

WRITERS MOSAIC

Courtia Newland

in conversation with Sanjida O'Connell

SANJIDA O'CONNELL: Courtia Newland is the author of eight works of fiction, including his debut, *The Scholar*, and his latest, *A River Called Time*. His short stories have appeared in many anthologies and been broadcast on BBC Radio 4. In 2016, he was awarded the Tayner Barbers Award for science fiction writing and the Roland Rees Bursary for playwriting. He's just completed a PhD in creative writing, and as a screenwriter, he has co-written two episodes of the Steve McQueen BBC series: *Small Axe*.

We're recording this interview remotely. I'm in Somerset and Courtia is in London. And, as we're both in our homes instead of a studio, please excuse any background bangs or squeaks. Courtia, welcome to *WritersMosaic*.

COURTTIA NEWLAND: Ah, thank you. Thank you... I'm really happy to be here.

SOC: Yeah, so lovely to talk to you after all this time. We had originally agreed to meet up before the pandemic; and, now here we are, a year and a bit later...

CN: That is so crazy.

SOC: And *what* a year it's been for you. I mean, *Small Axe* was released in 2020 and it's just swept the board with the amount of nominations and awards the series has received. If I've got this right: fifteen BAFTA nominations, a Golden Globe, a New York Film Critics Circle Award, a Critics Choice Television Award?

CN: Yeah... I think so. I think that's it. Yeah.

SOC: Amazing! And this is also the year that you publish your huge magnus opus, *A River Called Time*, and submitted your thesis.

CN: Yeah, it's my PhD thesis. May 5th – that date will be imprinted on my brain forever. [Laughs]

SOC: Ah, yeah. So, I wanted to start, kind of, at the beginning.

CN: I mean it was always there. I lived on the other side of the A40 Westway, near the BBC Television Centre, just down the road from there. And my school was just across the road from there, in a place called Du Cane Road. At 11 or 12 years old, we would walk from there into the middle of White City Estate, where there was a swimming pool; and that's where we would do our swimming lessons. It was about a twenty-minute walk. And me and my friends would be talking about all the stories that we knew in our areas.

My best friend was from Ladbrooke Grove, and we were all from like Ladbrooke Grove, Harlesden, Shepherd's Bush; and we would just talk about all the things that happened in our areas and all the things you never saw in films. And even at 12, 13 years old, 11 years old, we would say, 'That would make a great film...If we could just put this thing that happened in

our area into a film, people would love it.' Do you know what I mean? But then, we would never get to see it because it's all American stuff.

So, I mean, as early as that, I remember having that thought. Then, as soon as I started writing, it was always about trying to articulate being black British, even though I didn't really have that phrasing for it. I wasn't saying, 'Oh, I need to write about being black British,' I was more like, 'I need to write about what's going on in my area.'

I remember walking ... like with my mum up Wood Lane to go to Shepherd's Bush, and we would walk past the Television Centre on a Saturday and you'd see George Michael standing outside signing autographs and stuff, you know. And, just like being in the area, it was quite normal to see celebrities all the time. But it was a bit stark, you know, the difference between what was happening there and what was going on in the estate, you know; or what was going on in the subways around the area.

I shouldn't say this, really. I'm exposing myself. When I was in primary school, I was on *Blue Peter*, as a little kid [Laugh] but that was about it really. Apart from that, when you had these sanctioned visits to BBC Television Centre... you know... basically, were told to stay away.

SOC: So, talk me through your first novel, *The Scholar*. You know... you've taken your storytelling ability that started at a young age, and you were exploring the lives of the people that lived in that area.

CN: Yeah, yeah. It was basically a story about two cousins who lived on a fictional representation of White City Estate called Greenside Estate. And I just fictionalized certain aspects of it, but really was drawing from the

experiences of myself, my friends... anyone who lived in the area... all the things that we used to talk about. And it really came about from me wanting to do a novel. My first real serious – ‘I’m going to do a novel’ – was going to be a Windrush story. Then, when I was 19, while I was doing that novel, I read Sam Selvon’s *Lonely Londoners*. I was a little bit upset because I was like, ‘This guy has done it all.’ Everything I was trying to do, he’s already done; and I thought, ‘Well, what *can* I do?’ And I realized that I was third generation and that they were the first generation who came over. I was third generation, removed from Sam Selvon’s experience, but... so I’m a descendant of that experience, but I’m in the same area and I can talk about what was happening then. And that had never been done. So, I was like, ‘Okay, yeah, now I’ve got something.’

