

## **Bernardine Evaristo**

in conversation with Colin Grant

**COLIN GRANT:** One of the first phrases in the book is, 'I never saved anything for the swim back.' And that's a quote from the film *Gattaca*. Why have you started with that? And what does it mean to you?

**BERNARDINE EVARISTO:** Yeah, I love that quote. [*To audience*] Does anybody know the film, *Gattaca*? It's about a guy who achieves against impossible odds. And it's a fantasy film, science fiction. And I remember I used to write down all these quotes that I came across. So, people saying things that were about success and how they got to do what they're doing, and how to keep going. And just all the sort of life skills that you need to learn in order to sort of stay on your path and do the thing that you love doing, and to reach the goals that you set for yourself. This was one that really struck a chord with me, because 'I never saved anything for the swim back' is essentially saying, I gave it everything! Absolutely everything. And there's no second plan, in case it didn't work out. It was saying that I have *total* conviction that I'm gonna go for this thing.

**CG:** But isn't it wise to keep some petrol still in the tank?

**BE:** [Laughs, and audience, too] No, no, I never did. I remember when I was about... because I was an actor to begin with, and I was about 14, and I said to my mum that I was going to be an actor. And she said, 'Oh, you should learn typing skills – just in case.' And, even then, I was like so affronted. Of course, she was absolutely right. You know, I became a writer... I still can't type. But the fact was, her first thought was, 'Oh, well, what if it doesn't work out?' Whereas I was like, 'No, this is what I *want* to do, and that's what I'm *going* to do.' And so that's what that quote represents for me.

**CG:** It's a great quote.

**BE:** Yeah.

**CG:** So, you've written lots of novels, lots of plays, a lot of poetry; first nonfiction book.

**BE:** Yeah.

**CG:** What took you so long? Or, why now? And do you feel confident in writing nonfiction, that you hadn't done before?

**BE:** Well, I had written a lot of nonfiction, but not a book. So, I've written lots of essays, and reviews, actually, and articles – probably for about 30 years. But writing a full-length book was new for me. And I never really intended to do it. I did a PhD in Creative Writing, and I wrote a 30,000-word, academic essay on the representation of black men in black British fiction, and that was academic, the footnotes and the rest of it. And I thought, 'Well, okay, I've done that. Now, I'm never going to do academic writing again!' Even though I enjoyed the challenge of having to do it. I don't know

what I would write about. I wasn't thinking about writing an autobiography, or memoir, or anything like that. It was only when I won the Booker I was talking so much, you know, hundreds of interviews, literally talking about how I reached this point in my career in my life, and the rest of it. Because there was so much interest in me that – then I thought when it came to negotiating the next book with my publisher – I thought, Well, why don't I write a memoir about my creativity in my life? – which is really what it's about, essentially. And so that's what I did.

**CG:** I wonder the degree to which this huge success, both critical and financial success...

**BE:** How do you know it's financial? [Audience laughs]

**CG:** Because, because, I spoke to my editor and she said you sold a million copies. [Laughs] She may have been lying, but that's what she said to me, maybe to put me in my place; I'd been a bit uppity that day.

**BE:** It's true...

**CG:** But I suppose the question I'm reaching for is, how does that shift in your approach to saying 'No' to things? Because I can imagine you getting a lot of people approaching you. And do you have a kind of formula, or method for weeding your way through... the rubbish that is out there that's coming your way to find the cream?

**BE:** It's not really rubbish...

**CG:** Speaky Spokey... the Nightingale Room? [Laughs]

**BE:** I'm doing this for *you*, Colin, actually and Mosaic. It's not rubbish. I mean, it's wonderful to be in demand. But at the same time, you know, I only have one life. And I have to focus on the things that are most important to me. But at the same time, I've been in the arts for 40 years, and I *know* a lot of people, and *everybody* wants me to do something. And so, the first year after the Booker, I said 'Yes' to so many things. And then this last year, I've been slowly learning to say 'No', because as a writer, that's my priority. I need to – well, a) I need to have a life that isn't just work and b) I need to clear my head to write. That means saying 'No' to a lot of things. So, I'm now saying No to a lot of things. But there are some things I can't say No to. So, when I'm being published in all these countries around the world – which is happening – I can't say No I'm not doing any publicity for you; or, in the States, for example, I'll be touring there next year. So, there are certain demands that you have to fulfil... And it's very hard to say No to people I know and like, to be honest.

**CG:** [Laughs and audience, too]

**BE:** Obviously, it's really hard to say No, but I'm learning how to do it.

**CG:** Well, I'm glad you haven't said No to me... Now, there's so many great lines in this book, but, in essence, it's a manifesto, and I wonder when you first had the idea for a manifesto; because I wrote my first manifesto when I was 13.

