thing going on throughout my work, I suppose. Yeah... I don't know... I don't know. With things like this, I always feel... I don't want to sound self-grandiose, and you know... I just do it because I love it. I must love it, otherwise I wouldn't do it because it's *surely* not for money. But, yeah, it's for the friendships you make... you make such amazing friends in poets and authors and writers and festivals. I love all that side of it... you know the kind of... I've got a real family, you know. I've been doing this since I was nineteen. In that sense, I've kind of grown up very publicly. That's the thing as well. Actually, I'm kind of relieved that I was nineteen in a time when we didn't photograph everything and capture everything because I was very naughty. [Laughs] So I'm kind of glad that there's no evidence apart from a fuzzy memory.

**JS:** I'm just thinking, you know, for somebody listening to this now who perhaps is a younger writer, that idea of longevity, of course, can't enter into it, you know, we have... like you have that vantage point of longevity. And of course, you can't pre-predict that in any way. You can't think, 'Oh, I'm going to have this long career and it's going to be like this.' But as you say, you must love it and I always think to myself when somebody is held up as a bright spark on their first book, I always think, 'Oh, I'll see where you're at in about five books time.' So, one of the things I kind of want out of a writer is that they keep finding a way to keep keeping on, as it were. How do you keep coming back to that love?

**SG:** Well, there's definitely times when you're, kind of, just staring at the empty page, isn't there? I just can't find the words, but there isn't anything to do but pick yourself up and push yourself to try again, or try and tell a story a different way. Take yourself out of it or sometimes it's a case of the reverse, putting yourself into it, like you're lying to yourself and the reader, so you kind of switch your vantage point.

Yeah... I think if I did know how or why a person keeps doing a thing, I'd put it in a bottle and sell it. I don't think... it's just some kind of compulsion... I'm compelled to do this. I don't know how to do anything else. I'm completely unemployable. It's literally all I can do now. Yeah... I don't know. I love it, I guess, John. It's just that. It's just love that's in the centre of it. It's all about love. Yeah.

**JS:** And just going back to that thread we were talking about; I feel that there is a rebel yell in it. It is... you're very right. There is a kind of rebellious sort of attitude, but in a way you kind of reach out the page and you're writing, by talking about yourself – and you do keep going to that vulnerable place quite a lot, which is quite an amazing thing, you're prepared to use your own stories in order to ask questions, which is fantastic – but you always ask the question... (that's what I'm hearing anyway or what I'm seeing. I could be wrong, but as your reader, you know)... where's your humanity in this? How are you going to step up to the plate? You're always asking that question.

**SG:** I didn't realise... I suppose I am, yeah. I think that we need to have more faith and more hope. And that we need to promote that and share that. If you can imagine that nothing's going to change and that there's no point, well then there's no point. Nothing is ideal and so, fight for it to be ideal then... you know. I feel very strongly that that's the first step... is believing that there's a better tomorrow, or a better way to live, or a better way to be. Believe in the good in people, you know, that there's more good in the world than there is evil... but just evil is the thing on the front page every day, you know.

**JS:** Absolutely. I like this... looking at your different ages thing. It's quite fascinating actually. I'm just wondering if you could maybe give us three books: a book that you loved when you were a child, a book that you loved in the middle somewhere, when you were the other person (because you were 'Salena Saliva' for a while)...

**SG:** [Laughs]

**JS:** ...and then something of more from now that you've been enjoying... you're reading.

**SG:** Okay, so the books I loved when I was a kind of teenager... the book that really knocked my socks off was *Last Exit To Brooklyn* by Hubert Selby Jr. I remember reading that, and that being a massive turning point. That book just completely threw me. I really loved William Faulkner when I was at school and obviously F. Scott Fitzgerald; I thought *The Great Gatsby* was amazing. I remember really loving that and Laurie Lee... I remember loving *Cider With Rosie*. And then, a little bit down the road... I tried to sort of teach myself to be a writer. So, I thought the best thing to do was whenever I met someone clever or grown up, I'd ask them what they were reading. And then that would sort of send me on a path and then, whatever that author was reading... then I'd look up what they were reading, and it put me on this kind of chain. So, I tried to read the French writers like Céline, Gogol and Maupassant and Zola, and those kind of writers. I thought that was a path... and then... yeah, George Orwell is another big influence... William Burroughs and, of course, Richard Brautigan. And then, I realised I was mostly just reading men. I think in my mid-twenties, I was really crazy for Bukowski. But now when I read him, I actually find him a bit of a sexist pig actually. [Laughs] I don't know what... I think I used to love the rawness and the... what felt like a raw truth, but now, I just see the sexism and I'm not such a big fan.