There *is* a connection between Selvon’s generation and my generation. It wasn’t just him. It was Beryl Gilroy, and it was E.R. Braithwaite, and it was Andrew Salkey, you know, George Lamming, the whole of the Caribbean artist movement that was around at the time. And I was very, very much influenced by them.

So, I had been brought up by my mum taking me to the Third World Radical Book Fair. She took me to all the black plays of the eighties. I didn’t consciously say, ‘I want to do that,’ until I wrote *The Scholar*. You know... I was saying, ‘What can I do?’ But I wasn’t consciously trying to be like, ‘Oh, I’m going to be in conversation with Sam Selvon.’ I just was, by nature of the fact that I was growing up in West London; like he’d ‘come of age’ in West London, you know? So, it was just there. It was around me. I saw it as working-class fiction, black working-class fiction. That’s what I called it.

I was writing. I was definitely angry about the situation that we were in, and I was saying, 'These are our lives.' This is the... in a sense the trap of poverty that we are locked in, you know? Whether it was *Society Within* or *The Scholar*, I was talking about the same thing, yeah. I was definitely trying to make sense of our lives in this in a way; and also, just articulate that this is what's happening. Isn't this wrong? Not that our lives are hopeless or anything. I wasn't trying to say that. But just like these are the odds that are stacked up against us. When someone makes it from a place like that you *know* they had to struggle hard. These are the survivors, I was actually trying to say.

SOC: There's a real confusion, I think, in this country between race and class. You've got an interesting take on racism, that's not widely explored. So, you've written, 'I support the movement to address misogyny and patriarchy in our society, but it's time for an honest discussion about how some women use 'white privilege' to oppress black men.' So, I wondered if you could talk a bit about that.

CN: Derek Owusu had asked me to write for the *SAFE* anthologies, and I was very unsure what to do at first, and then I think I was like, 'You know what... I'm going to take a leap and I'm going to write about something which I know is very, very taboo amongst us.' We kind of will talk about [it] in hushed tones but haven't really made public. And what's interesting to me is that when I wrote that piece, you know, there was a lot of fear. But you know, it's got a lot of... you know, besides the comments and stuff... got a lot of positive feedback. And a lot of black men said, 'Yeah, I've had those experiences.' I got a lot of emails and letters and DMs saying to me, 'Yeah, yeah, I'm going through a similar thing...I've been through a similar thing.' It's important to be able to express that these things happen and have a discussion.

SOC: So, you published *The Scholar* really early on in your life, but you could have gone in other directions, you know... like music. You used to perform songs for your school friends, and I heard that aged eleven, you wanted to be a rapper.

CN: I did want to be a rapper. I didn't want to be a novelist. My English teacher said, 'You're going to be a novelist when you grow up,' and I got really upset with her. I started shouting at her.

SOC: But even though you didn't end up being a rapper, music's played a really strong role in shaping your writing and it seems to run through your stories, through your novels.

CN: Yeah... I definitely harken back to music because it was music that, in a sense, got me into it; or, you know... the two things were always intertwined, you know. So, even though I got really upset at Ms Hilton for saying that, I continued to write prose. And I wrote prose all the way through my teenage years, and I would basically... it's the same way that I write: I switch genres now. I would write stories; and I would write raps; I would write bars, lyrics; and I would listen to music and get my inspiration from music; and I would read books; and I would watch films. And all of that was just the same to me.

SOC: Yeah, and I love in *A Book of Blues*, how all the stories are linked by music.

