

Jeffrey Boakye

In conversation with Colin Grant

Colin Grant: Jeffrey Boakye is an English teacher, writer, and user of metaphors. He has written several non-fiction books and was recently commissioned to write two more. With his book *Black, Listed*, wrote one reviewer, 'He has proven himself a gentle provocateur and a skilled chronicler of the thrills and perils of the language of blackness.' That reviewer was me. So, welcome Jeffrey to *WritersMosaic*. Where are you?

Jeffrey: At the moment? Do you want the geographical location or the location in my home?

CG: How about both?

JB: I live in East Yorkshire, and I'm actually in my living room in East Yorkshire, where I live, because the rules of lockdown state this is how interviews like these need to be carried out now, I think.

CG: But you weren't always in East Yorkshire. You grew up in London, didn't you, in inner-city London?

JB: Yeah, correct. I was born in London and grew up in south London, in Brixton, and lived there pretty much my entire childhood and adolescence – until I made the big trip north of the river and lived in North London for a while, and East

London. So, that was the biggest trip of my life; I actually went to the other end of the Victoria line!

CG: Wow... But I would imagine it was quite a big leap from London to Yorkshire, isn't it? How has that manifested itself culturally on your life, would you say?

JB: Yeah, I suppose one of the most obvious things is that there aren't as many black people living in this part of the country, compared to where I was born and where I grew up. So, just on purely identity terms, I find myself in a more visible minority living here. But, having moved up here as an adult, I have got so much Londonness in me and I've got so much London arrogance in me that I feel like I can live anywhere. So, it does not necessarily feel like a problem for me, because I just feel like I belong wherever I choose to belong.

CG: Well, I'm a fair bit older than you, Jeffrey, and I'm wondering in your new circumstance whether you do what I did when I was in my thirties and forties, when I was in a place which was not very comfortable and not very well known to me and I'd see another black person on the other side of the street, and I would give the 'black salute'. Do you obey the 'black code' up in Yorkshire?

JB: Yes, 100%. Good God! What are you talking about? My postman is the only other black person that I saw for miles when I first moved in, me and my family, and we gave each other the nod instantly and the nod turned into a conversation, and now we're actually pretty good friends. That is par for the course – definitely.

CG: You need to know that there are people in your camp, there are people who have got your back, and you feel comfortable about that, I suppose?

JB: Yeah, and there is so much in that nod. There is so much in that. It's recognition, it's community, it's kinship. It's a support network. All in the fleeting moment. It's a very powerful thing.

CG: I wonder when you were growing up, Jeffrey... you've written several books now, and there are more in the offing... I wonder what your early interest in reading was. What shaped your reading? Was it your parents? Was it your school?

JB: It was a combination. I think that a large part of it was access to books. I'm the youngest of three and there's a gap between me and my two older sisters. So, as I grew up, I was at that kind of age where I was just left to wander around the house and just pick things up and I think that my sisters being teenagers when I was a child, they didn't want that much to do with me, in that sense.

So, I was wandering around the house, and we always had books at home. It's something that, culturally, my parents just wanted there to be books in the home. So, we had an encyclopaedia, we had novels; my sisters' old kids' books would be lying around.

I was always just picking up books. I can remember picking up books before I could read them fully and just looking at pictures. So, my dad would take me to the library, and I remember it being a very important occasion when I was given my first library card and that started a relationship with reading because it was this thing that I had responsibility for. I could go to the library and could read books that I was choosing for myself.

CG: And what book or books leapt out at you at an early age, would you say? Are there books that sort of landed on you and you said, 'Right! That's so right. That rings true?'

