**Peter Kalu**

in conversation with John Siddique

**John Siddique:** Hey Peter, it's lovely to see you.

**Peter Kalu:** Great to see you, John. Long time… long time.

**JS:** It has been a wee while, hasn't it, actually?

**PK:** A couple of months, at least.

**JS:** But we go a long way back. I just thought it would be really, really lovely because I don't think I've ever asked you this before; that if you'd share with us your journey as a writer? And so, over the course of this… 25, 30 minutes, I'd love to explore some things about your writing and your journey and how that has become a life for you, you know. So, what I'd love to know is, when did younger Peter discover he was a writer?

**PK:** I don't think younger Peter considered himself to be a writer at any point in time; but younger Peter did use to write. It was a strange upbringing because… or at least a unique upbringing, because my mother was Danish, my father, Nigerian. And so, their first languages were not English. And so, I was living in a household where English was the second language. Although we, meaning my siblings and I, we all spoke English. I was always aware of other languages.

So, what I wanted to do was kind of connect in some way with that linguistic diversity and one way of doing it is just writing myself… writing in English but writing in different 'Englishes', and so I'd experiment with different ways of writing. But I never thought of it as being a writer, it was just an act of communication.

**JS:** What age were you then?

**PK:** I would give myself probably about eight or nine. I used to enjoy writing at primary school, where it was a difficult thing. They would ask me, and they would ask many kids, 'What did you do on your holidays?' And the problem was that… and this is um… you get your violins out for this story… we were poor, you know; we didn't do anything; we didn't go anywhere. So, it was like, 'Okay, I'm going to have to make something up', you know, to feed the machine, to let the teachers have the suitable, or what I thought they were looking for – some essay. So, they became, more or less, acts of fantasy and, having had pretty good practice in living in a fantasy world anyway as a kid, yeah, those were my first acts of creative fiction; though I would try passing them at the school as creative non-fiction, I guess.

**JS:** What were you reading then? What books did you like? Eight-year-old Peter? What did he like?

**PK:** Well, round about primary school time, I don't think I had a major interest in reading literature, you know, grand books.

**JS:** No, anything. What were you reading?

**PK:** I think it was more that I loved reading, per se, in that my mother would always tell us these folk tales… Danish folk tales, actually, that she'd be

translating, but they would actually have a lot of Danish in them, such as [rhythmic phrases in in Danish] you know, and the rhythm of the folk tale and the flow of those stories and, you know, the bond with my mother, the love of my mother, became the love of the stories.

And so, when I went to school, from a very early age… five or six… I was seeking out stories; I wanted stories. And I remember at one point, I managed to get myself taken out of one class into another class, because the teacher of the other class read stories, and the teacher of the class I had landed in initially didn't read stories. So, it was a real love of stories. A lot of stuff I do sometimes when I'm stuck, I think, 'Okay, let me re-imagine this modern story as a fairy tale'. And that's a … Where would I go with it at that point?

**JS:** So, let me ask you, then, you know, you've got this rich home life, you've got yourself moved from one class to another, you basically have grown up with an oral tradition and that has almost instilled a DNA of love of story. But when I first met you, and I think that must be in 1991, you were writing books at that stage when I first met you. So, at some point, there was a shift towards, 'I'm going to write a book'. Where did that come from?

**PK:** Interesting, yeah. I think I looked around in the early stages of my adulthood, I was writing poetry, actually; and I started out writing poetry and we performed all around Manchester… Moss Side, Hulme, and Longsight… the local areas, south Manchester areas, as poets. And the reason we were doing that really is because we wanted to give the community a 'voice' and it just so happened that the best way of doing that was through poetry. And so, I ran with a lot of poets and, some of them you may know, they've

become quite famous and stuff; but that narrative drive was always still with me.

I remember one time, perhaps I romanticise it as a day, a particular day, but I got this feeling that, you know what, we're well served for poets here, you know, there's a lot of great poets around. Let me do something different. Let me write a story that I've always felt I wanted to write. I guess the block was that, although like as you mentioned, the oral tradition was very much there with me, at the same time, there was this sense that literature – stories on paper – were what 'white folk' did. And that's… the people who got published – on paper – were the 'white folk'.