CN: Yeah, yeah... I mean every short story collection I do is going to have the theme of music running through it in some way or another. So, it might be just as tenuous as like the title, or it might be weaving through all of the

stories. They're definitely all going to be titled. They're going to have some reference to music. So, you've got *Music for the Off-Key*, the first one; *A Book of Blues*; then, the one coming out later this year is *Cosmogramma*, which is a Flying Lotus album. And the next one... I think I can say this... is going to be called *Conversations with the Unseen*, which is a Soweto Kinch album.

SOC: Oh! Do you listen to the music that you're writing about and influenced about whilst you're actually writing?

CN: It depends. Not with the short stories generally because I generally try to listen to the music that's right for the actual short story. But generally, when I'm writing novels and when I'm writing scripts, I'll have a playlist, and I'll listen to that playlist while I'm writing. But I don't actually do that for the short stories, weirdly enough. Because they're all so different, I don't think I could have a playlist in that way. It would just jump around a lot.

SOC: You've written in so many different genres: I mean, detective, science fiction, ghost stories... *The Gospel According to Cane* is kind of loosely a domestic noir about a woman who lost her child when he was a baby; and the story begins when a young black man starts following her and claims he's her son. Although, the story is about pain and loss, and you were mentioning *Cosmogramma* before... I mean, that's science fiction.

CN: Yes.

SOC: Then you've got one of your stories, 'Underground', that's kind of a ghost story. So, tell me about writing in these different genres. What inspired you to change genre from your kind of earlier start with *The Scholar* and *Society Within*?

CN: Yeah... I mean, when I wrote *The Scholar*, I knew that I didn't really want to come back to doing that kind of stuff again. I knew I wanted to do something different. I think that there was a bit of opposition from publishers and from my agents. They were just like, 'How can we market you doing these different things?' It was kind of unheard of for a black writer to kind of shapeshift in that way. And I knew from day one that was what I wanted to do. So, it was always the intention to shift, and actually doing *Society Within* next was just because it was my second book and I had 'second book syndrome'. And the novel that I would have done next would have been a novel about squatting in Ladbrooke Grove; but I wrote that novel and it was a failure. So, I thought rather than... because I was just new, you know, I had only written one book... I was still thinking, 'Well, can I do this, continuously? What if I just had one book in me and that was it?' So, I decided to play it a little bit safer the third time around and I had these stories lying around that I had been writing anyway – just a few stories, maybe three or four of them that were set on Greenside and I thought, 'Oh, if I pull them together, re-write one of them, and write some more stories, I'll have an interlinked collection of short stories that is basically a novel.' And that would be a way to do it.

So, writing *Society Within* really got me back on the saddle again. Then I was like, 'Okay. So, now I've done two books set in the same area.' Even though they're not anyway the same in content and format and structure and everything, I've managed to change that. But I've done two books when I only said I was going to do one. Yeah, I better change it up next time. And so, I started to try and experiment with the ways that I could do that.

The 'crime writing thing' was a safe bet, but I was always like, 'Okay, so if I'm going to do this, I'm going to slightly try and do it a little bit differently.' And I think that that was because crime writing is quite traditional in a sense; and I was stuck between wanting to do it differently and wanting to adhere to the traditions of crime writing. And I think I managed to achieve a halfway house, which was a bit – probably – unsatisfying for everybody. I still like that book, you know... but I just feel like there was so much going on for me at the time. I was living in temporary accommodation, struggling with housing, and I was struggling with myself, struggling with the... not fame you know, but being in the public eye at a young age. I was struggling with PTSD – I think it really hit hard at that stage – from stuff that happened to me in my late teens. So, I had all this stuff going on and it just was an imperfect time to be writing a book like that. And so, I just learnt from it, you know. I wrote the book, it came out and stuff and I was like, 'Okay, next time around, I'm just going to go all out now.'

SOC: You've certainly gone full into it with *A River Called Time*. So, this is your latest novel and could be described as speculative fiction. It's quite hard to categorize – in a good way. So, tell me about that novel, because some of the initial ideas for that came from that period of time when you were struggling with housing and living in temporary accommodation. I mean, wasn't it at that sort of time that you first had the initial idea?

