

WRITERS MOSAIC

Alex Wheatle

in conversation with Roopa Farooki

Roopa Farooki: Hi, I'm Roopa Farooki.

Alex Wheatle: Hi, I'm Alex Wheatle.

RF: And we're here in Alex's south London home, which is not too far from the beating heart of Brixton, where many of his novels are set. I'm delighted to be talking to Alex Wheatle for the Royal Literary Fund. Alex is an astonishing writer. His novels have covered the Brixton experience, the experience of being young and black in Britain, have gone back to the heritage of those who came before, and have moved forward to the children of those who grew up during the troubled times in the eighties. He's also started writing young adult novels, where he's speaking both to and for contemporary youth in the city. So, it is with great pleasure I welcome Alex to the RLF.

AW: Happy to talk to you.

RF: Well, thank you so much for speaking to us. Your books take the readers to such incredible territories... territories which, I suspect, are

'unvoiced' and unrepresented. I was wondering if we could maybe go back to the start of your journey, to what made you want to start to write these kinds of novels. Can you tell us a little bit about why you started to write?

AW: When I emerged from prison, in the back end of 1981, I caught the reading bug. I had a reading mentor in prison, and he would recommend certain texts for me. I remember reading C.L.R. James, Ralph Ellison, all those Harlem Renaissance writers. When I walked down Brixton High Street, I was looking to feed that. And so, what I found didn't quite please me. I couldn't find anything that related to me, or I could engage with that was about my experience. And so, I guess that lit the fire, really. At the time I was writing poetry, but I always had in mind that I wanted to write something that was about myself, about the people who I grew up with, about the people I engage with in Brixton, in a children's home, about my experiences, my sadness, my ups and downs. I wanted to record all of that. I always felt that I had experiences that were just as valid as anybody else's.

RF: So, it's a personal journey as well - as well as chronicling that of a community in which you grew up. I noticed that in your novels you mention very specific experiences, for example, a child in front of an uncaring Catholic priest, a child going through photos. And that seems to me to have been drawn from the personal as well.

AW: Absolutely.

RF: Did you use your own experiences in there?

AW: Absolutely. A lot of *Brixton Rock*, a lot of *Brenton Brown*, those were actual events that happened to me. So basically, I'm fictionalising true, real-life experiences that sometimes... Well, you know as a kid, some of those memories are so traumatic that to release them you have to let it go out into the world and my medium was writing or poetry. And so, I used that, and I think it's very important that I do, because I know that there's others out there who have gone through the same experiences, who have suffered the same way as I did. And so, I think it's quite therapeutic. It was for me to actually write it ... for all those readers and anybody else that understand and empathise with that kind of real-life situation.

RF: And when you wrote that explosive first novel with *Brenton Brown*, and in many ways, a lot of your experiences are there. I remember that there's one point, I think in the sequel, where his friends joke at him for having come to 'Brickie' with a Surrey accent. And that felt very true to yourself. What drove you through the process of actually writing it, because you were a lyricist before? I know that you learnt to love reading through prison. You said that you had a reading mentor. So, what made you want to try and put this experience into that novel?

AW: Well, first of all, I was a failed DJ.

RF: [Laughs]

AW: I wanted to be like Tippa Irie and Papa Levi. I wanted to make millions of dollars, playing sell-out concerts all over the world, you know being a reggae artist, but I couldn't quite get that. I had this need to try and

understand and process those agonising moments that I had... those traumatic moments I had growing up. It had to go somewhere. It took me a while to gain the confidence to say to myself, I can write a novel. That took me a long while. It took me ten, twelve years to even dare to think about it. Because, as I mentioned before, I'm this kid from a home... I'm not supposed to be writing novels. I'm not supposed to be even considering writing narratives that are going to be available in bookshops. That is not the world that the people who are in charge of me expected me to populate. And so, I really had to get over that for a long time. It was until I had that confidence, and the confidence came from expressing myself in poetry and lyrics; where in Brixton when I was 18, 19... 20, I could go to a dance, pick up the microphone, chat a few lyrics, people would jump up in the air, lighters up and hands swaying... That began the journey, if you like, of me becoming a novelist because when I was picking up the mic, I had no idea where it would lead to, but it did give me the discipline and the confidence later on when I needed it.

RF: And you brought those two worlds together in your books. I mean one of your books, I think it's in *East of Acre Lane*, you actually have I think... one of your lyrics, your lyrical kind of pieces, 'Uprising', is actually within that book.

AW: That's right. I wrote that in early 1982...

RF: [Laughs]

AW: ... on the back of a 12-inch reggae sleeve. I mean, those days...