So, I think I remember when Maya Angelou just started getting published in… or came into recognition in England with… I remember particularly, *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes,* and Alice Walker came out; it was all by The Women's Press, based in London. They were publishing those works, and I remember reading Maya Angelou and thinking, 'Oh my goodness, you know, actually, we black people, we can be in stories too, you know.' I hadn't realised it. A sort of little light went on but, yeah, we can tell our stories – it's not literature on paper.

**JS:** But it was her biographies you went towards rather than her poetry?

**PK:** Yeah, she had very powerful biographies, but they're kind of creative non-fiction. As I say, it's not a dry, biographical style that I encountered, it's a really lyrical style. And so, yeah, that became the inspiration for me to try and write a few short fictions of my own, as an adult; I'd written them all the time as a kid and just buried them and, you know, whatever, lost them. I never saw them as any value to anybody other than myself. It was just my own craft, or credo, practice.

**JS:** Keeping with the poetry for a minute because you did bring that up, I still get this feeling from you that poetry has a very important place for you. It seemed to me whenever I sort of, you know, read your little book *Mongrel Moon*, whenever I've seen you read, there seems to be almost a kind of 'nakedness' in poetry that maybe, you know, I don't see in the novels. Well, actually, now that I've been looking at the young adult series you've been doing, it's interesting; I'm seeing more of *you* again. And there was a period where perhaps I didn't see so much of you in your writing. But with poetry, there always seems to be – even though you don't do it so much now… it's funny how you do keep coming back to it – you mention it a lot. It always seemed a very 'exposed' place to me when you read.

**PK:** Yeah, I guess the difference is the intensity in some ways, of the emotions that, when I experience very intense emotions, I tend to turn to poetry to express them and prose has less intensity. And, of course, I went into genre, or the formulaic routines of genre, at times, militate against any, if you like, authenticity, any kind of direct reflection of your own life. The genre's there to provide the formula.

So, poetry cuts you loose from all that and gives you a 'nakedness' that is perhaps conducive to… I won't say better writing, but a different form of writing… more transparent writing. As you know, my heart is always tender, and even as we speak, I'm writing… I've written six or twenty poems about my desperate love problems, you know, so, yeah, the poetry's always ticking over. [Laughs]

**JS:** So, it's interesting it's somewhere that you keep going back to, isn't it? Let me just pick up on what you were saying about going into genre and stuff because, Peter Kalu – and this is just me trying to keep up with you –

you've written poetry; you've written plays; you've written crime novels; you've got this young adult series called *Silent Striker*; you've written sci-fi; you've written romantic comedy; I've seen you do live storytelling. I'm sure I'm missing out… I only actually have ten fingers… but what has led you to be such a… I don't know if this is even a real word, but I came up with it when I was coming up with these questions for you… What has driven you to be so multi-formed? Is it, actually, that you are so expressive that you need a multitude of forms? Or, is it the money?

**PK:** [Laughs] Well, you know… it's not the money. That's the first thing, let's clear that one off the table.

**JS:** Are you chasing the money?

**PK:** [Laughs] Coming back to the other ideas, I was actually thinking about that, and someone said to me, 'Well, you know, Pete, look at your background, you know, you've got a Danish mother, you've got a Nigerian father, you're living in England, you've always been between places, and in many places at once.'

And there was a moment, actually… one of the reasons I left poetry for a while was that there was a time when they said poets had to find their *self*, their singular self, and when you know your true self, then that gets written down as poetry. And I remember my instant reaction was, 'But, I have many *selves*. [Laughs] I can't cram them into one self.' The narrative form gives you the luxury of being many different characters and moving around and having a dialogue with the many *selves* that you are.

There is certainly… there is a certain logic to my movement through the genres in that at every point I think, 'But *I* am not only this.' And so, I react

against myself, you know. I write crime fiction and I think, 'But, yeah, I'm not this protestant, linear, driven figure that is usually the hard-boiled hero of a crime fiction novel – no, I'm not that.' So then, I write a romantic comedy; here I am, I'm actually the soft, you know, tender, loving person. And I think, 'Well, maybe I went too far here. Let me go into the future, let me write a sci-fi', you know. We are techy people; I know you, John. I've been around your gaff and there's so much tech in there. We're techy, too. I then think, 'Well, that's not quite all... There are other things that need to get expressed.' Let me look back to when I was younger and the problems I went through then. Let me see if I can capture that, and so I take the young adult form.

