

Abir Mukherjee

In conversation with Sanjida O'Connell

Sanjida O'Connell (SOC): Hello, I'm Sanjida O'Connell. Today, I'm chatting to Abir Mukherjee. If Abir wasn't an award-winning crime writer, he could very easily make a living working for a call centre, thanks to his beautiful, soft, Scottish accent. Abir grew up on the West Coast of Scotland. Although now, he swapped the delights of the Highlands for Guildford, where he lives with his wife and two sons and he's loving being near a Waitrose. Abir is the author of the award-winning Wyndham & Banerjee series of crime novels featuring Detective Sam Wyndham and Sergeant 'Surrender-not' Banerjee set in the time of the Raj in India. Abir, welcome to *WritersMosaic*.

Abir Mukherjee (AM): Thank you. You make me sound like the most twee middle-class person ever: 'Left the Highlands for Guildford.'

SOC: [Laughs] I know. I was doing my best. Although, I'm very excited to have left the, um, wilds of Somerset to come here.

AM: Ah yes, to get sunny Guildford.

SOC: Exactly. Um, I see you didn't start off as a crime writer.

AM: No.

SOC: You began your career, your adult career, as an accountant.

AM: Yeah, I don't think we need to tell people that, do we?

SOC: [Laughs] Is that your secret?

AM: It is my dirty secret. I spent 25 years of my life working in finance, and sort of realised I always wanted to write but I never had the confidence; I never thought it was for me. I know ways into the industry, I didn't know anybody who was a writer. And it was only when I was sort of 39 and having a mid-life crisis that I thought, *Well, this is what I want to do. I want to write. I don't want to be an accountant for the rest of my life.* And that's when I started writing.

SOC: And how did you get into it?

AM: I suppose I did what a lot of people do, I think. I'd start something. I'd write 5,000 words and then I'd make the mistake of reading those 5,000 words thinking, *this is awful*, and then I'd put it in a drawer. [SOC laughs.] But this time was a wee bit different. This time I had this idea to send a British detective to India after the First World War. And I started it, but then I was very lucky: I saw a competition in *The Telegraph*. Harvill Secker, who are my publishers, which is part of Penguin, were looking for new crime writers and all they wanted was the first 5,000 words of a novel and a two-page synopsis of what would happen afterwards. And that appealed to me, because I am quite lazy, and I had already done the 5,000 words. So I tidied it up, and I sent it, and I wrote the two-pager, and I sent it away. And I didn't expect to win because I'd never actually submitted anything before. And nothing happened for about four months. I didn't hear anything; and then out of the blue, I received an email in February 2014 saying, 'Congratulations. Out of 500 entries, you're our winner and we're going to publish your novel.'

Except I didn't have a novel, I had these 5,000 quite ropey words, but really that was the beginning of my journey. And my editor then was a woman called Alison Hennessey and I really learnt to write from her. I learned between the first and second draft of that first novel. It was a really steep learning curve, but it was really enjoyable. I learned so much. I'm still learning. We're all still learning the craft, but I learned so much in that year, um—And I was very lucky that the book when it came out was *The Times'* book of the month and *The Sunday Times'* book of the month. It was more than I ever dreamed. It was always something I'd wanted to do and then it

all happened so quickly. And looking back, I'm not sure I took it all in at the time.

SOC: Can you tell me why crime fiction? I read in one of your books that you were grateful to one of your friends for giving your quality.

AM: Yes. It's my mate, Jamie, who was my best man—is my best mate. When we were 14 or 15, he lent me *Gorky Park*, and it was unlike anything I'd read before. *Gorky Park* is the story of a Russian detective called Arkady Renko, who's a detective in Communist-era Soviet Union. And it appealed to me. I've always been drawn to this idea of a good person upholding an evil system or a system they don't agree with. So, I'm also a big fan of the work of Philip Kerr, who wrote the *Bernie Gunther* novels of a detective, which are set in Nazi Germany. Um, and that always fascinated me: this idea of what would have happened if I were in that position. Supposing I grew up under communism or Nazism, would I be on the side of conscience, or would I tow the line? And that's a very difficult question to answer, but it's always one that fascinated me.

What upset me though was that, you know, we had all these British and American writers writing about Russians and Germans and nobody was holding up a mirror to, you know, the acts of British people. So why weren't we looking at the colonial period? Why weren't we looking at the actions that were done in the names of our forefathers? And, for me, growing up as the child of Indian immigrants, I always knew there was an alternative history there. I always knew that what we were taught in our schools was not necessarily the truth because I would go home and learn

another side to the story. And that other side is what I wanted to write about. You know, my reason for writing really is anger about at the fact that so few people know about the Bengal Famine of 1943, in which—

SOC: —But we know about the Potato Famine.