RF: You didn't have a notebook?

AW: No.

RF: You wrote it on a reggae sleeve?

AW: Yeah.

RF: That's very cool, actually.

AW: That's what the DJs used to do, and we used to go up the old 'Frontline', the Railton Road area of Brixton, and there used to be fellow DJs there and we would practice our lyrics, and so on. And any writing material, paper, whatever you could find... that's what you wrote on. Yes, 'Yardman Irie' was actually me. That was my DJ name. It's kind of cheeky, in a way, I've created my own persona.

RF: You slid yourself into your own novel, as a character.

AW: Yeah, that's right... that's what I did. I think it's important though because you're controlling the narrative. I'm controlling our view of history, if you like. I was so tired of seeing newspaper reports about what happened in Brixton, what led up to the Brixton riots, and so on. And it was all done by, or written by, white commentators and columnists and so on. And so,

it was an opportunity for me to have my take on it and what I had experienced, what I observed, how it felt from my point of view. And so, it was very important that I grabbed that opportunity and run with it.

RF: Yeah, and I think it's a very important point about who deserves to tell these stories... who deserves to be the chronicler of these moments. It shouldn't always be from the outside and I think it's actually a very 'meta' idea, as they would say these days, to have put yourself within that book as the observer. About these books... I mean the way that you started writing *Brixton Rock*, it's very lyrical and it's also very real. The prose is, you know, very artful but, at the same time, the dialogue really sings from the page. It kind of puts me in mind of Steinbeck's work.

AW: I love Steinbeck, by the way.

RF: Really? I wanted to ask who your writing... who your reading influences were for your writing? What shaped the type of novel that you started to write?

AW: Chester Himes, Richard Wright. Steinbeck was one of them, because he was writing about an oppressed... I remember reading *Grapes of Wrath* and I was thinking, 'I get that! I get that! That could be me!' I thought, 'Yep. I want to get that kind of feel, that kind of attitude, that kind of melancholy into my characters.' And so, I learned from everybody. Yes, of course, I gravitated towards the Harlem Renaissance writers. That became more widespread, as I looked around the world looking for narratives that could help inform me.

I used to get quite annoyed actually when I first began because people would say, oh, I'm a 'Brixton writer'. And I thought, 'No, I'm not. These stories are for everybody.' I'm sure there's a kid in Bogota in Colombia, who could relate to this story, or somebody in Sydney, Australia, or somebody in Toronto, Canada. They have children's homes there; they have disenfranchised teenagers there. They have a community who are trying to make their way into that kind of world... wherever you get these communities. And so, you know when I hear stories about 'Oh, this [is] just a Windrush story, or this is just a story from a young Pakistani family moving to the UK...' No, it's not that; it's a 'world' story because people have always migrated to other places...

RF: Yeah.

AW: In the history of civilization... even before civilization occurred, that's always been a perpetual thing that's going on in the world today.

RF: I agree, and I think your books are... and I think sometimes they've been described as books that are particularly focused on the cultural difference, but in fact I think, you know, they are about struggle and disenfranchisement, which are universal stories. And I think also very much, in the early books, about class as well. I think it's about the difference between those who have, and have not; and about what avenues are closed and then what temptations are opened up. And what you have to do as a parent, as a child to navigate this very difficult life.

AW: Yeah... Usually, if you're born into [the] working class, it's about what you expect of yourself. What ambitions do you close off for yourself because you come from that working-class community? It takes a powerful mind to even imagine that you could step out of that and be anything you wanted to be. That was my journey also. That's why it took me so long to write the first novel, because I was sitting down sometimes thinking, 'No... That is not my place. That's not where I belong. I'm not worthy to sit at that place where I can call myself a novelist and see my books in a bookstore... Alex Wheatle on the spine... No, that is not where I...'. It takes a while for you to actually *believe* that that could be you.

RF: And you were talking about the influences that you had... the world influences and what you poured into your book. You also had this background as a south London DJ and as a lyricist. Did you want to inform your work with that as well?

AW: Absolutely.

RF: Because I feel the poetry and the musicality comes very clearly through. Is that something you wanted to make sure people stood up and heard about?

AW: I still do, Roopa.

RF: [Laughs]

AW: If you notice... I'm not sure if you flicked through the pages of my teen novels yet, but that DJ influence is still there. I'm still creating.