So, I'm always moving around all different aspects of myself and the latest one that you didn't manage to get on your list was a speculative fiction, which is more fantasy, rather being anchored in reality, you know… let us see how the mind works.

**JS:** What would you say to somebody just finding their way as a writer, you know, about kind of all these different forms? Would you say to them, 'Pick your form and, kind of, stick to it?' Because quite early on, you did stick to the signs of poetry. You did stick to the 'crime thing' for a while, you know. You were published by Express, you had *Lick Shot*. Express, of course, famously published *Yardie*, Victor Headley's book, which I'm amazed I didn't realise had just recently been made into a film by Idris Elba. And I was thinking, 'Where's Pete's film, Idris?' You know… but, um… but you did… you stuck to that for a while and then you kind of went out into all these other directions.

So, what would you say to [given that a large part of the work that you do is actually supporting writers these days through Commonword, what would you say to somebody trying to find their way as a writer?

**PK:** I'm not typical in going through… and exploring so many different genres and forms. What I sense for writers is that some writers can be brilliant in a particular area. So, if they're brilliant in dialogue, I tend to say, 'Okay, you know… try radio.' If they're brilliant visualisers, I'm thinking, 'Okay, you know… film.' So, you try and nudge people towards what their strengths are, where they'll excel. Finding out what our strength is, is an act of exploration.

So, yeah, then I say, 'Go round the houses. Go try a few things and see where you suddenly get that buzz, that lift-off, that glee, you know… that passion.' You say, 'Yes, this is what I want to do.' When you find that, where your passion is, that's where you need to be. It just so happens that I get a buzz out of so many different forms. Most people probably don't, I would say, you know, and you need to find where the buzz is, where the passion is, and follow that… follow that.

**JS:** Even though you've written so many different forms, in kind of preparation for our meeting today, I was kind of just looking and I realised that, actually, underneath it all, there is a kind of unifying force and, of course, I almost slapped my head with the obviousness of it. I don't mean it's kind of obvious in that it's kind of weak in any way, it's just you actually have a powerful almost 'soul level' commitment to this, and you represent what I would call the multiplicity… Always. Because you get some writers, and they represent one kind of person, or they'll represent just one area of 'people of colour'. But you have always been a writer of open borders, if that makes any sense. And that in every single thing that you do and, of

course, because you've got your triple heritage upbringing (like I have, quite different to yours), that is again, kind of, almost DNA-level. It [is] just unmissable in every single thing that you do.

Do you think - and I didn't know how to phrase this question when I tried writing it down, it ended up so long – do you think that, one: being a 'person of colour' and, two: genuinely trying to represent what Britain *really* is against its kind of insane delusions of its colonial and imperial self, has actually stopped you going to, you know, bigger presses… to more mainstream places? Do you think that's got in your way?

**PK:** In short, 'Yes', in that often I have a vision or an idea, or a *feel* for what I want to do, and I'm more of an artist than a businessperson. And so, I encounter the larger presses and I think, 'Okay… I'm going to need to persuade this person, and then persuade another person, and then persuade a third person, about the 'vision' and explain why my idea of 'Englishness', or my idea of how the world is today, differs from theirs, but is valid and is worth pursuing creatively. And that act of persuasion, of negotiation, of explanation, almost – and sometimes it boils down to it – of justification…it's tiring for me as an artist. And rather than bother – and that's why I'm broke, John [Laughs], rather than bother, I tend to go to the black presses, who just 'get it'. And they're small presses, you know, and they 'get it', and then they run my stuff. And that gives me more satisfaction, I think, though I've never experienced it to learn for true, than you know, a large cheque, because I've kind of externalized something that I had held inside of myself that I wanted to share with people; if even just one person connects with something that I've written, I'd say, 'Yeah, you know, I thought that world could be somewhere around there, but now you've crystallized it for me. Now you've shown me that it can be.' Then, that's it. That's what I'm aiming for.

