

WRITERSMOSAIC

Femi Fadugba

in conversation with Vassili Christodoulou

VASSILI CHRISTODOULOU: Femi, thank you so much for joining me down the line for this *WritersMosaic* podcast. I'm in London, where your debut novel, *The Upper World*, is set; but you are often in the US, and that's where you are right now. Will you tell us how you came to split your time between America and the UK?

FEMI FADUGBA: Yeah. It all comes down to a girl, basically. [Laughs] My wife is American. And so, we actually met in the UK, when I was at uni at Oxford. And so, she was doing her year abroad, in Oxford while I was there and so we met there, and then carried on. And so, yeah, I go back and forth. During the pandemic, we actually like split apart for almost two years, I think; somewhere between a year, and two years, year and a half, because, yeah, I just couldn't get into the US because all the embassies were closed etc. And so, October last year, we were reunited. So, I'm trying to make up for lost time... but going back and forth quite a lot.

VC: Just give us a little sketch of your life so far.

FF: It's like a meandering maze [Laughs]. I'll do my best though. I was born in Togo. My parents are Nigerian. I essentially moved around the world a lot. My dad was an interpreter for the UN. So, I kind of went back and forth

a bunch of different places. And, at one point, I ended up... I mean, again, there's a longer story here... but I landed in England when I was about nine years old, and my parents were still in Africa. And I essentially had this triangle of life between where my parents were in Africa, boarding school in the English countryside, and Peckham. So, it's like, Rwanda, which is where my dad was working, as part of this International Criminal Tribunal for... for Rwanda, the genocide that happened there. And, then again, so, Harry Potter, what do you call it... Hogwarts-esque setting in the English countryside, and then... and then Peckham, as well, where my aunt, who was my guardian in the UK was living and taking care of me, basically. And, so yeah, kind of had like a 'just going back and forth' between those different environments.

VC: And you're a physicist. How did you come to study quantum physics?

FF: Yeah. So, when I was really young, I wasn't... I wasn't actually that into science and I think at some point, like a lot of people, I was lucky enough to have an influence in my life. It wasn't actually a teacher, but that's a longer story... but someone who kind of just got me really interested into some of the deeper aspects of physics, right... I think there's that famous Einstein quote, where he says, 'There's something deeply hidden within reality.' And when I realised that that was what physics was actually all about, was understanding and almost seeing that invisible reality, that's, kind of, always... that piqued my interest as a teenager.

And so, I ended up going to Oxford to study material science, which is a subject that covers a quite a broad breadth of science, full stop. I mean, it includes things like nanoscience, and biomaterials, and engineering alloys, metallurgy, obviously, and quantum information processing. So, in my Masters year, I basically did my, my thesis and did some publishing in

quantum computing which, at the time, when I did it, quantum computing was like it was completely theoretical. And even the work we were doing was... was just equations on paper, basically, and then running simulations to see if the equations checked out. In fact, back then, the joke was always that quantum computing has been 10 years away from arriving for the last 50 years; and which was almost like a joke saying that it would never arrive... But, it just so happened that that was actually 10 years away, when I decided to quit [Laughs], to quit the field and leave the field.

VC: So, having excelled in science at the highest level, what motivated you to switch it up and start writing fiction?

FF: After Oxford, I basically went into the working world, like a lot of people did: consulting at one point, and worked with a solar energy financing company in Africa. Essentially, I think I was chasing 'impact'. I went from one extreme of chasing almost intellectual gratification to chasing real world results. I think, you know, as much time as I spent in places like Oxford, I think, I'd also spent a lot of time in places like, you know, I was born in Togo, Nigeria, spent time in Rwanda and Peckham. These are places where I also felt there was a need for... yeah, it was quite obvious that I was well positioned to try and have like concrete impact straight away, basically, like real world impact – how do I make people's lives a bit better? Just because the equations and algorithms are going to take a bit longer, I think. So, I go into that, and weirdly enough, and I enjoyed it. But I think, weirdly enough... I think I just kind of got drawn back to my first love, so to speak, in *The Upper World*. I didn't write *The Upper World* because I said, 'I want to be a writer now'. I became a writer because I needed to write *The Upper World*. And so, it was a project. And I felt like it was needed – both personally, in terms of getting a sort of certain spiritual journey out of myself – but also, I think, there's a strong educational aspect into it... of it.

It's really a story that explains Einstein's theory of relativity; like, explains how time and space work, in a way, hopefully, that people my age, when they're 16 years old, would understand it, because I didn't have that when I was that age.

VC: Can you give listeners the 'elevator pitch' of what to expect from *The Upper World*?

