

Why I write

Carol Russell

I was eight years old when I wrote my first play. It was an adaptation of *The Emperor's New Clothes*. It received its first and only performance for all the pupils at my Catholic primary school, where I was one of five children of African descent.

I don't remember the circumstances around how it came to be performed, but I do remember that I was in Sister Vincent de Paul's class and that she was one of the few teachers who encouraged me and actively nurtured my creativity. But it can't have been easy to persuade the headmistress, Miss O'Connor, to allow the whole school to see the play that I not only starred in but also directed. (I've often wondered what she said, what Sister Vincent had to promise to get her agreement.)

The thing I do remember was the feeling that came with the sound of the applause: a particular frisson, a tingle I only get from seeing something I've created give pleasure to an audience. I also remember why I'd written that play: I was never in the school plays; I wasn't even allowed to be the donkey in the nativity

plays at Christmas; I wasn't allowed to sing in the choir; and I wasn't allowed to play an instrument in the school orchestra. I remember feeling left out, and I think that's where the idea of writing my own play that I could be in came from.

I was in my mid-20s when I encountered an article in which the African American writer and editor, Toni Morrison said, 'If there is a book that you want to read but it hasn't been written yet, you must be the one to write it.' It's a quote that has stuck with me over the years, and every time I have come to a crossroads in my career, her words come back to help me remember that if what I seek isn't already there, I must be the one to create it.

In my 20s, it guided me to write the plays I'd wanted to see. In my 30s, it led me to writing a novel which saw me shortlisted for the inaugural Saga Prize. Later, it steered me to pursue the craft of screenwriting because I wasn't seeing stories on the small screen coming from people who looked like me. Those stories hadn't been on the television, bar the odd single drama, for a couple of decades. So again, if I wanted to see more stories from people who looked like me, I had to be prepared to stick my neck out and create them and encourage others to do the same.

So, as I contemplate the question, why do I write? I realise that I write to create stories from my place in the world and make them visible to everyone. I write to explore ideas from a different perspective. I write to see myself and tell the stories that interest me and that no one else has written before.

Carol Russell

Carol is British-Jamaican and trained at Jamaica School of Drama (now known as Edna Manley College of Visual and Performing Arts). As a writer, Carol's screenplay, *House of Usher*, was one of six short films made by Crucial Productions for the BBC. She was the principal scriptwriter for two series of *Comin' Atcha*, starring pop group Cleopatra, for ITV and was also one of the BAFTA nominated team of adapters of Jacqueline Wilson's *Story of Tracy Beaker*. Carol was one of 15 writers chosen for the inaugural MEDIAEXCHANGE ADVANCED TELEVISION DRAMA WRITING programme 2017/2018, and was one of 20 writers chosen from around Europe for the inaugural SERIES MANIA WRITERS CAMPUS 2018. Carol wrote one of the multi-award winning drama series, *Soon Gone: A Windrush Chronicle*, celebrating the 70th anniversary of the *Empire Windrush*, broadcast on BBC4 in 2019. Carol's two episodes of the ninth series of *Stone* for BBC Radio 4 were broadcast in 2021. She has been accepted on the Criterion New Writing Programme and has several series in development, including one about the first Black Victorian circus owner, Pablo Fanque. Her book, *Invisible to Invaluable: Unleashing the power of midlife women*, co-authored with Jane Evans, was published in May 2021. Carol is also the founder of Fresh Voices UK, a company founded to support and amplify the work of ethnically diverse writers of theatre and television.

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

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