

## **Writing Heroes and Why I Write**

Niven Govinden

Shortly after my last novel was published, I was in Paris, where I picked up a copy of Dennis Cooper's poems from a guy selling used books on a tabletop in the Marais. The poems were everything I remembered them to be when I'd read them over a decade earlier: challenging, elegiac, direct, and hot.

What I hadn't anticipated was the sadness I felt on reading them, less to do with the poems themselves, but more concerned with nostalgia; transporting me back to my teenage self in the late 80s and early 90s. I was thinking of the time when I realised that I wanted to be a writer, and using the books I read to forge a path.

I was a voracious reader and felt very aware of a prolific community – or so it seemed to me – of radical queer writers whose work I found to be educational, resonant and inspiring. I was thinking of writers like Cooper, but also Pat Califia, Dale Peck, Oscar Moore, Derek Jarman, Kathy Acker, Edmund White, Alan Hollinghurst, Felice Picano, Larry Kramer and others. James Baldwin was of a different era, but also one of my cornerstones; similarly, David Wojnarowicz, but I didn't discover him until later.

So my sadness was partly down to the hero worship I had for that group at that particular time, but also I was wondering where all the radical queer writers had got to. Did those writers still exist for younger readers looking to find themselves in books: those who wanted to be artists themselves and seeking the same enlightenment and validation that I had once sought? I felt my absence from that conversation, painfully so, and the need to be visibly present was partly one of the motors that got me through my fifth novel, *This Brutal House*.

In producing a book about protest by queer People of Colour, set in New York, I was writing the book I wanted to see in the world. It was more productive than lamenting the absence of something that could never return.

What I hadn't factored in was the appetite for the book among queer readers. In working through my own feelings of nostalgia and generations lost, I was contributing something that was needed elsewhere – I realised that the visibility of my writing and myself as a queer PoC writer belonged to a new community of writing that occupied the same psychic space I'd once looked up to – and still do.

It's hard to put into words the feelings when you realise that you've become the writer you always wanted to be – so I won't try. What I will say is that the reason I write is two-fold; to make sense of the world around me – its freedoms and constraints – through a body of work, and also to pay forward all that my writing mentors have taught me: integrity, strength, fearlessness, solid sentences, and the desire to work to my own rules. I hope I've succeeded.

### **Niven Govinden**

Niven Govinden is the author of five novels, including *All The Days And Nights* which was longlisted for the Folio Prize and shortlisted for the Green Carnation Prize. His second novel *Graffiti My Soul* is about to go into film production. His third novel *Black Bread White Beer* won the 2013 Fiction Uncovered Prize. He was a judge for the 2017 4th Estate/Guardian BAME Prize.

A recording of this talk can be found on the WritersMosaic website at

**[writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)**

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