FF: Yeah, sure. So, *The Upper World* follows two teenage characters: one is a boy named Esso, who's 16 years old, living in Peckham, London. He's also got this one girl named Nadia, at the front of his class, who he's obsessed with and he's been trying to tell her for the longest time that he's obsessed with her. And so one morning he's running to catch the bus that he takes to school. And while he's crossing the road, he basically sees this little boy about to get run over. And he has to make a split-second decision, 'Am I going to save the boy, or not?' And he decides he is. So, he runs after the boy. And in the act of pushing this kid out of the way of this oncoming Range Rover, he gets hit himself and knocked out; not just out of consciousness, but out of reality as we know it, and into this place called the 'upper world', which is a realm where you can basically see reality the way that physics describes it. And so 'time', which is usually... we can only, we're kind of trapped in the present; he can basically see the past, present, and future all at the same time – glimpses of each one. So, they're all kind of 'flat' the way Einstein's theory describes time. And so he actually manages to jump into one of these glimpses of the future and he's transported into this scene, which is the end of his night. And there's bullets criss-crossing the air. One's coming for him, a couple coming for his mates, one's coming for Nadia. Anyway, he gets spat out of this upper world and back into the normal 3D world, and realises he's only got to the end of the night to stop him and all of his mates and the girl he loves from

dying. And the second storyline follows Rhia, basically, which is 15 years in the future. And she's lived after these events and is doing the opposite thing where she's trying to find a way to use the 'upper world' to go back in time and to reconnect with the parents that she never got to meet. So, it's a story about love, violence, and the physics of time travel that just so happens to take place in Peckham.

VC: You spent many summers in Peckham, and you mentioned that you lived through the pandemic there. What elements of your upbringing and the community around you, were you hoping to capture on the page?

FF: Yeah, I think the 'voice' was an important thing. Just having it be a 'voice' that, within a couple of pages, if you're a teenager reading it – and I do like a bunch of like school visits, and I've done like... I've gone to places like Sacred Hearts, and Harris Academy, Peckham – and it's just kind of being able to, like, read this aloud to kids and them saying, 'Okay, I get this. I can put myself in these shoes, and I know that bus stop that he's describing, I know Katie's chicken shop, I take the bus 36 to school every day.' So, it was just about grounding it, really, and it was important that I ground it, because I also wanted to explore this otherworldly abstract stuff. And so it acts as this... it brings balance to it all; because, I think, if I had, if it was just a 'street' story, that wouldn't have been kind of honest with me, or what the fullness of the project I wanted to describe... and if it was just a kind of physicsy, artsy kind of thingy, then I don't think it would have been as impactful, either.

VC: One of the storylines is set 15 years in the future. And the near future you depict is just as hard and cruel as the present day with the addition of new kinds of mass surveillance, and a chicken shop that becomes an all-

powerful mega-corp. How did you approach world-building the Peckham of the future?

FF: I think when you when you're thinking about the future, there's almost always three options, right, to make it interesting when you're futurescaping. One: is just to take a trend and kind of continue it, maybe even exacerbate it a little bit to make the point more. The other: is to completely reverse it, right. And, so the chicken and chip shop was an example of me kind of taking a trend, where you have corporate consolidation that we see every day, where, you know, I think maybe Vas, when me and you were kids, there was probably twice as many banks as there are now just because that's the way the economy evolves. And so that was the idea there. Then, there's also like sort of trend reversals. And, then, also just the stuff that stays the same. There's a scene in the book where Esso comes in, and the first time he meets... Rhia meets Esso, she notices that he's wearing some Air Maxes. And she's kind of confused, because those are the kind of Air Maxes that they wear right now, well in 2036. It ended up actually mirroring my own experience, because I went to go do a school talk in Germany and just looking... It's the first time after the pandemic, and I hadn't been in school for ages, or since I was in school myself. And so it's a bunch of 15-year-olds in Hamburg, and I was just looking at their shoes, and they really were just wearing the exact same shoes that I wore as a kid, because they'd cycled back around again. So, that's the third option, kind of just cycle it back. And each one has... tells you different things about both the present and where we might go.

VC: Did you find, as you were writing *The Upper World*, that there were parallels between your creativity and imagination in science and in art? Did your career in science prepare you for working as an author?