JB: Yeah, I mean, listen, I grew up in the UK in the early eighties, you know, through to the nineties, so, most of the culture that I was steeped in was not what you'd call 'black culture', you know. It was mainstream 'white culture', that was the default, still is. So, a lot of the stuff that I was reading was of that culture, you know. I've had an education in white Britishness. So, a lot of the 'quote, unquote' classics, the things that I would have been initially engaging with... I remember having my head completely spun by Roald Dahl. I can't even lie. As a child, one of

the first things that I read fully, like the first proper books, was *The Twits* by Roald Dahl. I must have been really young, because I couldn't understand all of it and there were pages missing as well. But I remember feeling so pleased that I'd read it because it had been in the house for ages and I must have seen this yellow cover. So, just the humour and the quirkiness spoke to me and...he's got poetry... and then, at school, I got into other poets of that era, you know, people like Roger McGough, Allan Ahlberg, Babette Cole and Tony Ross, and all these people. And so, I kind of got into the quirky, slightly subversive maybe, sometimes macabre, playfulness, like playful with words, playful with ideas and, as I said, sometimes a little bit on edge. A lot of that poetry is not nice, it's not soft, it was a bit edgy, you know.

CG: You have spoken eloquently about your blackness and being a black writer, or a writer who happens to be black. I'm wondering whether there were other black writers in your youth who also inspired you and got you thinking about your identity in that way.

JB: Yeah, not until I was a teenager. I was basically lucky enough to have access to black literature and works from the black diaspora, you know, African American writers, African writers, black British writers. So, James Baldwin... I remember someone – it might have been one of my sister's friends, or someone like that, someone older than me – recommending that I read *Go Tell it on the Mountain*.

I can remember reading that as a teenager, an early teenager, maybe pre-adolescent about twelve or something, and just thinking, 'Whoa! there's a lot of stuff going on here'. And then, when I was at secondary school, the only black teacher I've ever had happened to be my secondary school English teacher, from the ages of eleven to fourteen. He had a transformative impact on my literary life, because as well as pushing me in terms of the classics – he got me reading Shakespeare, he got me looking at Dickens and really thinking about that stuff, earlier than my peers – he also put stuff in front of me like *The Color Purple*; he put *To Sir with Love* in front of me; he put *In the Heat of the Night* in front of me; *The Lonely Londoners*. He put black writers in my path and, if that hadn't happened

at that age, it probably wouldn't have been until my late twenties that I would have really started to explore that stuff properly. That's fortuitous, really, because I started to see a literary world outside of the white mainstream.

CG: Well, that's been important also in the book that drew me to you. The first book that I was aware of that you had written was *Hold Tight: Black Masculinity, Millennials, and the Meaning of Grime*, and I was very interested in your choice of subject matter there because it's a challenge, isn't it, to the usual suspects, the norm? Were you aware that you are making this big challenge to what is considered to be the standard, central culture in Britain?

JB: In terms of talking about grime, as opposed to talking about some other kind of 'black thing'?

CG: Yeah, exactly. I mean there aren't that many books on grime, I should imagine, and I'm not sure many publishing houses would welcome you and say, 'Here's a big fat cheque. Write us a book on grime.' I don't imagine that happens too often?

JB: Exactly! No, no, I was just lucky that an independent publisher, someone at an independent press – Kit Caless of Influx Press – had an interest in grime and good writing and identity politics, and that's exactly what I was offering. So, yeah, I didn't set out to write a book about black identity or black Britain, but that stuff was so in me and I felt so passionate about it and I felt I'd reached a point where I could articulate my thoughts on it, that to do so via a culture that I was into, it allowed me to do a literature pirouette and express my joy of this music whilst also unpacking my thoughts and insights surrounding black identity in modern Britain. That was my thesis, basically, and it just so happened because it was about grime, it was kind of fun and energetic and lively and the music is energetic and lively and edgy and dangerous and cool and cerebral and all the rest of it... that's what the book was, too, you know.

CG: Yes, I agree. You look at grime as a series of tracks; instead of a conventional narrative, we have a kind of track list. Why did you decide on that structure?

JB: I love music, man, and basically, I love the springboard. So, when I'm writing, what I am springboarding off is really important and to springboard off a song it is incredible because, you can play the song and then you think about where you were when you heard it, and what it might mean. I'm an essayist at heart. I love writing essays, and you need to sort of be wrestling with something; and because I love music, it felt like a no-brainer to talk about songs.

