

Hope: Why I write

Salena Godden

Hope is that single cornflower growing in a gap in the concrete where nobody treads. Hope is the laughter you overhear from a playground, the children dancing and playing in September's sunlight on the first day back at school. Hope is the future we tell these same children won't be possible. Hope is watching the news today to see millions of school children all over the world marching for climate justice and to save the planet. Hope is the heavily pregnant woman joining the protest to march and sing in the rain.

Hope is your kitchen clock; you have set it ten minutes too fast, so life is on time. Hope is the plastic you remembered to put in the recycling. Hope is eating your vegetables each day. Hope is that smile you glue onto the front of your face when a septuagenarian you love supports the politicians that hurt you and your people. Hope is that fresh and green smell of summer rain on roses and hope is the first daffodil of the year bursting through the hard dirt and frost. Hope is the last cigarette. Hope is hiding in plain sight. Hope is everywhere right now. I can smell it. I can feel it rising. I can almost touch it.

I can remember being young and having hope. I am older now and I seem to still have that hope. This is unusual: we are meant to give up hope as we get older and get more gnarly and cynical. For me, the truth is this: the hope of my pubescent teenage years has returned to me in my forties with a fury that is a lively fire. They didn't listen to us as teenagers in the 1980s. But looking back at the teenager I was, I know now that my fears and concerns were valid; I also know I was right to be hopeful, to invest in hope and I am right inside hope writing this now.

All this hope must count for something. If you can still be hopeful after all you have seen – we get to our forties and we have seen all the war and all the death and all the wrong and all the mess – if you can still picture a kinder world and make space for hope, then that is a great achievement. Your hope is success. Hope is the first giant step.

You are saying: I can imagine a better world and see a light in the distance, and I will keep trying, try, try, try again. We have to keep listening, keep learning, keep moving, growing, believing, sharing, dreaming and hold hope up like a torch.

To sit down and write a book is in itself an act of hope. By doing this you're investing all of your time, your courage and energy – not for the shiny rewards of prizes or book lists and sales, but in something much bigger than yourself. You are saying that you believe there will be a future where libraries and bookshops still stand. You commit to this, you visualize your work published and read in a future where the world survives flood and fire and apocalypse, a world where reading and writing is still a thing. These hopes and dreams of the artists and the creatives are powerful: we write a better tomorrow.

To be hopeful is to rebel against a world that tells us hope is dead. To be hopeful is to rebel against apathy and the basic setting we are told from childhood, that things won't change. But we all know it is natural for things to change, everything is constant and moving and dying, nothing stays the same. It is vital to carry hope and your own idea of a better story and a better ending. I have always been told I am idealistic, but when things are not ideal – and let's face it, many things are not ideal right now – then it is powerful to envision a best-case scenario. We invest so much in worst-case scenarios. We invest time and money in the bad things; we have life insurance, we make our wills, we save for a rainy day. Why don't we prepare for success, for glory and hope in the same way? Why are we not saving for an

excellent day? If we all carried more faith in a good day, a brighter story, a better world, a day of healing and justice, we'd stand more of a chance than *this is how it is and how it has always been*.

Maybe I am a dreamer. I know I am a seeker. I look for the good in people and I hope for the best. People much more educated and smarter than me rail against this sort of idealism. Hope isn't based on hard facts and hope has no money invested in it. There is more money to be made if people are hopeless and filled with fear.

The global arms trade is based on lack of hope and trust; the fashion and media industries feed on our insecurities and loneliness. Someone once told me that hope can make us lazy, because we pray and wish and hope instead of taking action, and that optimism is a mask, so we don't face uncomfortable truths and confront difficult choices or scary decisions. I think hope can be a strength and a motivation to be creative and productive.

I feel strongly that if we must give our negative feeling and dark doomy thoughts room to fester and ruminate, then why not also make room to amplify the hopeful thoughts and feed our positivity, too?

I get down sometimes, and in those dark times I give my depression a voice and platform. I indulge it, I give depression the day off. I might take time off work, have a warm bowl of comfort, or take a pyjama day to binge-watch a box set until the darkness goes away. So why wouldn't I also indulge my hope? Feed myself the good stuff? On brighter days I give hope a chance, I give hope its own room in my head. This room has open windows and a lot of light. It is filled with colour and promise, and it has a clear view of an always changing sky.

Writing is a way to take that moment, an ever-changing sky, an unremarkable moment, and unwrap it to find the remarkable.

My brain gets cluttered with news and media narratives, with storytelling, with triggers and memories, dreams and nightmares and worst-case

scenarios. But when I write, I feel I breathe properly again. I'm an emotional soul. I admit I can be melodramatic and sometimes my feelings overflow and overwhelm me, so I write. It is obsessive, sometimes, but that's how books are written. Dislocating myself from the reality of the here and now to reconnect and unravel in my own storytelling.

There are magic times when I sit typing and I feel the words are music.