AM: Well, we do. We do, but I wonder how long that took to get out. The fact is that at the time when 3 to 6 million Jews were being massacred in Europe during the Holocaust, at the same time 3 million Indians starved to death in a preventable, some say, man-made famine. And a lot of that responsibility lies at the door of Churchill. But we never hear about that story. And that is the story that I want to tell one day. Why do I write crime fiction rather than a history book? Well, I grew up in Scotland and we have this tradition of the crime novel as a vehicle for social commentary. It started with a man called William McIlvanney, who wrote a book called *Laidlaw*. But then you have obviously the greats: Ian Rankin, Val McDermid, Denise Mina; all of these people grew up in that tradition and that's the tradition I grew up in, the idea that you can use a crime novel to make a serious point.

SOC: You've beautifully evoked Kolkata.

AM: Gosh.

SOC: I just—you know, you can imagine being there. It's a very immersive experience reading your books and particularly *Death in the East*, you know, *The Hills of Assam*, as well.

AM: Gosh, you've read all of them.

SOC: I haven't read all of them but I—

AM: Sensible.

SOC: [Laughs] I've still got a bit to go. So that's good. But um, that must have been so much research involved in not only India when you grew up in Scotland, but also that time period, particularly, as you pointed out that the whole Raj era is missing from our curriculums.

AM: Well, Kolkata is a very interesting city. It's probably one of the most interesting cities I've ever been to. It's hard to describe. It's a city that we only really hear one side of. We only hear about the poverty and the problems in Kolkata; but its culture is extremely rich. It has the world's largest book fair every year, in terms of—I'm not talking about a commercial book fair; I'm talking: one for the public. It's the only city I know where there was a riot because the book fair finished a day early.

SOC: [Laughs] Brilliant!

AM: Um, you know, the first non-white Nobel prize winner for literature, Rabindranath Tagore, is a son of Kolkata. You go to the airport; you look at the ceiling and it's covered in his handwriting. It's weird. You know, everybody in Kolkata is either an artist or a poet and they do their day jobs, or they pretend to do their day jobs when all they really want to do is write really bad poetry, or paint. But it's a fascinating place and I love it. I love the fact it's got more theatres than London and New York. And, so for me, doing the research—I'm also a nerd, so the historical research I really enjoy. Um, but Kolkata's odd because a lot of its history is still there. It's still there in the crumbling palaces and the old colonial buildings.

SOC: It's traditional for modern-day detectives to have a flaw; they drink too much coffee or whiskey, but your character, Detective Sam Wyndham, is an opium addict and, in literary terms, sharing his hard drug addiction with Sherlock Holmes. So, can you tell us about that choice and how you researched it?

AM: Mm-hmm. Sam had to be a damaged individual. He arrives in India with what we would today call PTSD. He's shell-shocked, he's got survivor's guilt. He's lost his wife; he's lost his friends during the war, and he's had his eyes opened. He no longer just swallows whatever his superiors tell him. He is a damaged individual and I needed him—I needed something to show that damage. And, so, his opium addiction is what I settled on, partly because of the Sherlock Holmes thing as my wee tribute, but also because of the relationship that opium plays in terms of Bengal and India and the Empire. You know the fact is so—the Opium Wars that we don't talk about, where we—where the British Empire effectively got half the population of China hooked on opium. So much of the Empire's money was made in

opium trade, um, that we just don't talk about. And that opium was grown in Bengal.

SOC: What was the inspiration for Sam Wyndham?

AM: It's hard to say. Um, he came to me almost fully formed along with his sidekick, Surendranath Banerjee, who's known as 'Surrender-not.' In terms of literary forebears, I'd say, you know, he's cut from the same cloth as people like Bernie Gunther and Arkady Renko and Xavier March, who's Robert Harris' detective in *Fatherland*.

SOC: He's quite manly, quite tough.

AM: Yes.

SOC: Slightly damaged, but—he's got a heart, hasn't he?

AM: Yeah, in my head, he does. He does. He's quite—he's odd. He's sat in parts of me. He has my sort of Glaswegian gallows humour. So, although he's English, he does have this very sort of dark, wry, West of Scotland humour, shall we call it? And Surendranath, his companion, is also part of me. They're really just two halves of my personality.

SOC: Yeah, I was wondering about your favourite novel, *1984*, which you've also written about for the Royal Literary Fund, which will be on the *WritersMosaic* podcast, as well. So, I know that Orwell is an inspiration for you. Do you think the themes in your book, in your books, all your books, are about injustice? Is that inspired by him?