RF: Oh yeah, I read about the raves. [Laughs]

AW: Yeah, I'm still having scenes in raves and house parties and so on. So, I guess that will never leave me. I'll still be writing about that when I'm 70 and 80-odd. So, that's very important though that I do... that's my... that is my starting point. So, obviously I'm going to always go back to it and reference it. In a way, I'm still that kid with a microphone in his hand, trying to entertain the crowd... you know, with lyrics, wordplay, and so forth. I'm still that kid. That's what gets me up in the morning excited thinking, 'Okay, how can I spin this line? How can I make that line? How can I make this interesting? How can I replace that word? How can I create a new word... from 18, 19, 20?'

RF: You're always creating new words. I love the kind of play that you do with them.

AW: So... I've always done that. It's part of my DNA now, if you like, because that was the creative DJ I was. I guess it's a bit of an ego thing. Every DJ back in Brixton wanted to be known for some particular style, specific kind of melody, or whatever it may be. With me and my writing, I'm exactly the same. I want someone to pick up an Alex Wheatle book, whether it's *East of Acre Lane*, *Island Songs*, or *Home Girl* – say they just dive into the middle pages and they read a few sentences, I want them to say to themselves, 'No one writes like that. Only Alex Wheatle writes like

that...' They might not like it, but I want it to be individual. I don't want it to be any old, any old... I want it to be an Alex Wheatle book.

RF: Yeah, it's absolutely your voice.

AW: It's my voice. It's my voice in there and only my voice in there. Yes, of course I've been influenced but now that I'm writing something... 'Okay, this is a Wheatle book', you know?

RF: I feel that we should have a musical soundtrack to the back of this interview.

AW: [Laughs]

RF: I feel I should have asked you to curate one for us. In the young adult novels, I noticed a lot of the graffiti has these... if you'll allow me to say it... these really sick rhymes. It's really, really cool. Do you write those in the voice or in a particular child's voice?

AW: I try to. I try to capture that. Even now when I go into schools, kids are very creative, you know. Sometimes they're denied that creativity in the way English is taught today and what they're told to read today, to study for examinations and so on. I remember as a kid, it wasn't just reggae, it was kids who wanted to be mods... wanted to be greasers, wanted to be punky rockers and all that. And they were creative with their clothing, they were creative with their language, they were creative with their slang; and

I feel that in Britain, we've lost that a bit. I'm trying to hang on to that kind of Britishness that we had in the seventies and eighties. Yes, it was rough; yes, there was racism; but you had your groups here and there who could identify with certain music, certain fashions, and so on. And so, when I'm creating *Crongton*, I'm going back to that kind of Britain of the seventies, eighties, where you had your 'tribes' here and there and they spoke in certain ways. That's what I'm trying to do with *Crongton*.

RF: I mean I guess let's talk a little bit more about *Crongton*. I mean, what made you want to shift from writing your incredibly powerful novels which cover many voices? They've gone back generations to talk about the grandmothers' voices, growing up in Jamaica through to the children's voices in the early noughties. And now, you're writing like absolutely 'fresh to the fingertips', contemporary fiction to and for young adults. What drove that decision?

AW: I guess I was exhausted a bit for a narrative because I had done the Windrush generation kind of 'state narrative', if you like. And then I've done the 'Brixton uprising generation' narrative. And then I've done the children of that story as well. So, I'm looking around for stories... looking around for stories... thinking, 'Okay, what else is going to inspire me?' I've done the children's home thing. So, I said my piece on that. I've done my narrative on that. I would get invited to schools a great deal because people wanted to... I guess librarians, English teachers... wanted to invite someone like me to talk about my experience, you know, for inspirational purposes. I started to give these assembly presentations, not just about my books but about my life, my struggle and so on. It suddenly dawned on me that sometimes I was speaking to Year 7s, Year 8s, and I couldn't give them the book. I couldn't give them *East of Acre Lane*, because it's too much adult

for them. I couldn't give them a *Brenton Brown*. So, it was then I decided, I've got to write for them. But also, I didn't want to be like... Brixtonised. I didn't want to just write about what's going on in Brixton. So, for me Crongton is a fictional creation that could be anywhere. Like... if I'm up in Newcastle, and I'm giving a presentation there, I say, 'Yes, this could be up the road.' I want young readers to imagine that this fictional place could be next door to them.

RF: Yeah, indeed in any country.

AW: In any country... absolutely.

RF: So, did you feel you had a duty in some ways to kind of provide a voice for the children you were speaking to? You were telling these stories and there was nothing that you could give them that they could hold onto, that they could actually relate to. So, you felt you were actually filling something that wasn't there, maybe?

AW: Yeah, absolutely. It is there in little pockets here and there, but not enough, because, you know, the working-class narrative is multi-faceted. It's not just the story of [a character] like a *Liccle Bit*, who gets manipulated by a local gang lord. There's also stories about the little girl who wants to be a ballet dancer. There's also stories about the maths genius who doesn't get enough support in his classroom. It's stories like that, that need to be told as well.