I'm typing as though playing the piano, each letter a note on the keys; I am singing to you, the repetition of lines in a poem are a chorus. And then there are times I feel as though I am waking my ancestors, speaking for the dead who watch over me; I am just a messenger. In some writing sessions, it feels like I'm casting a spell with my hope, my will and my intention. That is when writing feels like flying between worlds, or time travelling. But all of this is rare. Writing is mostly hard work, fighting self-doubt and procrastination, switching off the internet and other distractions and being disciplined and staying focused. I am reminded of my Jamaican grandmother not letting me leave the table until I finished my greens, and sometimes writing can be like that, an endurance, to stay put, to keep going, slowly chewing and wriggling to leave the table.

There are different types of writing I do: essays, poetry, memoir and more creative fiction and experimental work. I have work that has been commissioned, and then there is work I write because I'm driven to make it. The work I write to order is the work I overthink because this is writing for an audience and I am a performer. I know this work has been ordered in, like pizza, and so I write hoping to add the right amount of sauce and spice, or at least as much as I think I can get away with.

The writing I make from compulsion is free. This writing has no shoes and no home; it might never be shared or read or published or performed. I

wake up in the night with the voice of it in my head. It has heat and it burns on the tip of my tongue and bangs in my chest. This work comes with no deadline and no pressure and no audience. In the silence and solitude of darkness, I feel I am just flowing and enjoying it. I wrote my new book, *Mrs Death Misses Death*, this way; I spent several years rising at 4 a.m. and working on it between paying jobs, with no idea if I would ever let anyone else read it. This was a great freedom I gifted myself: the freedom to make something in secret for the love of it, and not an object to share and sell to survive. I gave myself space to make a book just to tell myself the story, and because I couldn't keep that narrator or the character of Mrs Death in my head any longer. You cannot keep a good story in; it's like a good tune, an earworm playing over and over again in your head.

Connectivity is important to me; my work is centred in communication of feeling. My work is also made of miscommunication and misunderstanding, all those unsaid things, unsent letters and deleted social media posts. All my life I have been navigating this troubled world with an emotional response and a pen and notebook.

Where does the writing come from? Does the work come out of my heart and down my arm and into the pen? Does it come out of my brain and into my guts then into the breath and onto the page? Does it come from my hope? I am not entirely sure... but I know, once I share it, it takes its own shape and flies away. What I mean is, once it has left my desk, I cannot control or even know if anyone else will feel it how I feel it, how people will react to it, or even if they will enjoy it or not. We all see colours and experience taste and sound differently; we experience, remember and re-tell everything in our own way. We play the leading roles in our own movies in our own heads.

I think many of us write in a state of reaction to exterior things we cannot change – the onslaught of terrible events in the news, for example. I feel it is powerful to reclaim the pen and to write, not as a reaction, but from a place of action, creativity and invention instead. I am aware that my work has been quite reactive and political of late. But I cannot be true to myself and live here at the dawn of the Roaring Twenties and not write all that I see and hear and feel from a place of faith in humanity. Our faith and belief and hope are under attack daily. We live in tumultuous times, most of it terrifying, and I feel the writing of this, the narration of events, the documenting of these times is vital and an important part of my job.

There is a great power in writing for the joy of creating, writing for the love of it. There is power in speaking from the heart and soul and guts of your story for yourself, but there is a bigger power when you write something that feels like a spirit is speaking through you. That spirit, that energy is what all writers seek and hope to channel, but it doesn't come every day. It is hard to be centred in your full power every single day. It is a rare truth and a beautiful treasure to find that light, that spirit, that focus, to hit that pure note, and that to me is where hope lives, and the essential magic of writing.

Salena Godden

Born in the UK, Salena Godden is of Jamaican-Irish heritage and based in London. The poet, author, activist, broadcaster, memoirist and essayist has published several books, written for BBC TV and radio and has released four studio albums.

Published books include poetry volumes *Under The Pier* (Nasty Little Press); *Fishing in the Aftermath: Poems 1994-2014* (Burning Eye); and

literary memoir *Springfield Road* (Unbound).

Pessimism Is For Lightweights – 13 pieces of Courage and Resistance, was published by Rough Trade Books in July 2018. The poem 'Pessimism is for Lightweights' was a public poetry art piece on display outside the Arnolfini Gallery in Bristol for over eighteen months. The poem has been donated to People's History Museum in Manchester, where it is now on permanent display.

Now in her fourth decade producing work, Salena Godden is a poet whose riotous poems tend to precede her, including the comic and political poetry anthems: 'My Tits Are More Feminist Than your Tits', 'Imagine If You Had To Lick It' and 'Can't Be Bovvered'. *LIVEwire*, released by indie spoken word label Nymphs and Thugs, was shortlisted for the Ted Hughes Award.

Essays include 'Shade', published in the award-winning anthology edited by Nimesh Shukla, *The Good Immigrant* (Unbound); 'Skin' broadcast on *The Essay*, BBC Radio 3; 'We are The Champions' published in *Others* (Unbound); and 'Broken Biscuits' in *Smashing it! Working class artists on life, art and making it happen* (edited by Sabrina Mahfouz, Saqi, 2009).

Her debut novel, *Mrs Death Misses Death*, is published by Canongate.

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

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