

Writing as obsession

Peter Kalu

Writing began for me as a secret activity. I would be sitting on my bedroom window ledge, scribbling away. I deliberately wrote in a scrawl, the idea being to create a language none of my family could read even if they found where I'd hidden my journal (under the bed – I know, I know). What began as a whimsical experiment recording my early teen thoughts – on such important matters as how long it would take to drain an ocean, and where would the water go? did birds ever engage in flying competitions with fastest bird, best manoeuvre and so forth? – became something more...

Scribbling away, I found myself free to range over whatever moods, emotions, off-beat ideas came to mind. In the journal, I could go canoeing along the River Mersey with my brother, steal a Ford Cortina and zoom off to Mars in it, spend my birthday on a chicken farm with my dad in Nigeria, blow up the neighbour's dog, Woofy, which used to attack us whenever it got loose, get trapped in a candy floss machine and be bound up in pink sugar. Good times in my fantasy world, all duteously jotted down. At some point, I switched to green ink to make the diary even more illegible. I think it was when I decided I had to write down my suspicion that there had been a mistake at the hospital, and I was swapped at birth and clearly not related to any of my many incredibly annoying, clearly deranged siblings with their godawful singing into hairbrush mics, obsession with engines and crushes on banal local boys. I must have filled a few floppy exercise books with this

theory, noting day after day reasons and behaviours that confirmed my suspicions.

In those same years, me and my brother created a library of our books, cataloguing them, getting one of those toy stamps and stamping them every time we removed one from the shelves. It was a very formal procedure, rigorously observed. I still have a fawning admiration for librarians now. During those library years, for some reason, I found myself colouring in the encircled voids of each letter (the top of the letter 'e', the bottom of the letter 'b' etc.) throughout entire books. A vandal in my own library.

What happened to all those scribbled green ink exercise books? Apart from a few scraps, they've all been lost, thrown away, shredded, abandoned, though the compulsive writing has continued.

To this day, my handwriting is indecipherable to others, and almost indecipherable to myself. It was fun. The liberation of being able to vent, to write whatever I liked, is an attitude to writing that has stayed with me. And so, to those perennial questions – why do I write, and who do I write for? – I often answer, first of all I'm writing for myself. It's that secret place I go to which connects with the writing *me* that has existed through all these years, and isn't actually concerned with audience, with getting published; it's simply a compulsion.

Obsession seems to be part of what connects me with literature. I'll read a book six or seven times, for the pleasure of seeing again and again how marvellously a chapter is crafted, the beauty of a line, the coy, new meanings that shuffle out of the text and rather embarrassedly reveal

themselves to me on the fifth read. Yes, obsession is part of my reading/writing bug. I write because I'm obsessed.

Peter Kalu

Born to a Danish mother and a Nigerian father in Manchester in the sixties, Peter Kalu grew up in Manchester. His short stories can be found in *Seaside Special* (Yorkshire: Bluemoose 2018), *A country to call home* (London: Unbound 2018) and *Closure* (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press 2015).

He is currently interested in the problematics of closure in the narrative form — the sense that, in providing neat endings, the story form suggests the world is fixable. The questioning of essentialist or intrinsic identity – as that may or not relate to the authenticity of lived experience, black 'double-consciousness', the narrative text as an attempt at reproducing consciousness, and the fundamental contingency of culturally-inflected notions of personality – also keeps him up at night, along with worry about paying bills. An associated concern is the nature of self-narrative, and the dynamic between storytelling and selfhood in answering the question 'who am I?' (as opposed to the question 'what am I?').

Retrieving lost, elided and disavowed British black histories is a further trope in his work, and he has written three short stories as part of the Leicester University co-ordinated *Colonial Countryside* project. His chapter 'Strangers at the Gate: Intermediality, Borders and the Short Story' can be found in the Palgrave Macmillan academic publication: *Borders and the Border Crossings in the Contemporary British Short Story* (2020). He tried but was unable to squeeze the word 'ontology' into this paragraph.

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

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