AM: It is, especially the first book. The first book, I set out to understand the impact of empire; not just on the governed, but on the governing. You know, what happened to all these British people who went out there and they were sold this idea of what 'Empire' was, this civilising mission; and so often they went out there and they realised it was nothing of the sort. And a lot of them became very disillusioned. And, you know, we have these stories of gin-soaked memsahibs, or whatever—and it was really Orwell in his book, *Bernie's Days* which opened my eyes to the truth of that period. We don't really see the impact on ordinary British people who went out-there: middle class and working-class people who went out there. Some of them had a great time. Some of them had lives that you could not imagine living in Dundee or Leeds, at that time. But others went out, like Orwell, with a conscience and realised, *Well, actually you know what? This isn't what we were told we were going to be doing. This is not the civilising mission that people talked about; it's a mission of oppression and exploitation.* And that fascinated me. I wanted to understand how these people did what they did. How does a moral Christian people justify the oppression of another race?

SOC: So, in each of the books in this series, you're exploring a different crime, obviously, but also a different theme. So, for instance, in *A Necessary*

Evil, it's religious divisions and diamond mining. So, I wondered where you get the inspiration from the particular theme that you're going to explore.

AM: Well, *A Necessary Evil* is an interesting one because when I started out, all I knew was I wanted to set it in the world of the maharajahs. Because even at the height of empire, two-fifths of India was still nominally independent and they were ruled by maharajahs; princely states ruled by maharajahs, who were the richest men in the world in their day. They were like the Saudi sheikhs of the nineteenth century. And they were, they were fabulously wealthy; they had huge palaces; they had wives and concubines in harems and they would come to London and fall in love with a chiropodist's assistant or a trapeze artist. And they would marry them and take them back to their palace in the middle of nowhere. And, so, I knew I wanted to look at this world. So, I started researching it. And what hit me very quickly was the role of women that seems to be written out of history. So, often while the men were out being debauched, it was the women who are the maharanis, the princesses, who ended up governing. You know, they were responsible for pushing healthcare and education and these other things. And we have this view of the harem because they all lived in the harem; they lived together. We have this view of it being some sort of pleasure palace for the maharajah. What it actually was, was a centre of power for women because men couldn't enter. And you had, you know, women who were very successful businesswomen in their own right, because they were within this protection and surrounded by other women and no men could get to them and no British advisors could get to them either.

And so you had these women who were extremely savvy; extremely wealthy, in a lot of accounts on their own merits, running these countries. And the case in point is the Kingdom of Bhopal where, which is in central India, where for about a hundred years, the kingdom was openly governed by women; and not just Hindu women but Muslim women. And that, you know, in this day and age is pretty hard to believe. But it all happened and that's really the story. That's the message that I wanted to get through in *A Necessary Evil*.

SOC: That's fascinating. I didn't know that at all. So when I'm beginning a new novel, I feel almost like I'm re-inventing the wheel because I've got to come up with another idea, and another setting, the characters, the plot, and so on. And, obviously, you've got your setting and you've got your characters, so each time you're coming back to them; and I wondered what were the joys, but also maybe the challenges, in having that same setting and the same characters in each book that you're writing?

AM: That's a great question, Sanjida. The joys are you are returning to your friends. You're returning—you know, my novels tend to have three central characters: There's Sam, there's Surendranath, and there's an Anglo-Indian woman called Annie Grant, and they are in pretty much every novel. And it's interesting to see the characters develop so you can take the long view of the characters. The reason I wanted a series is because I wanted to look at the history between 1919 and 1947, Indian Independence. And to do that, it makes sense to do it through the eyes of certain figures; the same people and you can—they evolve in real time. And that to me is very interesting. So, that's the good. On the negative side, there's the problem

that you do get stale. I'm writing the fifth book in the series right now; and I've said to my publishers, 'I want to write something else.' I'll come back to the characters, but I do want to write something else. I want to write in a different style; I want to write in a different time period; I want to write something fresh. I'm not saying the stories aren't fresh but, to me, the characters—I want to push myself as an author and I try and do that in every book. So, the fourth book, for example, is the first time I'm using two time periods.

SOC: Yes, so I was going to ask you about that. Definitely used. It's set in Assam as well as in London; and it felt very *Ripper Street* to me, and I wondered, *what was the reason for doing that?* Because also you've got the two locations, but you've also got two slightly different time periods as well, haven't you?

AM: Yeah, they're about twenty years apart: East London is 1905 and uh, East India—

SOC: 1922?