RF: Yeah.

AW: There's a whole range, variety of stories out there from the working-class communities, from BAME communities, that we haven't read or heard yet.

RF: And I felt when I was like looking through the Crongton sequence that I actually hadn't felt something like this before where, because it's such an interconnected world, you're not just taking one person's story, you're actually building this really tightly-knit community where people come to the fore in the story, and then they come back, and then someone else comes to the fore. And it's very much like in life, that you have this kind of overhead view of this world, and it's a fictionalised world, but it reflects a reality.

AW: My fiction is driven by family dynamics. That's what really gives me a buzz because I didn't grow up with it, so I'm fascinated by it. For me, in Crongton, I could write this forever...

RF: I hope you do.

AW: ... focusing on these, you know, families, communities and so on.

RF: I think you're writing about something quite universal. You're writing about the fragility of family in some ways and also the tightness of friendship and what gets us going through the tough times. But you also

cover some really dark and difficult themes. And this is the reality of any teenager's life, but it's not often seen in fiction in a way that they could relate to. So, you talk about... quite openly about gang violence and the casualisation of some violence... of, you know, things like tech theft in schools, of children dealing with being single parents or having lost a parent to a bereavement. Focusing on these really tough themes, was that kind of hard for you to go there for children?

AW: To be honest, it wasn't so hard for me to focus on this because it's been part of my life; not just as someone who had to endure the agony of living in a brutal children's home but being a youth worker. I was a youth worker for a number of years; and I would meet young people on a Tuesday and Thursday evening, and they would come in... they would be distressed about a particular issue that's coming from their home life, or their school life. And they would sit down and sometimes they would trust us enough to tell us what the issue was about, and I'm thinking, 'Oh my gosh. There's so many issues, so many obstacles and challenges that young people have to endure these days.'

RF: Yeah... and also new challenges. In *Crongton Knights* I really found the story of Saira really touching. She... I don't know if you want to talk a little bit about it...

AW: Yes, I do. Like most people, I'm very moved by the refugee crisis. And, again, it goes to the old Exodus story of people wanting better... travelling to find somewhere better. I was in Istanbul a few years ago and I went down to the harbour and watched a ship come in – and Saira came into my head, then. In fact, she is probably the first character I fully fleshed out for

Crongton Knights. The narrative was going to be centred around her, but I didn't believe I was informed enough...

RF: Right, I understand that, yeah.

AW: ... about her world, her life, her background. She did become an important member of the Crongton Knights, who go off on this adventure. She was the strongest image I had at the very start of the process of writing that book – because she's part of my world. I cannot ignore her, like I cannot ignore 'Boys in the Hills' because white kids populate our lives, rich white kids, poor white kids, Asian kids, Muslim kids, you know. So, sometimes I cannot understand why writers are so shy of representing the world as it is.

RF: I think it's so important that you did include characters like Saira and 'Boy from the Hills' but, for those who have yet to discover these characters, you should absolutely check out Alex's novels. Saira is... she's come from Turkey, she has such a story of displacement, and yet she finds a new, I guess... a new kind of community with her friends. But, you know, she still has to cope with what's missing.

AW: Absolutely.

RF: She's lost her father – she has to deal with that. She doesn't know whether she'll ever see him again, or what happened. And you have to also deal with that lack of knowledge, that you may never know. These

tragedies are happening to children in our communities every day, and they kind of keep them quiet. And, actually, you need to know what's behind people's actions and people's sadness, as well.

AW: Absolutely. And let's not be too timid about having these narratives on the page, because kids are having to be confronted with them on a daily basis. So, let's write about it.

RF: Exactly.

AW: Let's be open about it, you know.

RF: And if someone like you can't tell these stories, I don't know who can, actually. Because, you know, I guess, as writers, what we really want to do is create the support for people to come after us. We want to create that ladder for people to climb up and say, 'Yes, I want to write my story too.' So, I imagine a young Turkish girl reading Saira's story in *Crongton Knights* will think, 'Yes, I want to write my story now.'

