

## **Liming with Anansi**

Ingrid Persaud

This pandemic real messed with we. A set of normal things like human touch we've had to avoid. Madness. Crazy 2020 began with us united – marching into the Corona War. Everybody did their lil part towards this collective goal of defeating the virus. Now in these dying weeks of 2020, with science muddied by politics and economics, the commess has spread. Every man Jack is fed up to the eye teeth with this bubol. When it ending? Chook me with a vaccine now please and thank you. We're overs baking sourdough bread, binge-watching TV and stop-starting *War and Peace*. I say we, but I wasn't one of them people exerting so much energy.

As the world locked down my long marriage ended. Grief's shock and brutality mashed me up bad. All I wanted to do was run and hide under the duvet. But if you name mother it don't happen so. Twin sons needed me, even if all they wanted was acknowledgement of their anger and pain at the break-up of our family. My debut novel was also being published. Book events were cancelled left, right and centre and replaced by Zoom this and Zoom that. While I was grateful for the positive reviews – showing up professionally, skinning my teeth, was real pressure. Thankfully eye make-up and clever lighting hid the fact that minutes before these Zoom interviews your girl was usually quietly crying on the bathroom floor.

Chapters of a second novel sat on the laptop humbugging me. I'd promised myself and my agent that, come 2020, I was putting my head down and writing steady. But the work demanded following a cast of characters into awful, dark places. Think neglect, abuse, suicide. When your real world isn't too shiny, descending the ladder into an emotional pit is a high-risk move. But any two-by-four writer will tell you it's unavoidable. Authentic writing demands nothing less.

The writing refused to flow. Extracting words from brain to screen was like digging out ground provisions with one finger. I had a choice – stop writing this novel or end up in a home for the bewildered. Even after putting aside the draft I still needed emotional soothing bad. Surely something could blunt my pain while allowing me to function as both mom and professional author. So no wine and no weed. I'm not into anything harder. That left sex. But I couldn't even do that because with lockdown you can't meet nobody. Besides, when I asked mirror, mirror on the wall, it said I had the least confidence and biggest muffin top belly of them all. I didn't reject Tinder. It rejected me.

I admitted defeat. Writing was the only space I felt a tups of autonomy. Unable to work on the novel, I spent months drafting short stories, essays, flash fiction. Man, I even did lines of poetry. Mercifully that phase didn't last. Talk about unreadable. Then ay-ay, one day, just so just so, I was staring at the computer screen when who pass to check me but Anansi. Yes, the same Anansi, chief mischief-making spider. I couldn't remember when last I saw him. He watched me straight in my eye, grinned and winked. How could I resist? I winked back at trouble himself. Before long he led me into a new world of children's stories, where of course he was the starboy.

Of all the people, real or imagined, I never expected to be rescued by this old spider. When I was small, Anansi and his friends like Brer Rabbit, Dog and Puss weren't considered good enough. Often poorly illustrated and cheaply printed, Anansi breezed through my childhood but didn't land. Instead I rocked with the Secret Seven, Famous Five and Bobbsey Twins. While they were mainly good-looking blondes laughing, playing hockey and holding midnight feasts, my own childhood in San Fernando seemed miserable, inferior and remote. My primary school, founded by Canadian Presbyterian missionaries, shovelled maths and English, English and maths, 8 a.m. to 3 p.m., Monday to Friday. Anything else would be wasting the Lord's talents, the teacher's time and your parents' money. Life with Enid Blyton was gentler, and more sophisticated than our daily grind. Even the weather was superior. Changing seasons offered coloured leaves in autumn, snow in winter, spring blossoms and dappled sun. We had two seasons – scorching hot sun or hard rain flooding town.

Now that Anansi had appeared I took my uneducated self and dove into every Anansi story I could find. Some were popular, appearing in several anthologies. Others less so. Digging deep I found one-hundred-and-forty-nine Anansi stories. I am sure sure there are more. If you know how vex I was that my childhood had bypassed this treasure trove, for foolishness like Noddy and Malory Towers. And, as if that wasn't enough, it hurt my heart that writers like Neil Gaiman had, ever since, appreciated what I'd left unclaimed. His book, *Anansi Boys*, started life at number one on the New York Times Bestseller list. He has every right to use our African-Caribbean mythology. The question is why West Indian writers weren't also heavy mining this rich seam.