But I realised I was reading mostly men. I started looking at women and I got really into Flannery O'Connor and Jean Rhys and Carson McCullers and those writers... and Toni Morrison and those kind of writers... female, literary, strong women's writing. I've always been a fan of Maggie Gee... and then I really loved the books by Deborah Delano. She's in Hebden Bridge and she's like my pen pal in a way. I loved her book so much, I found out her address and wrote to her. I'm a bit of a fan... Maggie Gee, as well. Lyrical writing and poets and, you know, the lyrics of Bob Dylan... the passion of Janis Joplin and Hendrix and the old real classics like that, you know. They always are sort of in there as well, somehow, as part of my reading, do you know what I mean? The musicality...

**JS:** I know, it's interesting... I was actually going to mention that because even within the prose like, let's say in *Springfield Road*, while you are telling various stories from your earlier life, mostly the process of trying to understand who you are and your father's absence and so on. Even there... even in that, you sometimes lock into kind of quite almost rhythmic writing within the sentence structures and so on. It's almost like music and writing have always been welded together for you.

**SG:** Yeah, I think they are.

**JS:** And that's just beautiful.

**SG:** Well, thank you. Thank you.

**JS:** Do you find that that propels your writing along? It seems to me that that's like a beautiful engine that runs underneath the writing.

**SG:** Yeah. Well, I have said before that sometimes when I'm writing, I feel like I'm playing the piano. You know when you're really flowing... Oh gosh, it's not always like that, but sometimes you have these magic writing sessions, and the keyboard may as well be a piano and you just go into it. Yeah... that's wonderful.

**JS:** Yet at the same time with... because you have... there are definite... I don't want to call them techniques but there are things that become one's way of writing. You don't seem to get in your own way. A lot of books are kind of... you feel the writer and that the person that you are reading are not one and the same person sometimes. You meet them and it can be quite shocking. [Laughs] With you, here we are talking now and yet if somebody is listening to this and goes and grabs one of your books, I honestly don't think they're actually going to hear much of a difference. How... how have you become transparent to yourself in order to do that? Because Joyce said that's one of the hardest things that there is to do.

**SG:** Oh... to be... to be completely yourself and not to hide?

**JS:** Not hide... You don't hide but the voice comes through... in the actual writing. How have you done that?

**SG:** I don't know. I think in a way I'm betraying myself. I kind of grassed myself up in many ways, you know... because I'm not often the hero, you know. I don't paint myself as a picture of someone, you know, that's always right... or, you know, I don't know why I do that. I'm my own worst enemy. [Laughs] Yeah... I do feel quite exposed sometimes... vulnerable.

**JS:** Do you think you've paid a price for doing that?

**SG:** No. In a way, I'm very self-critical. I really... you know... I can really see my flaws. I can really see where I go wrong, if you see what I mean. I always see where I could have done something better or been kinder or more generous. There's a thing, isn't there? Just when you feel empty... when you've got nothing left to give, that's when you've got to give more. It's always at that moment when you want to give up, when you've got to push just a bit more, you know.

**JS:** Yeah. Just finishing off that line of thought, I don't want to stick on that because it's heavy old stuff, you know. We were talking on the phone a few months ago and I remember you saying how... because... I think of you and I see you on stage, it's that I've always known you on stage or coming out the radio or something. You felt like having to play the emotions that were moving through the poems through your body... kind of over and over again, like when you're on tour or something like that. You just felt like you weren't able to do that anymore. You were kind of coming to the end of that phase, or that it was kind of getting a bit much for you. And what's quite interesting is now we have this move into being the novelist, which seems like a perfect timing. And again, I'm thinking of somebody listening to this who is starting out on the road, or writing their books now, or kind of coming new into the world of writing. What do you think we can do to look after ourselves in that way because we're much more than emotional record players, aren't we?

**SG:** Oh... What a wonderful way to put it: 'emotional record players'. I was just about... just when you were talking, I was remembering that phone call and I was particularly tired. I had just been doing quite a lot of gigs and performing, and you know, every single time... the loneliest moment is just before they say your name, you know... just about when you're going to go on. It's just *you* and this sort of silence and then they say your name. You get on stage and then you have to do this thing where you are almost, like you said, like an 'emotional record player', because, otherwise, you might as well be reading a shopping list. You've got to go back there to the person that wrote that poem and why they wrote it, why you

wrote it, what's in there... what's the *pain* that made you pick up the pen in the first place? *That* is what can be really exhausting, I think, with poetry and touring poetry. You can't climb a well from the middle. You have to go right to the bottom of the well with the frogs and the sludge to sort of get in there, and then you can start climbing the well, you know. But, yeah... it's taxing. But then, having said that, I mean... I've just written *Mrs. Death Misses Death*. It's about as dark and confessional as you can get. It's really... it's right getting in the subject of dying and why we die... and funerals and life and love... and this time and time is short... and to ...you know... sort of push against the side of the swimming pool so you do a faster length. Push yourself. Yeah.

**JS:** Yeah. Sex and death tends to be kind of where it all goes in the end, doesn't it really?

**SG:** Yeah, I guess. [Laughs]

**JS:** So, talk to us a little bit about the move towards the novel... because, again looking at your printed works, there is the move towards longer form. You know... we had the musician, and the cassette player and then the almost-singer but poetry, then the poet... and then the poet in books... and then the essays started and then, here we are... twenty-five years. You've not stuck to the same thing - it is morphing, changing, growing. Was the novel just there in you, *Mrs. Death*? It seems like this onward flow... kind of keeps coming. So, what's brought you to the novel?