It also allowed me to get a bit geeky about the actual lyricism because I love lyrics as well. There's a lot of love in this conversation, isn't there? I love songs, I love music, I love black culture, I love lyrics and words, going back to my Brian Patten era as a child. And so this allowed me to geek out over all these things that I love. And also, I used to be a DJ, or I am still... So, I'm very much aware of sequencing and how you can basically control the mood and take people on an emotional journey through songs. So, for me, it made a lot of sense to apply that to writing and the easiest way was to actually write about songs.

CG So, here's your chance, Jeffrey, for readers and for listeners who are not sure about this programme called *Desert Island Discs*, here's your chance to alert potential listeners and readers to one or two tracks that they should look out for, that are particularly striking, as far as you are concerned, with regards to grime. What should they look out for?

JB: Whoa! you sprung this one on me – that's a massive question.

CG: Have a stab at it.

JB: Good grief! Actually, this is huge. Alright, here we go. Oh my god. How many do you want? Just like two or three?

CG: Yeah, two or three would be great... and why?

JB: Alright. I'll go with a song by XTC called *Functions on the Low*. Stormzy remixed it in a song called *Shut Up!* It's an instrumental ...and grime music, a lot of is actually instrumental even though it is a lyrical-based genre and it's just this beautiful, electronic and abrasive but a wonderfully calm piece of music, and so it holds these tensions. So, that's one: *Functions on the Low* by XTC.

Another, I'll say is... I'm gonna go with *Seems to Be* by Dizzie Rascal because Dizzie Rascal, he was being called a grime artist before he decided he was a grime artist. So, he released an album in the earliest era of the genre, and it's so unrepentantly adolescent and angry and wise at the same time. It's that sweet spot between rage and wisdom, but also the control, because, you know, it's a piece of music that he made as a teenager and the whole album *Boy in Da Corner* is just a complete jewel. It's a culture gem. That song encapsulates all the various energies and mood that fed into grime. All the social deprivation, all the anger, all the bravado, all of the problems, the joys – it's all in one song. So, *Seems to Be* by Dizzie Rascal. I'm doing quite well here!

And the third... I'll say... I'm gonna go with *Castles* by Skepta. Skepta's my vintage, man. He's, like... so is Dizzie Rascal, to be honest. These guys are in their late thirties now and, in *Castles*, he talks about basically how he's seen by society and how that makes him see himself; how he's been pushed out of education; and how he's maligned and in a very, very short space of time and with a few choice couplets, he just basically lays bare what it means to be a black man in millennial Britain; and it's very cerebral and very tense and actually quite sad in a lot of ways because it's yearning, too.

So, listen out for those three. There's my recommendations. How did I do?

CG: Pretty, pretty, good, as Larry David would say from *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, and I think you've outlined songs that challenge the narrative of black men and their demonisation, which you find, again and again, in the press and broadcasting outlets, especially in the UK.

There's a quote from your book *Hold Tight* where you say, 'It honestly took me the best part of my adolescence to appreciate that gangster rappers aren't

actually real gangsters, which is embarrassing because that is like admitting you thought Scorsese's movies were documentaries.' Can you unpack that for me? Why might you have thought that they were gangsters?

JB: Yeah, definitely because, like you know...I'm just laughing not at my own words...but I *am* laughing at my own words actually – it's funny. I came of age around the time when gangster rap started to really take a grip on mainstream culture, you know we're talking about the late eighties, the early nineties. And the thing about hip hop in general, and this offshoot of hip hop, is that it's *obsessed* with what you might call authenticity. It is *obsessed* with being 'real' and that's one of the things about hip hop, if nothing else, you have to be real.

