

Why I write: speaking out

Courtia Newland

As far back as I can remember I've always told stories, although those first fledgling ideas and narratives were obviously formed by my preoccupations of the time. I was known in my family for being the type of kid who would tug at adults' coattails, looking up at them, imploring that they listen to a story I wanted to tell. I'm not sure whether I wrote anything down at that stage, so my stories at that time were mostly oral and improvised; I would bore my chosen adult to tears going on about a man from Mars, or a hero with every superpower known to humanity. Back then I suppose I was trying to appease the simple urge to express myself. It was as natural to me as breathing, and as I learned later, stemmed from a deeply culturally embedded oral storytelling tradition. There were no rules to adhere to, or devices to learn. It was just fun.

Later, when I wrote more seriously, aged about 11, it was to prove to myself that I could manage a long form novel. It took me about 18 months and well over a hundred exercise book pages, but I kept going. It was self-validation. From then on, I always believed I could write.

As a Black teenager of the 1980s, of course I got into hip hop, and the idea of writing to clarify who I was took hold. I wrote stories of West London life, about our slang, our beliefs and who we were. They were about the

simple act of being kids of that era. These were exercise book length too, so maybe 60 pages per story, and I think that's where I first found a meaning in my prose beyond the joy of writing. I wanted to capture a moment as it happened. It was a brilliant discovery to have so early on in my life, and one that I've kept with me to this day.

I believe the moments we live, and have lived, from the mundane to the illuminating, are important as time capsules, a precise means of capturing who we are and were. Though it might not always be the primary intention of a piece of work, whenever we attempt to draw the world onto our pages, it's there: what the people wore, the language they used, the television they watched, their jokes. The politics surrounding them, the arts and culture, things that brought joy and fear. Emotions are often universal, transcending era, but the specifics of a particular time and place can never be replicated. Those stories of the 80s kids who wandered west London's streets will never happen again in that shape or form. So, I've discovered a joy in analysing what it means to live in the present, alongside my love of writing. I seed minuscule details into text so that each book is another layer in the strata of who we are, and the stories we tell.

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Courtia Newland has published eight works of fiction including his debut, *The Scholar*. His latest novel, *A River Called Time*, was published by Canongate in 2021. A forthcoming collection of speculative fiction stories, *Cosmogramma*, will also be published this year. Newland's short stories have appeared in many anthologies, and have been broadcast on BBC Radio

4 and included in *Best of British Short Stories 2017*. He has been awarded the Tayner Barbers Award for science fiction writing and the Roland Rees Bursary for playwriting. He was previously associate lecturer in creative writing at the University of Westminster and is completing a PhD in creative writing. As a screenwriter he has co-written two feature length films for the Steve McQueen BBC series *Small Axe*, of which *Lovers Rock* was jury selected for Cannes, and opened New York Film Fest 2020. *Small Axe* won the LA Critics Circle award 2020 for Best Picture. *Impact*, an original feature, and *The Future Isn't What It Used to Be*, a science fiction short, are currently in development with Film Four.

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

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