

# WRITERS MOSAIC

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## Diana Evans

In Conversation with Jonny Wright

**Jonny Wright (JW):** It's Jonny Wright here, and I'm with award-winning novelist Diana Evans in her loft atop of a spiral staircase. Is this where you work?

**Diana Evans (DE):** Yeah, this is where I work. In that corner over there, is my desk. That's where I think. And then, over here, where we're sitting, I read and make notes, read poetry in the morning before I write. I love a loft. I grew up in a loft when I was a kid and I just really liked being at the top of a building, and I like the triangular shape of a loft room.

**JW:** So, saying this about lofts in both *26a* and *Ordinary People*, the loft is a big part of *26a*, and *Ordinary People*, with a kind of spoiler alert, but the main character in it wanted to move back to a flat to be high up. So, how much of your own personality gets into your characters?

**DE:** Quite a lot, actually. I tend to put traits that I recognise in myself into my characters, to scatter them around over the different characters; and it makes me feel connected to the characters. I think writing is a way of exploring one's psychology, exploring human psychology. So, I often put ex—sort of extremes of emotion into my characters; feelings that I don't necessarily let myself act on in my own life. But in the context of fiction, I can take my characters all the way with these very extreme emotions, and that's quite an exciting thing to do. But I'm always very deeply psychologically connected to the characters. That's what makes the work feel alive.

**JW:** How does that make you feel having that freedom to, to take these characters places where, in real life, you perhaps wouldn't dare to go?

**DE:** It's a kind of a freeing feeling, actually. I'm very curious and I think we live with lots of limitations in our own lives, especially if you're part of a family. You know, we come into the world generally into a family and that family comes with its own limitations on individuality and who you are and who you become. I've always been really interested in exploring that kind of friction and the tug-of-war between the 'self' and the limitations of the family. How do you fully manifest yourself, in the

context of family life. And that's one of the main preoccupations, I guess, in *Ordinary People*.

**JW:** Yeah, I was going to say 100% in *Ordinary People*, that seemed to be almost the theme.

**DE:** Yeah. And I was thinking, particularly, about motherhood, but also, parenthood, in general. It's also a book about fatherhood. And it's a book about the convention of cohabitation and marriage and exploring that in a contemporary setting. And the characters are all struggling to, kind of, work out who they are. It's also a novel about middle age, approaching the 40s. So, all the characters are in their thirties. And there's only one character who's really content and happy in herself, in who she is, and that's Stephanie. And she's married to Damien, and she has three kids. And she always wanted to be a mum and for motherhood to be her main priority.

And then the other three characters around her all have their different kinds of angst, imposed by their situations of being in a couple, whether it's married or not married, and having the responsibility of the children. Plus, the thing about children is that you, you've given birth to them: they belong to you; you're fully responsible for them, and you don't really have a right to kind of resent that responsibility,

because you're the one that created this person. But, nevertheless, those feelings exist; the feelings of limitation, and what do we do with those feelings?

Things that happen in the books are actually fabricated and it's a combination of fact and fabrication. I think, if I was to write a memoir, I'd be much more limited. I'm not interested in writing things exactly as they happened. I'm interested in taking real life as a starting point, and then bending it, and twisting it, and changing it, and matching it with some other something else, something that might have happened, or could have happened.

**JW:** So, you have a starting point. And then what would you do?

**DE:** It's always very muddled and complicated at the beginning; not just at the beginning, actually, most of the way through. I really often feel like I'm working blindly, and I'm working in the dark and I don't really know what I'm doing. I begin by having a rough idea of the kind of book I want to write, but this book, I knew I wanted to write a portrait of black British middle-class life in the course—over the course of one year; which would be the first year of the Barack Obama presidency, and the same year that Michael Jackson died. So, that gave me a kind of a workable scope. But, uh, beyond that, I didn't know what a lot of the substance was going to be, and the particular themes were going to be.

So, at that point, then I would start reading other books, like the John Updike I found quite inspiring. Also read James Salter's book *Light Years*, which is about the long-term fragmentation of a marriage, and Richard Yates' *Revolutionary Road*, which ended up forming the basis of my plot, as it were. I don't really have a strong plot, but it gave me a kind of a narrative framework. That book was quite important. Also, Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, the way that he was depicting aristocratic Russian life at a particular moment in time

**JW:** Which Damian was reading.

**DE:** Yes, Damien was reading *War and Peace*.

**JW:** So, Damien was reading it as you were.

**DE:** Yeah. Yeah. It took me a long time to read that book and I almost gave up on it.

**JW:** Like the other character had given up on it, right?

**DE:** Yeah, yeah. I think she had, yeah. But I liked the way it opened with a party.

That's where I got the idea to open with a party. I knew I wanted to document the

Barack Obama moment, the moment that he won that first election, I wanted to document that in some way. And then to open it with a party seemed just very fitting, because I could open the world into this middle class, black British milieu.