**BE:** [Laughs]

**CG:** Do you know... that idea that it's you against the world, and you're going to put your stamp on the world? And that idea arises, I think, sometimes as a teenager. Was this your first stab at writing a manifesto?

**BE:** Absolutely. Absolutely. Yeah. It never felt like a manifesto, because it is about the decisions I've made, to have the career that I've had, right. And, so, it's not like a political manifesto, where you come up with your ambitions and your goals. And then you don't fulfil them – usually, or you work towards fulfilling them. This is me saying at the end, there is a manifesto, literally a page and a bit, which is a literal manifesto. But the rest of it is how the manifesto has been formed through the act of my life. And I also say, there's a manifesto in all of us, and wherever age or stage you are in your life, this is something that is about how the decisions you make lead to your, say, creative life.

**CG:** It helps if you have good parents, doesn't?

**BE:** I had good parents, yes.

**CG:** And so, my mum used to say to me, 'Without the vision, you perish.'

**BE:** Wow!

**CG:** And it seems to me that your mother was the storyteller, and your father was the one who gave lectures.

**BE:** Absolutely. 'Without a vision you perish.' I mean, I know that was a very long time ago when your mum was saying that.

**CG:** Yes, yes.

**BE:** And that's something that people, many people go through their life and don't even think about that. But I had to learn how to have a vision for

my career or visions for my career, through motivational and personal development courses. That's where I got that from. My parents were role models. And, actually, it was only through writing this book that I realised how important they were in my formation, you know, because they were both very strong individuals, they carved out a path for themselves as individuals and as a couple. They went against the grain. My mother rebelled against her family. My father was very political. They're both very political.

**CG:** So, we should explain your father's from Lagos.

**BE:** Yeah, Nigeria, and my mother's English. And they married in the 50s – interracial marriage and all of that stuff going on in the 50s. And, and they were very determined to live a life that would honour their principles.

**CG:** 1954, right?

**BE:** They got married in 54, I think, yeah.

**CG:** In 1954, *Picture Post*, you know, the *Picture Post*?

**BE:** Yeah.

**CG:** They had a front-page article. And the headline was, 'Would you let your daughter marry a Negro?' So that's the climate, wasn't it?

**BE:** That was the climate. It was the worst thing anyone could do, really, a white person. So, yeah...

**CG:** They must have been brave.

**BE:** So, they were very, very brave. You know, my mother was more intellectual, and my father was more activist. You absorb it through osmosis, don't you, when you're growing up? Whatever you're getting from your parents, you're absorbing it. And so, I did absorb that. So, the strength you see in me, which I think I've always had, but I built on, it comes from those two individuals.

**CG:** Now you say that you don't go to see any psychiatrist or therapist...

**BE:** Why are you looking at me suspiciously? [Laughs, the audience too]

**CG:** [Laughs] Like... the quote is that you'd 'like to live with your demons.'

**BE:** Yeah.

**CG:** Can you expand on that?

**BE:** Yeah, you know... do you know Phillipa Perry? psychotherapist, writes for *The Observer* at the moment, and she interviewed me on Monday for the 'Guardian Live' event...

**CG:** Warm-up, warm-up. She was doing a warm-up for me. [Audience laughs]

**BE:** ... And at the end, she said, 'You don't need therapy.' I was just like, 'Wow'. She said, 'Don't you know that?' I said, 'No.' She said, 'No, because you don't have...' She said that the idea of demons... 'you don't have all this unresolved stuff', and I have been talking about writing about my family. In my book, *Lara*, I wrote about my mother, my father, my

grandparents, and ancestors. Through the act of writing this book, I resolved some of the issues I had around my own personal identity as a biracial person, but also my grandmother's racism, I understood where she was coming from, I wrote her with empathy. So, the act of writing actually helped me understand the people in my life, and even those who weren't through my imagination. And she said, 'Yeah, because it's almost kind of resolved for you. You don't need therapy.'

**CG:** So, the process of writing resolves?

**BE:** I think so. Yeah.

**CG:** Recently, there's a film that's come out called *Passing*.

**BE:** Yeah, I've seen it.

**CG:** You made an interesting point about the fact that the characters, or the actors playing the people 'passing' wouldn't necessarily 'pass'.