It was high time I dipped my pen in the ink that is my birthright. Scrambling to write the stories I wanted children to read, I began by retelling some

Anansi favourites, adding my own bacchanal. I rewrote *Anansi and Fire* in Trini English, adding local colour and fleshing out the relationship between Ground Dove and Anansi:

– Jehovah, put a hand. Think, Anansi, think. Use the brains you have in that big head.

– I should have used my brains and listened to my mother. She always said if I marry you I would end up flying away from all my friends and them.

– No woman was ever going to be good enough for your mother but that is beside the point. I'm telling you now. Fire trying to outsmart you. Jerk pork and a bottle of rum and now you want to bring him here. You don't understand? He go burn down we house.

Poor loveable Anansi, outsmarted yet again because he had hard ears and he didn't listen to nobody – not even his sensible wife.

As Anansi and I got easy with each other, I became more bold face with my own retelling. High off the light of long summer evenings, I began writing stories I felt were missing. Children, especially of Caribbean heritage growing up in the UK, ought to have a choice of stories incorporating their history and their experiences. *Anansi And The Curse Of Seven* I transported to London, adding new characters like Scarlet Pigeon. But I added some hard talk like this where Scarlet Pigeon tells about her dad leaving the islands:

- Anansi, use some of your hands them and top up my tea please. Now, we have to go back to when daddy came to London on that big ship, Windrush. Things were hard. First they had to find place to live. They walked up and down but all about had signs saying “No dark pigeons, dogs or cats welcome”.

Ground Dove’s mouth dropped open.

- What they had against them? They behave bad?
- Girl, nothing so. People didn’t want to rent to them simply because they had a different colour. Hard to imagine but it’s the truth – cross my heart and hope to die, stick a needle in my eye.

Scarlet Pigeon wet her lips with tea.

- Daddy and his crew were strong. They grew thick feathers so the insults slid off their backs. He and his friend Cat looked for a place to live together to share the bills. One of the few people willing to rent to dark pigeons, dogs and cats was a Rat Man named S-e-v-e-n. I’ve seen pictures of the terrible places he rented to Daddy and others for big big money. Apparently the first night Cat tried to swing out of bed he hit his head and ended up needing stitches.

And just like that Caribbean kids could be introduced to a part of their history. Other children could catch a glimpse of the West Indian immigrant experience in the UK. The boldfacedness to rewrite these Anansi stories came partly because I was coping better personally. Crying morning, noon

and night was over. I still cycled back and forth through the stages of grief, but writing for innocent readers gave me purpose.

Lately I've reached the point where I want Anansi to have brand new adventures. Rutger Bregman's book, *Humankind*, gave me an idea. He discussed the case of boys stranded for eighteen months on the deserted Pacific island of Ata. In direct contrast to William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, this true story showed that in life-or-death situations we don't always turn on each other. These boys worked as a team to survive, and get themselves rescued. So I sent Anansi and friends Scarlet Pigeon, Brer Goat and Sister Rabbit on an adventure. They stole a cursed boat that took off with one speed and dumped them far away from home on a deserted island, wind rushing everywhere. I breathed out hard and thanked the little spider. His magic was healing the writer and the woman.

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## **Ingrid Persaud**

Ingrid Persaud is a late bloomer to the world of literature. She began her adult life as a lawyer, having studied law at the London School of Economics. She'd always yearned for an artistic life, an ambition which took her to study fine art at Goldsmith College and Central St.Martins. Up until her 40s, Ingrid Persaud taught law at Kings College, London, and also worked as a visual artist, before undergoing the transformation into a writer.

Apart from her Costa First Novel award 2021, her prizes and awards include the BBC National Short Story Award (2018) and the Commonwealth Short Story Prize (2017) for 'The Sweet Sop', a story exploring themes of fractured families, death and terminal illness, through the medium of chocolate.

Persaud's work is mostly set in Trinidad and Tobago, where she was born and grew up before relocating to the UK.

A recording of this talk can be found at **[writersmosaic.org.uk](https://writersmosaic.org.uk)**

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