**JW:** So, when do your titles come?

**DE:** The titles come at the end, usually, the final title. I have a working title, which helps me keep focused on what I'm doing. So, the working title for this was Bell Green—

**JW:** Okay.

**DE:** —which is a particular area in south London. It had a ring to it. Bell Green: I was quite wedded to that title, but then my agent, she's actually very good with titles, my agent, she thought of the title for my first book *26a*; she didn't like the Bell Green title. She wanted something more, I don't know, dynamic. And so, we were going back and forth between me and her and my editors all throwing in ideas. In the end, we decided it had to be a musical title, because it's a very musical book. There's lots of music in it. And, then, because John Legend is very instrumental in the psychology of Michael, and he's, kind of, the star of the—

**JW:** Nice pun, 'instrumental'.

**DE:** —yeah, that's, yeah. He's kind of the star of the playlist. So, it was just very fitting to have one of his songs as the title.

**JW:** What's your relationship like with music and your writing?

**DE:** I listen to a lot of music; it's just something that I need. I need books and I need music. So, I often listen to music after I've been writing. I listen to music in the mornings; I listen to music with yoga; when I'm driving; and what happens when you're writing a novel is everything in the world around you is—takes on this heightened significance. So, the music that you're listening to, becomes much more potent, and it has much more meaning. It has its own particular meaning in the context of whatever you're working on. And there was a particular artist that I was listening to when I was writing *Ordinary People*, such as John Legend and Michael Jackson. Especially with Michael Jackson, whenever I heard Michael Jackson, any of his songs, I would always feel rescued if I was lost in the writing, because I was often lost with this book. You know, I didn't know where it was going. It took seven years. It was really tough, but it was always music that brought me back.

**JW:** And I see with all of your books, I'd say how London is a character in the books; and so, what's your relationship like with London, and your writing?

**DE:** Yeah, London is a really interesting canvas to write on. It's so full of difference and diversity, and all the areas of London are different from one another. And I've lived in a few areas and London, because I grew up in northwest London in Neasden, and I wrote about that area in 2016. And then I lived in west London, in Ladbroke Grove for 10 years, and that's that also had a really particular history of migration into the UK in the 50s and 60s, and how that's kind of manifested in the Notting Hill Carnival and the whole identity of the area. So, I was really interested in showing that.

**JW:** In *The Wonder*?

**DE:** In *The Wonder*. In the second book, yeah. And then I felt that south London just deserved its own novel, because a lot of the novels that I'd read about London are often set north of the river.

**JW:** Yeah.



DE: And I thought, *Why isn't there a novel? Why isn't—doesn't south London crop up that often in novels?* Because, you know, it's so vast, sweeping and beautiful.

JW: And was it a conscious choice. So, with your books, the protagonists getting older? So, you have teenage protagonists in *26a*; and then they were like in their twenties, in *The Wonder*; and then in this latest book, *Ordinary People*, it was 30s turning to 40s. Was that a conscious choice, as you matured?

DE: No, it wasn't conscious, but it does seem to be a pattern that is emerging. And in my work, as I go along, I realise that's actually a useful way to think about it; if you can have some kind of construct, or pattern that you can apply to your work, it helps you make a clear course for yourself. And, I guess, I am trying to chart the different decades of life, of human life. So, the first one was a childhood and teenage; and then the second was the 20s; and, then, *Ordinary People* is people in their 30s. And the next book is going to be 40s; and then the next one is going to be 50s. and it just gives me this kind of visible course, this natural course.

JW: And one pattern I've seen emerging in all of your books is dreams. So, how big a part do dreams play in your life?

DE: Yeah, I don't really like dreams in novels. I say that and then my second novel opens with a dream! I like charting the characters' dreams and how the dream differs from where they actually end up. And the emotional, kind of, how that plays out in their lives emotionally, I guess. That's what interests me.

JW: But, there's also, there's a sense in a lot of your protagonists of restlessness, and not wanting to, to settle down and wanting to escape the confines of whether that be parenthood, or a relationship, or just almost to walk out into the sea, or just to leave.

DE: Yeah, I mean, I think there are two kinds of people in the world; and in that area, there are people who are restless, and who are wanderers, and who just want to kind of take the world and eat the world, the way Melissa does.

JW: So, that's Melissa in *Ordinary People*.

