

Speaking out: why I write

Derek Owusu

In 2003, I started writing lyrics, hoping that I'd find myself a basement or bedroom recording studio and be the next person to 'blow' in the grime scene, develop some sort of celebrity status in north London. I couldn't confine each written line to a bar, words spilled over and eventually smothered the instrumental, like I was talking over it instead of conversing with it. So I began writing poetry. What I thought was poetry. Matching what I thought were clever metaphors and similes. I wrote these punchline-heavy poems until 2012, when I decided I wanted to be a writer, of what kind I didn't know, but I knew I loved treating words like puzzle pieces. Creatively, the first long-form piece of writing I ever did was picked up by a (then new) online platform. It was a book review of *Kindred* by Octavia Butler. A few months after it appeared online, I read it back and knew without question that I didn't write it because I loved the book, I wrote it because I wanted to sound smart, to seed something. Though I realised this, I continued to write in the same way, with the same subconscious reason, crafting sentences with the bass of Bertrand Russell vibrating through my fingers and influencing every word I typed. I wanted to present myself as a middle-class white male, legs folded in an armchair, tilted back with the stem of a glass through my fingers filled with some 30-year-old whisky, bookshelf in the background, of course, with diction beyond RP, not a bookworm but a man of letters, overcompensating because I was embarrassed that I was black and working class. Luckily, after a few more long reads, I stopped writing and focussed on full-time work. This needed to happen. When I decided to start writing again, Bertrand Russell was no longer appealing and the only

thought that leaned on 'literature' was getting more young black men reading and feeling like they could write a book. Before I tried to make a career out of writing, a friend, who I had recently sent a long WhatsApp message to, and who confessed that she rereads it often, told me that when I sit down to write, to think in my voice and everything that follows will feel more authentic and I'll be able to express what many think young black boys find so hard to acknowledge. Suddenly, It became so simple: I knew what I wanted to say, why I wanted to say it, and who I wanted to speak to – so the right words became more distinct, throwing light onto the page, agreeing with my purpose. And in this way, I was also able to enjoy what I was doing. I've been reading for pleasure for a long time and now finally I could write for pleasure, confidently, the strength developed over time, bending sentences like iron bars, breaking rules and switching items in the dwelling of grammar. I write because I love to; I write because we need to.

Derek Owusu

Derek Owusu is an award winning writer and poet from North London. He discovered his passion for literature late in life while studying exercise science at university. Unable to afford a change of degree, he began reading voraciously and sneaking into English Literature lectures at the University of Manchester.

Owusu has written poetry and short stories for the BBC and ITV and regularly features on literary prize judging panels. In 2019, Owusu collated, edited and contributed to *SAFE: On Black British Men Reclaiming Space*, an anthology exploring the experiences of Black men in Britain. His first novel, *That Reminds Me*, and the first work of fiction to be published by Stormzy's

Merky Books imprint, won the Desmond Elliott Prize for debut fiction, the judges praising it as a 'transcendent work of literature.' In 2020, Owusu was one of the founding members of the Black Writers Guild, whose formation was due to the lack of representation and inequalities that exist within mainstream publishing in the UK. In that same year he was a Book of Man 'Man of The Year' for his writing and mental health advocacy.

A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at **writersmosaic.org.uk**

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