

On finding ideas and the artists who have inspired me

Moses McKenzie

My ideas come from immersion. Immersion in the places I frequented in childhood, immersion in family life, immersion in people. There have been times when ideas have come to me of their own accord, often at inconvenient junctures, and then there are times where I've sat and tried to plot an entire novel in one sitting. Whether the latter or the former, my ideas always begin with my opinions. I ask myself: what am I trying to say, which of my beliefs do I want to further explore, which of them do I want to impose upon my readership. For example, with *An Olive Grove in Ends*, I sought to explore morality in neighbourhoods similar to mine and its relationship with the Islamic and Christian understandings of God. The novel was conceived before I had an agent or a publisher, and therefore the readership I was trying to influence was entirely nonexistent. Still, my opinions became the spine of the novel, its essence and themes, and I started to create characters to carry them through the narrative.

It helps that my audience never changes. As with most artists, my primary audience, or readership, is myself, then afterwards I write for diasporic Black people and then for all Black peoples after them. I write in pursuit of timelessness, and I dismiss ideas, good or bad, that I don't believe will achieve this. So finding ideas, or inspiration, becomes about longevity and how textured I can make the story. As a writer it is important to have an

understanding of history and your place in it, so the work you create can stand the test of time, even if cultural shifts reduce your work to evidence of what was. I believe legacy should be at the forefront of any artist's mind, and our ideas should be a reflection of this. It is important to be both analytical and selective in the art we allow ourselves to consume, because there exists both objectivity and subjectivity within art and, whether consciously or subconsciously, we draw on other people's work, even across mediums.

I hand-picked some of the artists who have continued to inspire me stylistically, but most of them were placed there by those around me. I draw from Maya Angelou and James Baldwin, Hayao Miyazaki, Spike Lee, John Singleton, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Toni Morrison. D'Angelo, Barry Jenkins, Eiichiro Oda, Jill Scott, Kendrick Lamar, Miles Davis and August Wilson. All are touchstones, all have achieved eternity. Nothing is new under the sun, their precedent both compels and constrains, and their work is a well of regular inspiration. I write with the dictionary, all of Maya Angelou's literary autobiographies and *One Hundred Years of Solitude* within arm's reach, and always with 'Voodoo' or 'Brown Sugar' playing through my speakers. In the same way our sense of morality is a product of our circumstance and our taste is in our surroundings, our ideas find us more than we find them.

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Moses McKenzie is of Caribbean descent and grew up in Bristol, where he still lives and writes full-time. Born in 1998, Moses wrote his first novel, *An Olive Grove in Ends*, at the age of 21. He has been commissioned to write a TV series based on the novel. His second novel is underway.

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

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