DE: In *Ordinary People*, yeah. But, then Michael, I guess, who is her partner in the novel, is the opposite of her.

JW: Yeah, importantly not, husband.

**DE:** Yes, yes, importantly, that's significant. So he's, he doesn't hanker for the unknown in the way that she does.

**JW:** And that frustrates her.

**DE:** That frustrates her. Yeah, I mean, I think if you put characters in some situation where they're limited, that's what creates the story, you know; it's the conflict between a character's reality and their desire that creates plot and action, or the conflict between what one character wants and another character wants. So, Michael and Melissa, essentially, they're opposites. Yet, they're also really well suited. I think that's the case with lots of couples that they 'complete' one another.

**JW:** One thing I loved in all of your books is that you actually made me question my own racism, really, or my own—how I stereotype people. So, I'd read a character, and a lot of times, I would assume they were white because they were doing things that I wouldn't associate black people to do; like, people on a barge, or I think there's a photographer, or the dance troupe. At first, I thought it was a white dance troupe, I think.

**DE:** Oh, did you?

**JW:** Yeah, I think so. I can't remember. That one might be wrong but, definitely, the people on the, the brother and sister on the barge.

**DE:** in *The Wonder*.

**JW:** Yeah, it's something that you couldn't really do with a film: we're saying—because you see the florist: you see she's black, or you see the people on the barge: you see they're black. But what's great about the reading of the book is a character description will come in later, often, in the way you write it. But I think that's amazing that you're making me think outside the box. Is that something that you make a conscious choice to do, to put black people in, yet to take them 'out of the box', and put them in, in unfamiliar situations for the readers?

**DE:** Yeah, definitely. That is something that I'm always aware of when I'm writing, that I'm trying to disturb and confront these stereotypes around blackness and try and write the kinds of lives that are unexpected, in order to reject those stereotypes, especially in the way that I describe characters—that's very deeply thought out. Usually, it's like I'm trying to reclaim language from the limitations that racism has imposed on our minds in the way we perceive other people.

So, I was very aware when I was using the word 'blackness' or 'black', and I wanted to use in a different way, or in a way that was unexpected to take the pressure off that word, and the way that characters look at one another. I was very careful that I wanted to describe exactly what they're seeing. So, there's this bit in the first chapter of *Ordinary People* where Melissa and Michael are changing to get ready for bed, and there's a description of what Melissa sees as she's watching Michael change. She sees particular things about him that are very specific to the way that she sees him. She doesn't see a black man, you know, she sees Michael.

**JW:** Yeah, that's her partner.

**DE:** Yes, yes. So, that was all very intentional. Yeah, I mean, I think I am very aware of the theme of race and how heavily it has laid on black writers, and that I'm very determined not to be burdened by it, and to write these characters in all of their truth and accuracy and, you know, psychological authenticity, but not to have them have this kind of blanket of "race" over them.

**JW:** Which was really interesting with Melissa and Michael, because she wasn't burdened by race, and Michael was.

**DE:** Yeah, because their experiences of race have been different. So, I'm trying to, kind of, inject some nuance into the way we think about race. And, also to make the point that that race is not something that belongs to black writers. It doesn't belong to black people. Race is a construct that belongs to the world. It's a problem that belongs to the world. And we should all think about it. It's not just mine, you know, it's also because white writers, for example, they have this luxury of not having to think about race with their characters; doesn't apply to them. But, of course, it should apply to them because it is part of their story, as well; it's part of the story of their privilege.

**JW:** And you talk about other writers. Who are your favourite writers?

**DE:** Oh God, there are so many.

**JW:** Okay, give me a top five.

**DE:** Top five?

**JW:** Doesn't have to be in order.

DE: Okay. Leo Tolstoy; Lucia Berlin; I love her short stories; an American writer, John Updike, I have to say is one of my favourite writers as a stylist. I mean, I have deep problems with his rampant racism and I'm not sure how much more of his work I'm going to be able to read; James Baldwin is right up there; maybe. I really like Jackie Kay's work. I love her stories.

JW: So, the *Red Dust Road*, you've got here.

DE: *Red Dust Road*, I loved that memoir. Yeah. And her poems, as well.

JW: And she is Scottish-Nigerian, is that right, Jackie Kay?

DE: Yep. Yeah, because I don't like all of Tolstoy's work, or all of Updike's work. It changes as well, as I'm discovering new writers.

JW: What about your relationship with humour? Because I think humour shines through in all of your work, and even in really dark moments.

