

Writers I admire

Roy Williams

I was 10 years old. I was in the kitchen or something, having my dinner after coming home from school, when I heard a very catchy theme tune coming from the living room. I didn't know why but there was something about it that made me want to rush from the kitchen to see what programme it was. I had never heard an arrangement like that before, and because it was the very first episode of the show *Grange Hill*, neither had thousands of other kids my age. It was the show that everyone in the school playground was talking about the next day. The show had special meaning for me, because the opening scene of the show was this young black boy, dressed in jeans, carrying a football, looking like and sounding like me and all of my mates I grew up with, going to a run-down looking school that looked exactly like our school. I had seen black people on the television before, but it was the first time I had seen myself.

The portrayal of Benny Green, beautifully played by the late Terry Sue-Patt, was, I suppose you could say, the first time a form of art had directly spoken to me.

As I ventured into my days of secondary school, that important memory stayed with me. I remember I was in my English class, talking about *Grange Hill* with my friends. I was sharing with them that feeling I had, as a young black Briton, when I first saw Benny Green. Our English teacher had overheard me talking. A couple of weeks later, that same teacher threw

down a play-text on my desk. I looked up at her perplexed, and all she said was, 'Read it'. The play was *Class Enemy*, written by Nigel Williams. It was a remarkable piece, set completely in a school classroom, much like the classroom I was in when my teacher gave me the play. *Class Enemy* was about British working-class youth in the seventies; a group of unruly London schoolboys, the ASBO kids of their day, waiting for a teacher to arrive. To pass the time, the boys give each other lessons, which then in turn give the audience an insight into their troubled young lives. At the time, I was completely struck by the fact that this was a play performed in the theatre, that was about people I knew, and the world that I lived in. I was the black kid 'Snatch' in *Class Enemy*; I was also the black youth 'Louis' in Barrie Keeffe's classic play *Barbarians*, and all the other characters were my mates. I discovered theatre wasn't all Shakespeare. It could also be about my life's experiences, my own take on the world. Barrie and Nigel had such brilliant skill in capturing the voices of British working-class youth in their plays, both black and white voices. Their work made me feel that I was visible. It made me feel that I mattered, and that my anger, growing up in late seventies/early eighties London as a young black man, was understood.

Roy Williams

Roy Williams OBE is one of the UK's leading dramatists. In 2000, he was the joint winner of the George Devine Award and in 2001, he was awarded the Evening Standard Award for Most Promising Playwright.

His plays include *Death Of England*, *Death Of England: Delroy, Out West*, *NW Trilogy*, *Sucker Punch* (Olivier Award nomination for Best Play, Writers Guild Award for best play, joint winner of 2010 Alfred Fagon Award), *The No-Boys Cricket Club*.

Radio work includes adaptations of ER Braithwaite's *A Choice of Straws* and *To Sir With Love*, John Wyndham's *The Midwich Cuckoos*, as well as eight series of *Interrogation* for BBC Radio 4.

TV and film work includes *Fallout*, *Babyfather*, *Offside*, *Let It Snow*, *Soon Gone: The Windrush Chronicles*, *Fast Girls*, *Death Of England: Face to Face*. His latest play is *The Fellowship*, directed by Paulette Randall, staged at Hampstead Theatre.

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

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