CN: *Snakeskin* was published in 2002 and I wrote *A River Called Time* – the whole of part one, as you have it in the book, in 2003... say to 2004. So, *A River Called Time* was going to be my fourth novel. That was the next book. That was the decision I'd made. I'm going to 'go for it' this time because I felt hampered and restricted by all sorts of things: like trying to be a slightly commercial writer; trying to stay within the traditions of the way that crime fiction stories are supposed to be told; trying to do all these things... and

all the problems I was having. That was like, 'Okay, next time, I want to do it *properly*; it's going to be *A River Called Time*.' And that's the book and I'm going to go 'all out'. I did... I did with part one and then I just found it really, really, difficult because my publishers at the time said, basically, 'It's the best book you've written so far but we're not going to publish it because how can we market you? Why don't you stick to urban fiction?' Because of this decision, I've told you, I've been talking to you about this for ages, this is what I *want* to do. I went through about... it must have been about four or five agents during that time [Laughs], until about 2006, and then I was just like, 'Okay, I'm just going to stop now.' And that was it. I was kind of agentless. I had this part one of this novel that no one seemed to want.

I decided in 2006, that I better do something else, because I needed to eat; I needed to live. That's when I wrote *Music for the Off-Key*. That was my next book after that, and I'd been writing those stories as well, in tandem with writing *A River Called Time*. That's when I tried to pull it together as a project. It had existed in many different forms, with many different stories, and it never quite worked. Then I was like, 'Okay, I've got some that are good, and I'll lose the ones that aren't good, and I'll try and write some new ones.' But, yeah, it actually came together that time around. I think I'll try three different versions of it.

SOC: And can you tell me a bit about the other work that you've done? So, working in theatre and TV, I mean, that's... you know, you said earlier about you had this idea at 11 that being a writer was very isolating and yet you have actually gone into very collaborative work, co-writing with Steve McQueen. And obviously with theatre as well as TV, there's just so many other people involved.

CN: Yeah, yeah. I mean, I did find the process of working on a novel really isolating. I had to separate myself from my friends. Eight months, it took me to write *The Scholar*. They would be calling me up and saying, 'You've got to come out, man. There's a party... this, that and the other...' I'd be like, 'Nah. Can't do it, man. I've got to write this book.' Eventually, they gave up. But, yeah, I was always trying to find ways to combine the work with working with people. And I think film was a part of that; really interesting, that. But I tried to direct, and I wasn't very good at it. I still wrote screenplays, but then I 'found' theatre, and theatre was hugely collaborative. I would do that, again, alongside writing the books; I'd write a play as well. So, sometimes I'd have a book out and a play out at the same time. I'd just bounce from one to the other.

But also, you know, I did like the power that came with controlling a world all by yourself. I did like that - that sense of like... I'm in complete creative control of this vision. And also, sometimes I was like, 'Okay, well I want some more heads in on this.' So, the theatre is great because it wasn't just me. So, sometimes I resented that. Not *resented* that... that's a bit too strong a word; but sometimes I wanted a change, you know. I wanted to do that, I wanted to have that sense of 'power' and creative control. And other times, I wanted to relinquish that creative control. And I moved... like always moved between those two 'states'... It was just nice to have a bit of both, rather than have it all one way.

SOC: But the thing that I really want to know is how do you manage to juggle all these different writing projects? Because it's not as if you very neatly do one and then the other. Everything's kind of overlapping a bit.

CN: Yeah, I don't know. I'm not sure I'm great at it, particularly at the minute, because I am a bit overwhelmed by the amount of good stuff I've

got coming my way; stuff that 'I must do this...' I'm trying to cut a lot of stuff out now, to be honest. I'm saying 'No' to a lot of stuff, just because I feel like I've really got to concentrate. But generally, when I'm working, it's what's the most urgent thing at this moment in time? What do I really need to get in quickly? And I'll work on that and then I'll get it done and then it's on to the next. I've just done that this week, you know. So, if I just keep my head down and concentrate on the most urgent thing, it generally... it gets done, and then I move on and then that gets done. It is difficult sometimes.

SOC: Yes, yeah. Well, thank you so much. It's been such a pleasure to talk to you.

CN: Yeah, thank you!

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

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