**BE:** No, they wouldn't 'pass'... that's Ruth Negga and Tessa Thompson. Has anyone seen the film? I mean, it's a beautiful film, you know. I love the sort of monochrome style of it and so on. But... where we going with this?  
[Audience laughs]

**CG:** The fact that you're dual heritage.

**BE:** Okay. Okay.

**CG:** Whether you could have 'passed'.



**BE:** I couldn't 'pass'!

**CG:** Couldn't you?

**BE:** No, no, no, no, no...

**CG:** Sure?

**BE:** But neither could those actors.

**CG:** But would you want to 'pass'?

**BE:** No, but as a child, I would have...

**CG:** That's what I'm getting at...

**BE:** Oh...

**CG:** Didn't you cross the road when your father...

**BE:** I did. I did. You know, and I wasn't the only one. [Audience laughs] I know. But I wasn't the only one in my family, you know. Others have admitted similar crimes when they were young, because we were just embarrassed about our father... You know, white area, mixed-race family, very dark-skinned father who did not do anything to inculcate in us a positive sense of black identity. And that's not his fault, you know. This was a very long time ago.

**CG:** What do you think his approach was? What was he thinking?

**BE:** He wasn't thinking... he wasn't thinking about. He just, you know... he raised us as British children, in a sense, but he *wasn't* because he was Nigerian, but he wanted us to fit in. That's what he said. And he couldn't pass on his language, which is Yoruba. Because how can you? Eight children, you know; no money, he's working full time, my mother's looking after all these children, and how do you teach? How do you pass on the language in that way? And, also, I just don't think he had it in him to do that. He wasn't really a teacher.

**CG:** Bernardine came in when I was still working [at] the BBC when we did a project together...

**BE:** Oh, yeah.

**CG:** ... on the history of the word 'nigger', the 'N-word'.

**BE:** Yeah.

**CG:** And I remember you saying, then, that your grandmother was a racist.

**BE:** Yeah.

**CG:** An out-and-out racist. And I just loved the way you just sort of said it straight – without any kind of censure even – just sort of saying it plain. And I wonder – over the passage of time – whether your understanding, or view of her, has changed in that regard.

**BE:** Yeah, it has. I understand where her racism came from, you know, she was somebody born at the turn of the century, she actually had an Irish mother, who came over here at the age of 12, and she had an Irish

grandmother, and they assimilated. Assimilation is the way in which you survive in your host country, isn't it? But if you're a person of colour it's very hard to assimilate. So, my theory about my grandmother which, actually I develop further through writing *Manifesto*, so I had... I kind of understood where she was coming from, when I wrote *Lara*. So that was really kind of illuminating for me, seeing that she came from this poor, working-class, Irish background in North London, and everything was about aspiring to do... to be better. And there was a time in my life where I was really snooty about my grandmother and her aspirations, which is really kind of immature of me. Because why would you not, as a working-class person at the turn of the 20th century, why would you not want to aspire to leave that poverty behind? I mean, workhouses were still around at that time, you know, it was a tough time, before the NHS. So why would you not? So, I understand where she's coming from. But that has developed through writing *Manifesto*, it deepened my understanding of... you know, the past is not static, in a way, the past is how we interpret it. As we move through life, that interpretation changes. So, the racism of my grandmother that appalled me when I was young, even though we loved her, and she loved us, and we were part of her lives. And she never really said anything – she slipped up a couple of times – but she didn't really, you know, she treated us pretty well. She was lovely. She was a lovely grandmother, you know... that then became me being much more compassionate because I knew where she had come from. And then through writing *Manifesto*, as I say, it just kind of deepened my understanding of who she was and the culture she came from. And that may, that may deepen in 10 years' time again.

**CG:** Well, you're capable of moving between your preference for men and women, aren't you? Or you have been...

**BE:** Oh, yes. [Laughs, and audience, too]

**CG:** [Laughs] Now, there's an amazing quote here, which I'd like you to expand on. Well, there's so many amazing quotes... 'Living out as a lesbian was not an easy choice. But it was the only one I could pursue with any integrity.' Can you expand on that? What was that phase of your life?

**BE:** Yeah. So, in my 20s, I lived as a lesbian, that was my identity. And I thought I was going to be a lesbian for the rest of my life. So, I had been heterosexual beforehand. And then I had this 'lesbian period'. You know, again, I think, because my parents are role models, I found myself attracted to women, and I pursued it. And it was not something I denied myself, my natural predilection at that time, was to be attracted to women. So, I had relationships with women. In a way I've kind of often – always, I think – honoured myself, my creativity and who I am in any kind of, at every stage of my life. So, I know people who don't honour their sexuality, you know, for so many reasons, they live another life, you know, and they deny it, whereas I didn't. And so, that's what I mean...

