

The difference between a PhD and being a full-time writer

Nick Makoha

In my family, being a professional writer is something that was never discussed. Thinking about being a writer was a non-event. I come from Africa (Uganda to be exact), and in our household the arts and sports were considered recreational pursuits or, as my father would say, first-world hobbies. In the African way of life, there are no prizes for that. Do not pass go? Do not collect £200 pounds?

Both my mother and father have higher education training to masters level. My mother trained as a psychologist and went on to be a social worker for most of her professional life. My father recently retired from his profession as a medical doctor in which he specialised as a gynaecologist and surgeon. So, naturally, my parents assumed that I would choose a similar career path. Being a doctor, lawyer, accountant or architect were the only professions that held weight in our household. These were things that one could build a life around. One thing an African parent can give their child in this racially volatile world is a good education. So, I understand my parents' motives in encouraging me to achieve in these areas. I appreciate both the sacrifice and persistence. Despite my father and mother's separation, one point they were never in disagreement on was my need for a solid and fruitful education.

Luckily for me, education was an area I excelled in, the sciences particularly. I was also quite good at sport and would have loved to pursue that as a profession. But as I said before, you do not pass go. Though I competed in all sports at school, it

was in rugby that I thrived. My position was blindside wing. I continued to play at university. I remember suggesting to my father that I would like to be a professional rugby player. This was before rugby players could be full-time professionals. My father pulled the newspaper down from his face and his grin laughed me out the door. For the most part my education through my teens was a success. I only hit a bump in the road when I didn't get the grades I wanted to study medicine. It meant that my conditional offer to Cambridge fell through. Luckily, I got the chance to study Biochemistry at Queen Mary University through clearing.

It was at university that the calling to be a writer started. In my first year, I made friends with a second-year student named Yusuf. He always seemed to have a smile on his face – this intrigued me. One Monday morning after my lecture in physiology, I cornered him in the cafeteria. Over a hot chocolate and blueberry muffin I questioned him on his perpetual radiance. He was pensive and unwilling to disclose his secret at first, but when I pointed to the two drumsticks in his rucksack he relented. Yusuf had been attending the Weekend Arts College in Camden Town. Being a doubting Thomas, I asked him to prove it to me. The following Sunday, Yusuf and I, escorted by two friends, took the overground train to Kentish Town.

When we arrived at the building, everyone seemed to know who Yusuf was and greeted him. He wasn't the scientist we all knew at uni; here at W.A.C. he was a singer, drummer and a composer. And to top it off, he was African. At the desk, a lady registered the four of us and asked, 'What activity would you like to do?' There was a crossroad if ever I heard one. The offer to do what I liked as opposed to what I was good at. Or, to call a spade a spade, to stop taking the safe option. By signing my name in the register, it felt that I was stepping out of a fast-flowing river and on to dry land. I felt like I was rewriting the course of my life.

On offer was singing, jazz, tap, drama and dance, and some other activities that evade my memory. While I decided what options to take some of the tutors walked by. A lot of them are now household names: Marianne Jean-Baptiste (Oscar, BAFTA and Golden Globe Nominee who has been in Mike Leigh's *Secrets and Lies* and the hit show *Without a Trace*), Ché Walker (who wrote the play *Been So Long* that was adapted into a Netflix film musical starring Michaela Coel and Arinzé Kene), Ann Mitchell (who starred in *Widows 1* and *2* as well as starring as Cora Cross in *EastEnders*) and Martina Laird (you might know her from *Casualty* and *Holby City*). At the time I did not know who any of them were. They were just a bunch of faces in the room. But I did notice their warmth and verve for life. I signed up on the spot.

If you have ever seen the TV show *Fame*, W.A.C was your British version of that. Dancers stretching in the corridors, singers harmonising in stairwells and would-be actors learning their lines on the sofa. At that moment in my life it was just what I needed. Come rain or shine that is where you would find me, from 9am to 6pm, breaking only for lunch. I think I learnt more about being myself in those drama and singing classes than at any other time of my life. At W.A.C the artist was considered as vital to society. The arts were not a hobby or something for the less-gifted kids do, but a legitimate form of self-expression. Being an artist was a legitimate contribution to society. Our tutors always stressed acting as an enquiry into authenticity; singing was the ability to identify the body as an instrument that can receive and transmit emotion through sound.