AW: Be inspired. Be inspired. And, also, another big factor, and I hope you keep this in, by the way, we're sitting in this very room, in my front room, and when my kids were going to school... you know eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve years old, and they'd want to have birthday parties, and I'd say, 'Yeah, invite who you like.' You would have kids from everywhere. My son, Marvin, he had a very good friend whose parents were Maltese. My daughter, Serena, got a very good friend... one of her closest friends at the

time was a girl from... whose parents came from Yemen. And it didn't occur to them that they come from different places around the world, or their parents might dress slightly differently. It just didn't occur to them. They've moved on from my generation where there was that bit of division; where, you know, the Blues dances, the parties that I went to in Brixton at the time, were totally West Indian-dominated. Yeah, you might find the odd white girl, or white guy in there, but really it was very West Indian-dominated. And so, that's why I've got hope. I mean know we're living in a time of the far-right, Trump, Brexit, and the rest of it, but it's the next generation that give me hope, because they don't see race, colour or anything, or religion as some kind of barrier like maybe my generation did. I'm trying to reflect that in the *Crongton* series as well – where everyone is important.

RF: I love that you're talking about hope because I think there is a lot of hope in your work. I wonder, do you feel that you could have written that kind of hopeful narrative without the journey in writing that you've taken?

AW: That's a very good question. Hopefully, I would have created a narrative that would lead to that hope... no matter anything else that went on in my life. Without a doubt, I grew up with people who haven't been as fortunate as me, who have suffered because their childhoods were so traumatic that they could never recover. But I've been blessed in a way, you know, in that I've got a sound mind enough to raise a family, have a career that I really, really enjoy. I feel like an obligation.

RF: It sounds like giving back to you is really important. You're giving back to your readers, I know you do a lot of school visits, and you've done prison

visits, and you were telling me about a project that you're doing in Manchester to help children who have been pushed out of the education system for whatever reason. How important is it to you that you do that? Is that what also helps feed your motivation as a writer and I guess in that kind of activism as well?

AW: I've got to use my platform well – I have to, you know, the background I had leads me to that. Otherwise, I'd be very selfish, wouldn't I? If I didn't even try to improve other young people's lives, you know, through my journey... even telling my journey to an assembly of Year 8s or Year 9s? And even if they don't pick up a book, but they want to be a sculptor, want to be a painter, want to work harder in history – that's a result. I have to use this platform.

RF: And do you feel that mentorship helped you? Did you have support from...

AW: Yeah, I did.

RF: You talked about your reading mentor when you went through those months in prison, but other writers, other communities... did they kind of help you carry on, you know, persist when sometimes writing felt too hard?

AW: Absolutely. And family, friends of family... I was reunited with my mother in my late twenties, early thirties. So, that was again another motivation for me: to concentrate on my writing and actually believe I could

accomplish this. And so, there's been many people along the way who sat me down and said, 'Alex, believe in yourself. Try this, you know, because you're going to regret it if you don't try.' And also, another important thing is that a number of people told me, 'Don't be scared to fail. No one's going to laugh. Just give it your best shot.' And I think sometimes our young children need to hear that, too.

RF: Would that be a message to your younger self then?

AW: Absolutely.

RF: If you had to go back and give young Alex [a message], who was struggling, who wouldn't have yet made peace with the past, because it was too close, and it was too raw. What message would you give to yourself back then when you were starting out?

AW: Confidence... Believe. You know... that's what I would say to a young Alex, that 'Better Must Come' – it's that old Jamaican saying – but 'Better Must Come'.

RF: Can I ask you what are you going to do next? What's your next ambition, whether it's in the writing world, or beyond? What do you really want to do next?

AW: I want to maybe write another play. I'm really excited about maybe coming up with another narrative for a play. I want to dig into Caribbean

history, maybe African history, too. And maybe set a young adult novel there, or even a middle grade novel there, who knows? I'm considering writing something for TV; I'm involved with the Steve McQueen BBC series – that's got the juices flowing, and I want to create in that medium too. I want to go back to my poetry; I want to see what's good... see what's rubbish and try and put it together and maybe publish a poetry anthology.

RF: That's fantastic. You're going full circle back to where you began as a poet and a lyricist.

AW: Yeah.

RF: That's amazing. So, we've got lots to hear from you yet. I just... I would like, as a final... you've been incredibly generous with your time, and one final question: 'What message would you like to give to your readers?'

AW: Readers? [Laughs] 'Thank you.'

RF: The people – the adults, and the young adults...

AW: 'Thank you' that's the first one.

RF: What message would you like to give them?'

AW: Expect a lot more, basically.

RF: So, for readers of all ages, for those discovering *Island Songs* for the first time, or discovering *Brenton Brown*, or discovering *Crongton*, what do you want them to take from your story? Is there something in particular that you hope that you've given them?

AW: Empathy and understanding of the people who I write about. To let them into your world and to give you an understanding of that experience.

RF: Fantastic.

AW: ... you know, in the pages of my work.

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

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