**CG:** There's a fluidity...

**BE:** ... with the most, integrity is, you know... I had integrity in that, that is what I was attracted to. I was attracted to women and, therefore, I spent 10 years having relationships with women. And then when the last relationship got really sour, I actually went back to guys and, you know, I don't really psychoanalyse it too much, because I think it's the most natural thing and I do say that, the most natural thing to be attracted to human beings.

**CG:** There's another lovely line which relates to that, it says, 'My lesbian identity was the stuffing in a heterosexual sandwich' – which I thought was just brilliant.

**BE:** [Laughs, and audience, too]

**CG:** I love that line. One of the formations of you, was going to drama school: Rose Bruford College. But you met four other very strong black women who...

**BE:** Yes.

**CG:** ... who forged a relationship with you... and gave you some direction about what you would do after you leave. It was important that it was a community theatre course.

**BE:** Yeah, because it was the only one of its kind – as far as I know – community theatre arts course; it probably lasted about 10 years. And it wasn't just training actors, it was training people to create their own theatre. And that was *really* amazing. So, it was then the beginning of me becoming a writer, actually, because you were there, and they were saying to you, okay, you need to put on a one woman show. And, so, you'd put... you'd have to write a one woman show. So, I didn't, I didn't, yeah, I didn't go to drama school to write. But I ended up writing while I was at drama school. And then, you know, in this very political atmosphere with loads of feminists and lesbians coming in to teach from theatre companies that they'd set up themselves; *really* powerful women, very, very different to traditional drama schools, where they would take more men than women, where we were primarily women, they wouldn't hardly take a black person every year – if they had to...

**CG:** Because they thought they couldn't give them roles?

**BE:** Yeah, and you would be cast in traditional plays. And they were very much focused on training you to act, not to be theatre-makers. And I was at an institution that was the opposite of that. So, I left really empowered. And I often think if I'd have gone to a traditional drama school, I wouldn't be here talking today. I probably wouldn't have become a writer, because I would have struggled to find work, which would have been the case in the 80s. And then I would have given up and probably become a drama teacher, or something.

**CG:** And in a way, as is the case I suppose for everybody, a certain amount of rejection is good.

**BE:** Yes, that's what I say. Yeah, it's good for you.

**CG:** Yeah.

**BE:** That's what I tell my students...

**CG:** Up to what point.

**BE:** [Laughs]

**CG:** I mean, if it's just a kind of 'wall of rejections' it's not so good, is it?

**BE:** [Laughs, and audience, too] Well, it just fortifies you, and it deepens your resolve to do what you want to do. You've just got to keep going. Yeah, sometimes you do have to change direction, maybe. But I don't think

rejection is necessarily a bad thing. Yet in our society, we see it as a bad thing. I don't even entertain the idea of failure, to be honest.

**CG:** One of the great things that you've managed to do is change people's perception. Because there's a lovely story in the book about the Museum of London, who have these guides that give you a tour of antiquity and, through *The Emperor's Babe*, they woke up to the possibility that black people could have been in this country from the year 200 AD. And, so all power to you! That must have been a great moment for you, when you recognised that your novel had actually had an impact on the way that the institution runs itself.

**BE:** Yeah. So, the story is that I had a writer's residency at the Museum of London. And it was a Poetry Society residency and I was there for six months. And the idea was I would write, inspired by the exhibits. And they used to have this incredible Roman gallery. I don't think they still have it, but they recreated Roman rooms, and you'd walk around these Roman rooms, and it was just like, 'Oh, my God', you felt like you were in ancient Rome. And I just thought, 'Okay, I'm going to set a black woman in Roman London.' And I started writing *The Emperor's Babe*. And I was talking to the curators there. And they said, 'Oh, no, there weren't any black people in Britain...There were Moors in the north of the country...', but they said there weren't any black people in London at the time. There's no archaeological evidence for it. But I wrote the book. And then when the book came out, they then created some tour guides, who were black Romans, to take people around the museum. So, I realised that it had an impact. And a few years later, what did DNA analysis reveal?

**CG:** Yep, yep.

**BE:** An African presence in Roman London!

**CG:** Yeah, yeah.

**BE:** So, I actually beat them to it. [Audience Laughs] You know, they couldn't imagine it because they didn't have the scientific evidence. But as writers we can imagine anything!

**CG:** Now, listen... Bernardine's come all the way from west London. I'd love everybody to join me in thanking Bernardine for 'keeping on keeping on' and being prepared to come and spend time with a few friends in Brighton. So, thank you very much.

**BE:** You're welcome. Thank you. [Audience applauds]

A recording of this interview can be found at [www.writersmosaic.org.uk](http://www.writersmosaic.org.uk)

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