The tutors who were artists took as much interest in our creative practice as they did in their own. To be fair, I had no creative practice at that time. However, the tutors held us to a standard that they challenged us to meet. In the advanced drama class (which I auditioned for and got accepted into) Marianne Jean-Baptiste was my tutor. Often the class would overrun and dancers would be warming up outside. This did not alter her focus or attention to detail. She even invited some of us onto the film set of *The Murder of Stephen Lawrence* in which she played

the mother, Doreen Lawrence. Her transformation from tutor to actor at the flick of a switch was astonishing. Before each scene she explained to us the goings-on, on the set. Things like how she prepared for wardrobe, how the crew prep the lights, the difference between filming on a sound stage and on location in a public space.

We had been invited to a reshoot of the public inquiry in the Elephant and Castle headed by Sir William Macpherson. In this scene, anger spills into the streets and the five white suspects are confronted by the anger of a predominately black crowd. Naïvely, I thought that Marianne had brought us on set just to observe. However, minutes before the director Paul Greengrass called 'Action', she whispered into his ear and the next thing I knew we were being part of the angry mob in the scene.

There are many reasons why this particular moment in my life holds such significance. The fact that it retells the story of a black boy the same age as me not being able to live his dream while at the same time I am being mentored by one of the best actors of her generation in the country is one. But most importantly, the fact that without saying it in words Marianne Jean-Baptiste is telling me that this life as an artist is possible. In many ways being on the Stephen Lawrence set was my Damascus moment, because it would have been just as easy for me to go back to my ordinary life and play it safe. Who would notice? And more importantly, who would care? The answer to that question is, I would notice and I would care. The life of an artist holds no promise, only discovery and that at a cost; it can be expensive. I don't know if I will ever have the opportunity to personally thank Marianne for the flame she ignited. I can only hope that my pursuit of the artistic life can itself in some way repay and stand in testament to her influence.

Since then, in pursuit of my practice as an artist, I have written several poetry pamphlets, an award-winning first poetry collection, a one-man show and am now currently working on a second poetry collection. However, unlike the first collection that took seven years of graft, I now have the opportunity to write my second one while being a full-time academic at King's College, London. What is strange is that after many years developing my practice, I am now neither one nor the other, neither academic nor artist. I am a hybrid. I am aware of the difference that each persona brings, but I am keen to have the artist lead my academic process. I fear something will be lost if I reverse that polarity.

A few years ago, I finished my Masters at Goldsmiths College, but since joining King's to start a PhD the most noticeable difference, as an academic, has been the access to research data, to institutions, to gatekeepers of knowledge, opportunities to develop contacts internationally. The access to research trips and conferences, and the ability to cross-pollinate ideas through those international exchanges, gives the academic a logistical advantage. I realise now that when I was just an artist, a barrier to learning and development was the constant dead end I would reach with research. The danger now, however, is that research can be addictive.

Good writing requires time to read, time to write and time to reflect on and edit what you have produced. The more times you repeat this cycle, the better the work becomes. It is easy to be distracted by actions that are not about writing when being the writer but not writing. The two biggest distractions are my family and earning money to support my family. I spend a lot of my energy devising creative projects that allow me to create windows of time in which to develop new work. The payoff is that it is paid work, the cost is that it often requires me to be away from my family for long periods of time.

Becoming a PhD researcher made my writing more acceptable to my mother and father. They started to see that being a creative has an intellectual, even professional element to it. Now, when either of them calls me, they ask questions about my research, my meetings with my supervisor, and about what books I am reading. My work now exists in a realm that they can recognise. My mother pointed out to me that when I graduate, I will be the most qualified person in our family.

When I told my wife that I had a place at King's College, London, I was actually serving my tenure as Writer-in-Residence at the Wordsworth Trust in Grasmere. I had already been away from her and the children for three weeks. Her response was electric. Go for it! Her support, both visible and invisible, helped me to govern the fear that was forming inside me: questioning whether becoming an academic would shut me off from my creativity. Would I have to give up the way of the artist to take this new path? Andrew Motion, the former Poet Laureate, spoke of the crippling effect that position had on his writing life. My unspoken fear was that the demands of the PhD would erode the core of who I had been for the last fifteen years. In the first semester, the fear was warranted; I took every course going to combat my imposter syndrome, such as talks at the Royal Society of Art (RSA): on a) 'Who Does Society Really Listen To?' and b) 'Anti-Racism and the Politics of Diversity'. It was Dr Sarah Howe, my supervisor who pointed out – Remember, Nick, it was the writer that got you here, not the other way around.

Nick Makoha

Nick Makoha is the founder of The Obsidian Foundation. In 2017, Nick's debut collection, *Kingdom of Gravity*, was shortlisted for the Felix Dennis Prize for Best First Collection and was one of the *Guardian's* best books of the year. Nick is a Cave Canem Graduate Fellow and an alumnus of Spread the Word's 'Complete Works' programme. He won the 2015 Brunel

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

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