FF: Yeah, it definitely did. I think there are deep parallels. And if there's anything that I... I'm pretty confident I could bank on about how the future would look, is that the current divisions and segmentations that we use to divide different subjects, are probably going to melt. They might rearrange into something else, but they definitely are going to dissolve, because they're pretty superficial. My conceptualisation of this is that it's all about language, basically. Everything is language; language and... and kind of objects, right. And so storytelling is really just about telling an inner spiritual story. The language component is always invisible, and the object is kind of what you see; but the storytelling is about telling this spiritual journey of a character, where they go from having a problem that they're not even aware of to, kind of, finally facing the truth and overcoming it. And that's a spiritual journey that you can't see, but it's manifested through the premise – the events that happen on page, the objects that you can see. And physics is basically the same thing. You have this language of mathematics like this, this just symbols on a page that represent these invisible realities; and they manifest through the objects that we do see, in everyday life, right. So, science is really just about using this mathematical – again, invisible, abstract – language of mathematical objects to describe what we *do* see in reality; and it turns out that this invisible world is more explanatory of the visible world than the visible world is.

VC: This is a novel with big, powerful emotions, and very well drawn characters, not the kind of thinly sketched archetypes we might associate with sci-fi. Would you speak a little bit about the craft of characterisation and how you made your teenage protagonist feel so authentic?

FF: Well, thank you, first of all. Yeah, this is an interesting one. I mean, yeah, it was really just taking my own life and experiences and, and cranking it, putting it in a different mould. I mean, it's funny, because sometimes

people ask me, 'Are you Esso, or are you Rhia?' And the answer is, kind of, 'Yes and No', because I'm definitely not as... there's a bunch of things about my life that don't reflect in Esso's life, but there are some that do overlap. But, the truth is, I'm just as much, you know, the headmaster [Laughs]; or the person on the bus that, you know, that waves at Esso at the end; and his mother and his father; as I am Esso and Rhia. So, I think we've all got like a thousand characters within us. And it's, for me... it was just about taking any of the characters that are within me and putting them in this situation and just saying, 'How would I react?' And, then, most importantly, I think just trying to make it kind of feel funny, for lack of a better word, or feel, kind of, ordinary. I mean, weirdly enough, there's... I've got all of these high concept things in *The Upper World*, but the feedback I've gotten from a lot of people is that their favourite scene was just like the lunch scene, when you have these kids just taking the piss out of each other over lunch. There's a ton of people who were like, 'That was basically my favourite scene.' I think there's just something very tangible and relatable about that. And so, I think, yeah... and that was what made it most fun; being able to span both of those extremes, between the piss-taking of the 'ordinary', and also the mind-blowingness of the extraordinary.

VC: It's going to be made into a Netflix movie, which you're executive producing. It's an incredible achievement for any author, let alone a debut novelist. Tell us a bit about how that came about.

FF: Yeah mate, it was a bit mad. There was an auction for the book, which meant we sent out the book to a bunch of different publishers. There was like a fifteen-way auction in the end. And then Penguin snatched it up in the UK and HarperCollins in the US, and a few other people doing translation rights in Italy and in Spain and Portugal, Brazil, Germany, etc. And I think, at some point, because we sent it out to so many people, it got into the hands

of film scouts. I didn't know that this was a 'thing'. But you have people who are reading books all the time, including books that haven't been released, that they kind of fall into their hands. And, yeah, it went from them to a bunch of different studios, both in the UK and in Hollywood. So, I spoke to a bunch of different film houses, and in the end my... I think it was it was Daniel Kaluuya's agent... sent it to him. It was funny, Daniel told me that he actually got it sent from a bunch of people like at the same time, for whatever reason, from a number of different sources. They sent him this book and said, 'You got to have a look.' So, he teamed up with Netflix and Grand Electric, that's a production company. They made like *Narcos*, and *Hustle*, I think, they've got a pretty impressive roster of films. And, they, yeah... they just came together, and the team just kind of was, too, yeah, it was incredible. And, so yeah, when... we're going with Netflix currently and in the stage of finalising the script. Um, so yes, it's exciting times.

VC: Do you know when we can expect to see it?

FF: Um, I'm not positive. I think next year.

VC: Oh, wow! Soon. What are you reading at the moment and who should our listeners check out, once they've finished *The Upper World*?

FF: So, I haven't been reading that much because I'm writing my second book. And so I try not to have too many voices in my head at certain stages. So, I've just been keeping it quiet. I generally... I'm reading books on quantum field theory [Laughs] just because the world-building for my books is based off of real physics. And so, I end up having to go quite deep into the theoretical stuff, as well.

VC: So, we're going from the Einsteinian world of relativity in the first book into the quantum realm for book two.

FF: Correct. Exactly right, yeah. So, yeah, I'm super excited about just being able to explain that and quantum field theory I think is the least understood... I mean, people always say quantum physics is confusing and doesn't make any sense. And quantum field theory basically only came out in the 90s but it, essentially, makes sense of most of the things that people believe is crazy about quantum theory. So, I'm excited about the opportunity to... to kind of retell the story of quantum mechanics in a way that, hopefully, people are okay with.

VC: Well, thank you Femi. It's been a pleasure talking to you for this podcast.

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

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