AM: 1922. And that book started off as my tribute to Agatha Christie. Um, I wanted to write a 'locked room mystery' where a body is found murdered in a room; the door is locked from the inside; there's no way in or out. How was the murder committed? And I think quite a few crime writers want to write a 'locked room mystery'. It's about coming up with something new; a

new and novel way of killing a body inside that room. Um, it just took me five years to come up with an idea.

SOC: [Laughs]

AM: But that's how it started out. But very quickly, I felt, as you said, and with your work it's a similar thing, you always have a message. You always want to have something other than just the story. And, for me, the message over the last few years, or the subject that was really upsetting me over the last few years, is the issue of immigration and integration and populism and everything that's going on in the world today. And I felt I had to comment on that because I think these days, we are—there's the 'fear factor'. There's so many people who are scared: scared of the 'other'; scared of foreigners; scared of this—and a lot of people play on that fear. And that's not my vision of Britain. My vision of Britain is the country that gave my father and mother opportunities. They faced racism; they faced terrible racism, but they also were given a fair chance at life. They were given opportunities that they did not have in India. The fact is that I, growing up as the son of middle-class immigrants in Glasgow, had better life opportunities than white working-class boys growing up five miles away in Govan. And that's something we don't talk about. We don't talk about issues of class. And, so, I wanted to look at this issue of how Britain treats immigrants; because I think there's a lot of negativity, but the fact is we are a very tolerant country. We are at our best when we remember how tolerant we are.

I've spent almost the last 20 years living in the East End of London. And what struck me was that, a hundred years ago, those streets were mainly occupied by Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe. They were fleeing persecution. They weren't done any favours, but they were given a chance. They were given sanctuary and they were given the opportunity to get on in life. And the Jewish community is extremely successful and integrated these days. They have their own culture, but they are British.

Similarly, today, those same streets and the same jobs are being filled by Bangladeshi Muslim immigrants from, you know, the sub-continent. And what really struck me as fascinating is if you take a newspaper article from certain newspapers in 1905, you can take a passage and you can replace the word Jew with Muslim and you can run it in our papers today. It was the same level of vilification. And yet, there is the other side of the story which is that Britain allows people to integrate; and I have no doubt that the immigrant story of the Jewish community, which is mirrored by the immigrant story of my community, the Hindu-Bengali middle-class community, which is now very integrated, but we have our own culture, but we are British.

I am convinced that that same story will take place with working class Muslim communities today. It takes longer for working class communities of whatever ilk because in this country we have a problem with class more than we do with race, in my opinion. But if you look at the educational statistics already, you know, you look at the performance of Bangladeshi Muslim kids—

SOC: —They're doing so well, aren't they?

AM: They are. They are and that is what Britain allows people to do. Britain is a tolerant country—

SOC: —Yeah, I would agree—

AM: —and I feel we need to—this was my attempt to show that, which is that when we are at our best, we are a nation which is open and welcoming, more than most in the world. But I also wanted to kill some bodies along the way so—

SOC: [Laughs] —In a 'locked room'.

AM: Yes.

SOC: Um, so do you think that you might write something that reflects perhaps more your personal experience, in terms of growing up British-Asian in Scotland? You know, I grew up um— [Laughs]

AM: —You're even more confused than me.

SOC: Definitely more confused, growing up in Northern Ireland—

AM: —What happened to your accent?

SOC: It got beaten out of me when I came to this country.

AM: You're just too posh.

SOC: A sort of Northern—a Northern Irish accent with someone with a brown skin in Yorkshire just didn't really go—

AM: —Did you sound like Arlene Foster? [Northern Irish accent]

SOC: [Laughs]

AM: Is that what you sounded like?

SOC: So, my mum is from Belfast. So, every time she, you know, goes back to the home country then she—her accent gets really strong. But yeah, I was just wondering whether you might reflect on your Scottish upbringing at some point?

AM: What I want to write is the immigrant story of my parents. I would like to write from my mum's point of view. Um, because it's very different from

the immigrant stories that we normally hear. We hear about the working class immigrant stories, but the middle class immigrant story is quite different and that's what I want to write. I'd love to write that, and I think it would be quite a funny book.

SOC: Yeah.

AM: Because my mum comes from a society where she was 25; she'd been Miss Kolkata the year before; it was an arranged marriage; they met twice; dad was 15 years older, but my grandfather, my mum's dad, was an educational reformer. He was an Anglophile. So, the idea that the 'boy lives in Britain' was enough for him. So they got married and my mum only found out that my dad was 15 years older when she saw his passport at the airport.