That usually means you have to be really affiliated to like hardship, to the streets, to urban life and everything that comes with it: poverty, crime, deprivation. You know, all that stuff. So, gangster rap leads with this very theatrical pantomime of black urban authenticity, but it is a pantomime. When you get NWA screaming 'F*** the police', dressed all in black, pointing paintball guns at the camera... because I don't think they were real guns, even. Those guys were into paintballing, you know. It's a performance, but it's a performance which, to get serious for a second, this is what, you know, 'whiteness' – or not 'whiteness' but white supremacy – has constructed, these beliefs and these stereotypes about black masculinity. Definitely. It goes back hundreds of years. So this performance which is art, like Scorsese's movies is art, it's narrative, it's emotion, it's entertainment, but when they're presented with a level of like, supposed verisimilitude, like it's supposed to be real, for a child, for a young mind, you take it at face value. You believe it, even though you're consuming it as entertainment, and then what happens is these cultures, or these subcultures, can get vilified, as somehow creating problems that they're just reflecting, or turning into art, which is grossly unfair.

CG: Now, we started our talk by talking about the fact that you moved to East Yorkshire not so long ago. My wife's from South Yorkshire and I've known her for almost thirty years and I remember going up to South Yorkshire for the first time

and thinking that many of the people I met would have benefited from reading *Black, Listed* and I'm wondering whether you found that yourself in East Yorkshire, whether there are people who have some peculiar ideas about blackness who might benefit from opening your book.

JB: Ah yeah, definitely, definitely. Oftentimes, I feel as though you're having conversations with, but you're entering into scenarios with people that have a very limited understanding of race politics, identity politics, and actually have no language with which to explore these ideas. So, they don't know what they don't know. It's like trying to do trigonometry with someone that has never been taught basic maths, you know. They can't engage in the discourse, and the way that manifests is usually in complete apathy to what's going on in terms of identity politics. Sometimes it can be callousness. I don't think it's often active interpersonal racism, I don't think that's the default position for most people, but it's something a bit more insidious or maybe a bit sadder, actually, where the lack of exposure to certain narratives, the lack of exposure to the language of race and identity, means that they can't participate in that conversation and that puts up a certain barrier to an extent.

Me writing a book like *Black, Listed* is almost like offering a lifeline, you know. There are white people out there that I'm just thinking, 'Look man, if this can wangle its way onto your bedside table where you can actually read it, then you might be able to start having a real conversation,' you know. It's kind of like outreach work.

CG: No, no, I think it's great, but also, I thought, Wow! I wish I had written this book, because I can imagine you've had a lot of fun. In a way, I imagined it allowed you to talk about things in a book that you might ordinarily just reserve to your mates in a pub perhaps, and wouldn't necessarily share with a wider public.

Can we just talk about the choices you made in the words that you described or categorised? What was the way that you broke things down? You have words like 'chocolate lunchbox', 'suspect gangster', 'rude gal', 'roadman.' How did you

go about structuring this to make it thematic perhaps and to explore some of the deeper themes to link these words?

JB: The first thing was to let my mind drift a bit, and sort of relax my mind actually and just to think of all the various labels, and I didn't over-complicate that part of the process. I just thought, I'm going to write down as many different words as I can think of that have been applied to people who are racialised as black and just write them all down. I didn't know how many I would get to, but it was soon, you know, 50 plus words and then from that starting point, I thought, if I wrote a short essay for each of these, because I've got a short attention span. So, I thought if I do like a thousand words for one, if I had 50 words, that's 50,000 words. That's kind of a book size and it was obviously much bigger than that; but that process was how I went about creating the content or curating the content.

In terms of where the words come from, these are words that are in use. I think that's crucial. These are words that, in my lifetime (bear in mind that I was born in the early eighties), have been said to me, said by me, or used in relationship to me and my community. So, this is just stuff that is in the front of my mind. It's very easy to just think of a long list.

CG: I love the subtlety and the nuances. So, for instance, 'black man' equals scary, 'black guy' is unthreatening.

JB: Yeah, yeah, which I think is really telling, because, you know, I've been called 'a black guy' on many occasions and I just feel like, 'Well, what is that all that about?' It just feels so chummy and so unthreatening, you know, and there's some politics in there. Why would I need to be unthreatening, in that particular label?