DE: Yeah, I think it comes through on its own. Actually, I think when I really discovered my voice as a fiction writer, I immediately became aware that there was this natural comedy in it; and that's when the writing felt right. And it does have

the—this effect of balancing out the atmosphere of the work, because I do get very dark; I think my work is often quite dark. And I find that the—this sort of lightness and the humour, it helps me shine a light on that darkness and draw it out and really describe it fully and fully inhabited. And I like funny books, as well. I like writers who make me laugh. I love that.

**JW:** What advice would you give to someone starting off as a novelist? How do you do that first novel?

**DE:** I think you have to really believe in what you're doing. And you have to feel like this book needs to exist; you know, it has to be that important, for me, personally. Otherwise, if I didn't have that feeling about a project, I wouldn't be able to complete it, because it is so hard. It helps to have some connection with other writers. That really helped me when I was working on my first book.

I think a sense of regularity is really crucial. So, if you are working on a novel to work on it every single day, or at least five days a week, so that you're returning to the, to the project every single day, even if it's just for an hour, or two hours, if you can really only manage a short space of time. It's much better to do that for five days, or six days, in a week, than to do a long stretch of eight hours, once a month, or once a week. Do you see what I mean? Because it's the regularity that imposes momentum



and then momentum makes you brave because each time I come to the desk I'm a little bit scared. I think it's good to be a bit scared. But you need that sense of momentum to help you, kind of, overcome that fear and make you just sit down and just start writing and not be overcome by the fear.

**JW:** What was your journey? How did you get into writing?

**DE:** Well, I used to keep a journal. That's where it all started. When I was about 13 or 14, I just used to write thoughts and then it turned into poems. And then I started submitting poems to anthologies, and I got a couple published. And I think I slowly became aware that I was a writer. I didn't think of myself as a writer, but I recognised a writer in myself, you know. And it wasn't like, I wanted to be a writer or anything like that, I just recognised that it was, it was within me. And, from there, it was just really following a natural course.

I was always writing because it was something that I just did, naturally. I had to do it. And then I started trying to write stories. And I became a journalist. Because I was a dancer for a while, and I had to choose between writing and dancing, and I chose writing. And that meant I had to go and get a job; and the obvious thing was to get a job as a journalist. So, I ended up as a music journalist, but I found that that kind of framework of writing journalism quite restrictive; I couldn't be as creative as I

wanted to be. And so, then I was trying to write stories, and then I started working on a novel. And once the novel was finished, I, I got a two-book deal, I got an agent. Yeah, and I found an agent who basically didn't want to change the work too much, and kind of seems to understand what I was trying to do.

**JW:** Do you make major changes? For example, would you change the beginning, or take out chapters, and put chapters back in that didn't exist previously? How was that process?

**DE:** If I'm moving chapters around, or change in the beginning, that's usually on advice from my editor for that point, because I don't, I don't work; I've never worked in a linear way when I'm working on a novel. I tend to write chapters in a very disparate way. And I write scenes rather than chapters. And I kind of slot the scenes into their logical places. And then when I have a larger idea of the structure, then I go back to the beginning, and I write through, sort of editing and adding as I'm going.

**JW:** So, do you know—

DE: So, I find that I never—I don't need to—by the time I finished that process, I never really need to move things around in a big structural way because it's been done very organically.

JW: And then, with your writing, I find it so descriptive; and you even, I mean *26a*, for example, how you mentioned depression with colours, which I thought was genius.

DE: Thanks.

JW: Did you just develop that descriptive style?

DE: I think I'm always trying to find different ways of saying things because language is like a plaything, you know, and I like to exploit it to the point of exhaustion, you know. Because, when I'm writing, I'm thinking about—lots of thoughts are coming into my head, and I follow the images, and I follow the thoughts right to exhaustion until that thought is fully exhausted, then I can leave it and move on to the next thing.

And I'm always looking for new images and trying to work against clichés and stereotypes. And so, when it came to writing about depression, I mean, I was kind of a bit stumped at first. How do you depict depression? So, I just tried to think of it in

a way that was more sensory, than actually describing it. It's more connecting to an idea, or an image in a way that's more to do with colours. And it's very difficult to describe what you're doing when you're writing.

**JW:** But I mean, you do it; you do it really, really well.

**DE:** Thank you.

**JW:** It's excellent; and also spirituality and superstition I think are a big part of a lot of your books. Do you have any writing superstitions?

**DE:** Um, yeah, I think I am quite a superstitious person. I like to start a book at the beginning of the year in January. That's a good time to start work. Yeah, I don't like to talk about work that I'm writing because it feels like bad luck. If something is too spoken and it's too outside of yourself, then you lose the energy of it. It's kind of, it, it leaks out of you. You lose the passion.

A recording of this transcript can be found at [writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)

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