SOC: Before she'd met him? Or after she—

AM: —No, after they were married.

SOC: After they were married! Oh my goodness!

AM: [In father's accent] 'But you know, Sanjida, I was so handsome and so young looking, nobody asked my age. So, I did not lie. If they asked, I would have told them.' So, um, yeah, that was my father. Yeah, and I would love

to tell that story because my mother came here and literally within two weeks she got a job, and she was being paid more than my father was.

SOC: Brilliant.

AM: And he didn't believe her. He thought she hadn't understood them at the interview. [Imitates father's accent] 'No you didn't understand.' [Imitates mother's accent] 'No, I did. I start on Monday.' And so, I'd love to tell that story because I think it's a very uplifting story. It's a very British story.

SOC: Yeah, yeah, I can see the film already!

AM: Oh, I'd love to do that. But it wouldn't be a crime novel, which is—I can't think of who to kill. The only thing that would be murdered in that book would be the English language. So, I'm not sure when I'm going to write that. I'm currently thinking of writing something different, which would be based on radicalisation and the factors behind radicalisation.

SOC: But still a crime novel.

AM: That would be a crime novel or a thriller; but the book I want to write is the story of my mum and dad, or loosely based on my mum and dad.

SOC: That sounds like one to do a bit later on, a bit further down the line.

AM: If I win the lottery, that's what I'll do.

SOC: In another project you've got going—

AM: —Oh gosh—

SOC: —with Vaseem Khan is the—

AM: —Oh, I hate him—

SOC: —*Red Hot Chilli Writers* podcast.

AM: Yes. Yes.

SOC: And your mum's on that, too?

AM: That's right. Well, my mum is the star of that. The Red Hot Chilli Writers are a bunch of British-Asian writers. There's Vaseem, there's myself, there's Ayisha Malik who you may have heard of; Imran Mahmoud who wrote a lovely book called *You Don't Know Me*; Amit Dhand, who I also believe you're interviewing, and Alex Khan, who writes everything from

crime to Bollywood blockbusters. And we really examine arts in the media, but with a British-Asian view with a dash of garam masala, we like to say. But Vaseem and I sort of anchor it and we have guest interviews; you know, MPs, writers, whole loads of people. We've had wonderful people like Ann Cleeves, who wrote *Shetland*; we've had Bobby Seagull off *University Challenge*. But we tend to have it at Mum's house because when I used to live in East London, Mum's flat was sort of equidistant between Vaseem's place and mine, and Mum always makes snacks. But very quickly, Mum became the star of the show. People just wanted to listen to Mum. And our guests just want to be fed. So, yeah, Mum seems to become the star, but she'd been away the last couple of months in India because she 'winters in India', but she's coming back today. So, we will be back to normal service.

SOC: So, maybe she could—

AM: —You must come on and have some food.

SOC: I would love to, I would love to. Thank you. Maybe she could just do the podcast and Vaseem could—

AM: —Do you know what? People wouldn't mind. People are like, 'Can we listen to more of your mum? Why do you two have to talk so much?' I don't know.

SOC: Well, I look forward to meeting her.

AM: Yes.

SOC: So, my final question is, if you were to meet yourself as a young writer, what would you tell yourself?

AM: I was never a young writer.

SOC: Yeah, I was just thinking, you know. We'll say 39 is young.

AM: Oh, okay. Yeah, I was a bit offended there when you said that. What would I tell myself? I would say 'persevere' because it's very difficult. Yeah, I'm just going to give advice to everybody else because it's not advice that I'd follow, but it's advice that's good. Um, it's very difficult to write a novel when you are working full-time, have a family and have no guarantee that anybody is even going to read it. You know, it may end up in a slush pile. It's very difficult in those circumstances to write a whole novel. It could be a hundred thousand words; but sticking with it is the hardest thing. I'm not sure I would have managed it if I hadn't won this competition and been contractually obliged to write it. [Laughs]

SOC: [Laughs] To write the other 95,000 words.

AM: Yes, absolutely and fix the first five. So, yeah, I think it's about perseverance. It's about just getting it down. If you can do that, if you can

write almost every day, no matter how many words, I think that discipline is a great one. And have fun, because if the best happens and you become a contracted writer and you become published, you'll be on a treadmill. As you know, you're almost expected to churn out a book a year; and you're expected to meet certain hurdles and criteria. And you don't have the freedom that you might have before you're published; so, enjoy yourself.

SOC: Thank you. It's been an absolute pleasure talking to you.

AM: Thank you, Sanjida.

A recording of this transcript can be found at www.writersmosaic.org.uk

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