CG: And, it's also curious, isn't it, that you were able to reflect on some of these tropes around 'angry black women'. I mean this is something that gets levelled and thrown at black women all the time, and you say, 'I think that it is dehumanisation of black femininity.' Why do you think it persists?

JB: First of all, you're absolutely right. It does persist. That's where my big sigh just came from there. We're still very much living in that. I feel as though, you know, the intersection of sexism and racism is potent, and we're living in a patriarchy, we're living in a misogynistic patriarchy and, in terms of the position of black women, in society, I think it might come down to fear.

I just feel like there's fear of the empowered 'other' and, it sounds very crude, but the thought of an empowered black unit, or black community, able to exist in its own terms and to actually affect the world and to shift the centre, I think that white supremacy will always react to that – badly – and black women are a very easy target. But, rather than just crushing black women, actually to turn black femininity into the aggressor, in the same way that black masculinity is turned into a threat, I think that's part of the way of making sure that there will never be equality there or equity there.

CG: I agree. One of the most powerful, impressive, and inspiring black women in the publishing world, is a woman called Sharmaine Lovegrove who runs Dialogue Books and Sharmaine published *Black, Listed*. To what degree did it help to have a powerful black woman editing, publishing, *Black, Listed*? Could it have been done by a white woman?

JB: I am tempted to say 'No', outright. I don't know if there's any white women out there that feel as though they could have published *Black, Listed*, but I'm very tempted to put it on recording and say, 'No. I don't think there was anyone else who could have done it.' I mean, it's very telling that *Black, Listed* wouldn't have existed if not for Sharmaine Lovegrove personally. Because, I'll be upfront with you, she was the only person who wanted it, you know.

A lot of publishers said they wanted it. A lot of publishers said it was great and they loved the manuscript and they thought it was vital and they loved my writing style and everything else, but they weren't willing to pay for it. They weren't willing to publish it and part of it was because they didn't know what to do with it. What the hell do you do with a book that's got like negro', the 'n-word', 'wog',

'darkie', just running through the middle of it? How do you market that? Who is it for?

CG: Were they scared, do you think?

JB: I think they were scared, and also, I feel like, you know, this is when black lives didn't matter. This was *before* black lives mattered. There was no urgency to open up the debate.

CG: So, where are we at now? I mean, thirty-odd years ago, when I first tried to start to write, I remember sending work out to an agent I admired. He wrote back to say that he was not interested in 'ethnic writing'. But where are we now, would you say, in the culture? Some people would argue that, for a black creative, it's a good time to be black.

JB: Yeah, maybe. I don't trust it.

CG: Why not?

JB: Well, because, you know, we're talking about a moment in a four-hundred-year history. So, it's a four-hundred-year context we're looking at here. So, I don't trust any particular moment.

Colin, it's no accident that I am knocking out books at a ridiculous rate, because I know that my output has to be high and consistent, and it has to be *good*. It has to be good, consistent, and high for me to make my presence kind of un-ignorable. Maybe that's part of the trauma of blackness in the twentieth and twenty-first century – that, you know, we have to be pretty good in order to make waves.

CG: Yeah, well, isn't that something that everyone should aspire to anyway? To be excellent?

JB: Yeah, but can you imagine how easy life would be if you could get away with being mediocre? Oh my god! Imagine if you could be like...

CG: But who wants to be mediocre? Who would want an easy life? You want to have some grit, don't you?

JB: Exactly. I don't want an easy life. I don't want to be mediocre, but my lived experience is that I've never been *allowed* to be mediocre. That's the deeper stuff for a therapist to unpack later. I've never had the chance to be mediocre. I've never been allowed to be a C-grade student; had to be an A-star.

CG: Good for you and good for your parents. I think your parents did something in that regard. So, Jeffrey, thanks again for taking part in this *WritersMosaic* session and all power to you and your writing.

JB: Thank you so much, Colin. It has been an absolute pleasure and thank you for having me.

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

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