**SG:** I think... I'm going to sound really pretentious now. Please forgive me...but I sort of feel like *Mrs. Death*... I'm kind of a messenger. I really feel like... it came to me... I was just walking down Brick Lane and it was Christmas and I was a bit blue, and I was really skint, and I couldn't buy all the things I wanted to buy for my

family...for presents... and you know we're always skint at Christmas, aren't we?  
[Laughs]

Then you've got this pressure on... and it's my dad's anniversary of his suicide. I was just really down... and walking down Brick Lane, and then I heard this voice, 'I know a lot of dead people now.' And I just remember walking all through Whitechapel and this voice was sort of telling me... and that became the first chapter. And this character of death being a woman, and death being the invisible woman... the black woman, the working-class woman, the one that you walk past, the backing singer no one bothers to learn the name of, the woman mopping the floors... the unskilled immigrant, basically.

And that's when the idea started to grow. But the voice very much feels like a character. It doesn't sound like 'me' to me. It's definitely... yeah, it's quite real to me as a separate voice... not in my head, you know? So, hopefully I've got that across. But going back, *Springfield Road* took ten years of my life, pretty much my whole thirties... writing *Springfield Road* the memoir and that's from first draft to when it actually got printed and published... when I had to crowdfund it and everything. So, this one, I'm pleased that it's only taken five years. So, half the time... so I'm definitely speeding up a bit. It's a slow process, isn't it... writing, novel writing... compared to writing a lovely poem? [Laughs] Yeah, it's another kind of skill and commitment, isn't it?

**JS:** It is indeed. And could you tell us a little bit about how you shape your day then to kind of pull this in? Because whilst you are doing the novel or the novels, because it's become novels, do you have a very strong structure for your day?

**SG:** I've changed to being a morning writer from being a night writer. I used to be a stay up all-nighter kind of writer. But now, I kind of like to get up and watch the sunrise. I get up at four, I have tea. A day that's got two breakfasts is a perfect day to me. Time for two breakfasts... I love breakfast food; it's my favourite food, I think. So yeah... I like to sort of watch the sky change and the light come.

Obviously, if I'm touring and gigging, I can't do that because I'm going to bed at four. So that's not going to work, is it? Partying after gigs and things... so, the two are very separate.

**JS:** Like kind of starting an early shift basically now.

**SG:** Yeah. I find I'm a much nicer person if I'm doing that, because then by midday I've done everything I can for what I wanted to do with my brain. And then in the afternoon, I'll happily do emails and all the things the world requires me to do, you know. As long as I've got a couple of hours' writing in, then I sort of feel like I've done what I want to do. It's so demanding, isn't it... the world... with the internet, and everything, and the messages and the emails? And you go, 'What about this lovely chapter I wanted to write?' And then it gets really sad. So, the only way to do it... no one's going to bother you at five in the morning. That's why I get up then.

**JS:** I was just about to say you're reminding me of something Mary Oliver used to say which was kind of... It's okay. She would get up very early, too, and she had to keep working for quite a long time. We think of her as this monumental poet, but she had to keep working for quite a long time. She used to say that it was okay to kind of give your first and best efforts of the day to the writing and then the remainder... your second effort goes to your employer.

**SG:** Yes. [Laughs]

**JS:** You actually have to make, you know, a quite strong decision to do that, and most people of course do things the other way around. I just wondered if you could leave us... If we were to stick you on a desert island, you know, to work on

the next novel, and you had a few things to keep you company, what book are you going to have with you, and maybe what food would you have with you?

**SG:** I can't choose *one* book. That's really difficult. Please can I have.... I really love the work of John Burnside at the moment, but would I re-read it... re-read it in the same way that I re-read Richard Brautigan? Possibly not. I don't know. I can't choose. Ouch, um, yeah. Can I just have the entire works of Richard Brautigan, please, and can I take my record player?

**JS:** You want some records, of course?

**SG:** Yeah. Can I take some music? And food... I really like roasted pineapple. [Laughs] Can I have roasted pineapple?

**JS:** You can.

**SG:** I can just stick it on the fire. [Laughs]

**JS:** Roasted pineapple, Richard Brautigan and vinyl.

**SG:** I feel sad about my book choice now. I need more books. I can't handle it. Can I take some Virginia Woolf?

**JS:** You can have as many as you want.

**SG:** Can I take some Virginia Woolf, too?

**JS:** You can take her with you, actually.

**SG:** Aw, that would be great! [Laughs]

**JS:** God bless you, Salena. Thank you for talking to us.

**SG:** Thanks so much, John. I really enjoyed that. Okay... I'll see you on the other side, man. [Laughs]

**JS:** Take care.

**SG:** Bye.

A recording of this interview can be found at [writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)

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