**JS:** You know, the kindness that you show towards people in your books is actually, sort of, quite remarkable – and that's another area. It's not just kind of 'representation'. I think you also have a kind of commitment to 'love' in a way, you know... I know you have your romantic turmoil.

**PK:** [Laughs] Let us not go into that disastrous terrain. [Laughs]

**JS:** There's always the poetry to keep you warm.

**PK:** That's it. That keeps the poetry going. [Laughs]

**JS:** That keeps the poetry going. Let me just ask you something very writerly, anyway… Oh kind man who 'represents', what's your typical writing day like?

**PK:** I like to write in the morning, for sure. I find the best energy for myself between about seven and midday. I wake up and sometimes I sleep, and I've formulated things in my subconscious or in my almost-consciousness, you know. I'm trying to get down and write them while I can still remember them, you know. And so, I don't really like huge interactions with other human beings in the morning. (That probably goes back to the relationship problems, you know.) I find that a really fecund time, early in the morning; and then, the other time I write as a matter of habit is in the dead of night. And what I like about the dead of night, is that everyone else is sleeping. Partly, it's calm, it's quiet. But partly it's that it's dealing with the subconscious, you know… trying to find a path…

**JS:** Do you have any special rituals or routines for writing?

**PK:** My thing is… no, I tend to… I like to write – initially – horizontally. I don't like to write sat up because I'm like a shaman. I know that I don't see myself as generating it, I'm channelling it. And I need to be in the place where I can channel it. And generally, sitting up is too dominated by my conscious mind. I need to kind of find a way into my subconscious, where the free-wheeling associations just start to go.

Once I'm in that zone, it's usually pen and paper: blank paper, no lines, gel pen, something that will flow really well. And uh… my perennial problem is because I'm horizontal, you can't get the ink on the page. You get these ghost lines. Pen that up, and then once I've got the flow, and I'm cooking with gas, as I feel it's really working well, then I'll go off to the machine and I'll start writing. That's my thing… it's a transition from the horizontal to the sort of vertical.

**JS:** Let me just ask your young adult series, *Silent Striker*. These are so interesting because each book is kind of like a standalone, rather than, kind of, one thing running into another, to another, to another. How many books are they going to be? You've done four, have you?

**PK:** I've done three in that series: *Silent Striker, Being Me* and *Zombie XI,* and I never have a plan for how many books I'm doing. I thought I might do one more. Each time you write one, another of the characters in the group, sort of appeals, you know, tugs your shirt saying, 'Author, author, please write up me.' I think Chekhov said, did he not? or somebody said, that, everybody is the main protagonist in their own drama, and whoever is the main character in any book is just a choice, you know; every single character could be the main character, you know; you're just going to get a different kind of book.

So, they all… the characters start pulling you, and because my publisher said, 'We'd like a series.' I said, 'Okay'. The motivation for doing them – as you know from what you've looked up and researched and known in the past about my writing – is that I tend to move to other areas. So, I've stopped writing the series now and I've gone into a young adult dystopian sort of fiction, because, you know, that's what I wanted to do; then I might go back to that series.

**JS:** But just coming back to the series, though, your early character, Marcus, what he's dealing with? He's losing his hearing and there's kind of terrible racism all around him. Does this kind of track with your life? Is Marcus you in a way? Because, I mean, I don't know the story of your hearing loss. As far as… as long as I've known you, you've worn your hearing aids and we communicate brilliantly. But just again, there you are… I think it's you. I also feel like you're 'representing'. You're also holding space for people. You're being kind, and it's quite wonderful. But is Marcus close to you?

**PK:** The deafness was something – as a theme – that I thought I wanted to tackle. I'd kind of avoided tackling it, I think, through the years. One, because I hadn't read much in that area and I didn't know how to go about it as a set of techniques or methods. How do you express silence or deafness? And then, as I experimented with many different forms, I suddenly thought, 'You know what? I can do it this way through the young adult form.' I thought that's where I can find the most powerful story from my own life, my own journey into deafness, which started from around about 14, 15. Yeah, so that's why Marcus is around that age 14, 15, 16, because that's where I could see was the key turning point in terms of deafness in my life.

And the football skills, on the other hand, were a wish fulfilment. [Laughs] I'd never made it onto the school football team, and I thought, 'Right! In an act of revenge, I'm going to make Marcus who, in many senses is me, I'm going to make him a brilliant football player.' So, I lived that alternative life out through Marcus, too. God, I play well, don't I, in that book? [Laughs]

**JS:** You do… you do. And again, in this young adult series, but then once I had seen it in the young adult series, looking back across your work, I realise that there's another unifying feature. So, not only do we have the kind of the 'representation' and the heart… that kind of DNA. But also, I suddenly realise the importance of 'place' within your writing. You have the multiplicity of people and their specific locations always kind of so deeply, sort of, tied together. Could you say a bit more about how 'landscape' works for you?

**PK:** I've always felt that the default for 'blackness', when understood superficially, was London. So, as soon as you say there's a black character, people's minds say, 'Oh, I'm now living in London.' So, it's a devolution, isn't it? It's a devolution of 'black identity' [Laughs] that I've been campaigning for thirty years to occur.

I almost, invariably, set the novels, or the text, or whatever I'm doing, in the places I know: Manchester, Leeds, perhaps Liverpool. There is one… on one occasion, John, when I 'sold my soul' and I set *Diary of a Househusband*, a romantic comedy… I set it in London, and, let me tell you, it made me more money than any other book!

So, you could see what integrity I have. I never went back. I just did it because I wanted to see… I wanted to examine how the market responded

to location, you know. So, I've been saying, 'Oh, Okay… yeah, London. That ticks a lot of boxes for a lot of publishers and a lot of the readership maybe. I went back to Manchester, and I went back to Leeds and Liverpool because I do feel that part of the stereotyping and the narrowness of the conceptions of 'blackness' and 'black identity' is that everybody lives in London.

**JS:** Okay, final question and it's more about reading than writing. So, I would just like to know, if Peter Kalu was on a desert island and, by some kind of magic, he had managed to get three of his favourite books with him, what would those three books be, and who would they be by?

**PK:** Well, you know what, John, it changes every month, doesn't it?

**JS:** What… you're on a different island every month?

**PK:** [Laughs] Okay. Right now… right now.

**JS:** On this month's desert island.

**PK:** On this month's desert island. If I had to take three books only…

**JS:** Only three books.

**PK:** It's going to kill me first of all. [Laughs] Alright… off the top of my head, I've just read *Beloved* by Toni Morrison and I'm like, 'I need to read that again.' Something happened, or many things happened in that book, that were mysterious and magical and brilliant; and I want to read that again. So, *Beloved* would be a great one.

Then, there's another writer called Samuel Shimon, who wrote a book called *An Iraqi in Paris*; and it's nuts, it defies all the forms, all the rules of how to write a novel, and somehow it works. It's crazy and it's so unbelievable that it's totally believable. And I just love the spirit in that book. I'm not sure if the book just crashed and burned, or nobody else has read it or whatever, but I don't care. I love, I love that to my dying days. I'll take that one.

And then for the third, I'd probably take… I don't know if I can say her name right… Ntozake Shange's *Nappy Edges,* which is a collection of poems – which was the first time I've read poetry that had a sense of urgency and creativity bound up in that urgency. And she said something that's really useful for all writers: I used to go around sort of saying, 'Read what Ntozake Shange said', because she said, you know, 'When you write, it should be the way in which the jazz players play. As soon as they read the first lines, the first paragraphs, they should know instantly, that's you!' That's how you want to write, with such a style that it's kind of like distinctive… distinctive. And so, I feel that Shange and her approach to the poetics… to how, as you said, I started out in poetry; I've never left it, and I think Shange would be the poet that would keep my fires burning in this long exile on whatever island you've got in mind for me, John. [Laughs]

**JS:** Probably Urmstead or something like that.

**PK:** [Laughs] I'd be alright there…

**JS:** Exactly, or Urmston… Peter, thank you so much.

**PK:** Oh, it's been great, John.

**JS:** Thank you.

**PK:** Lovely talking with you.

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