

# WRITERSMOSAIC

---

Chitra Ramaswamy

In Conversation with Colin Grant

'This was one of the huge emergent themes of *Homelands*, just how we speak through the silences of history and how many silences remain.'

— Chitra Ramaswamy

**Presenter:** This is *WritersMosaic* In Conversation. Editing Director Colin Grant talks to author and journalist Chitra Ramaswamy about living and writing in Edinburgh.

**Colin Grant (CG):** Well Chitra, can we start by asking you where you are and what stage of the week this is for you.

**Chitra Ramaswamy (CR):** Absolutely. I am sitting upstairs in my daughter's bedroom, in fact, which is where I often do interviews from home. I work from home

and I am in Leith in Edinburgh, which is in the north of Edinburgh, right on the sea. I think we often forget that Edinburgh's a city on the sea, a coastal city. But yes, I've lived here for about—more than a decade, now. I have officially got to the point where I've lived in Scotland longer than I have lived in England, which is where I'm from, which is quite disconcerting and a bit disorientating.

**CG:** But you started off in Scotland in Glasgow. Can you tell the listeners, who may not know the difference between Glasgow and Edinburgh, what that difference is and also what that difference is in terms of being a writer, would you say?

**CR:** Oh! Well, that is a very rich and controversial question, Colin! [They laugh.] That's almost like a—that's a discussion all of its own! Well, I spent the first ten years of my life in Scotland in Glasgow. I went to university there, so I was there in my twenties, which—you know, it's the perfect meeting of my time of life with the geographical place because it is such a fun city, and I had huge amounts of fun while I was there. And then I've kind of moved to Edinburgh, when I've been a bit more grown up and I've had children here and so in some ways, to me, Glasgow's kind of the younger, more hedonistic city and Edinburgh's the slightly more mature city where, you know, you're more concerned about quality of life and access to green spaces and, you know, proximity to the sea and things like that. But I do think the difference in the cities is actually very well represented by its writerly scenes, because Glasgow is a

much more kind of 'DIY'—you know, it's much easier to be poor and a writer in Glasgow [they laugh] in other words, I think. So many of the differences between the two cities are actually differences of kind of class.

**CG:** But your history may have been different if as a young child you decided to stay, or your family decided to stay, in India. What was that like? You moved back to India; your parents were from India, weren't they?

**CR:** That's right. So my dad came here in the late 60s and he came here alone from Bangalore in South India. And, you know, he came here in that time where he came here as a British citizen and so, you know, you didn't need a passport, you didn't need a visa, you didn't need anything. You were a citizen. Then he went back a few years later, had an arranged marriage to my mum and then brought her back almost immediately, which I find—I always found extraordinary: the thought that, you know, my mum, who really had just met this man a couple of times—and he was a bit of a rogue, my dad; still is in many ways. But she, you know, I mean, what a leap of faith, to marry this man you barely know and then to just get on a plane and leave for the rest of her life. Whenever I used to ask her about this she always used to say, 'No, I wasn't afraid at all.' And I think that says something, really, about it being very much a meeting of minds between my mum and dad. She felt kind of

safe in the knowledge of coming here with him, that they were somehow choosing the right kind of life together, and it did turn out to be true.

So after my sister and I were born, I think I was one year old, one years old, when they decided—I sort of see it as a kind of fork in the road that probably many first generation arrive at, where perhaps you have children and you think, *what are we going to do now?* Are we going to try and replicate what we had, in other words, go back; or are we going to stay and stick it out here and our children will be, you know, in our case, British through and through? So they decided to go back and just see how it went.

They enrolled my sister in school. I was a baby, so this is fascinating to me and I'm becoming increasingly preoccupied with memory and history and how these two huge forces interconnect in life and in writing, as well. I find it interesting and powerful and kind of touching that this happened at a time of life that I obviously have no memory of whatsoever. And we stayed for quite a long time, I think for a year or so, and then financially, really, we had no choice but to come back. I think it was a money decision, fundamentally, but I think also there was that sense of my parents no longer really felt like they fitted in there, either. They had become quite British by this point.

CG: Yes.

CR: And so, yeah. In my book, *Homelands*, that's how I kind of referred to it as, you know, the results of the experiment came back and they were, 'no, you're to go back to [laughs] suburban south-west London. That's where you belong after all'.

CG: So in your most recent book, *Homelands*, it's dedicated to Henry and Ingrid Wuga and my parents. And this is a fascinating book which is a story of friendship, but it's also the story of both your family and the family of the Wugas, isn't it? How did you first come to arrive at the idea that this was a story that you could forge into a book, would you say?

CR: Well, it's interesting because I have interviewed so many people in my two decades as a journalist, but this is the only time that I've ever ended up writing a book about one of them, and so it was very, very specific to, really, this man Henry Wuga. And Henry Wuga is a German-Jewish refugee, in fact he's just celebrated his 99th birthday; I was at his tea party. I met him as a journalist. I went to interview him and this was in the summer of 2011. After I met him, it really was—it sounds trite but I do feel like I walked back over the threshold of that flat in Giffnock on the south side of Glasgow, this beautiful mid-century block of flats where Henry lives and I was a changed person. This encounter with this particular man and his

attitude, his perspective, his empathy, his style, his sense of humour, his love of food; so many things about him and of course his life and what had happened to him. I just kept returning to his story and I kept interviewing him. I interviewed him for the Guardian a couple of times; whenever I got the chance, really, I wrote about him. And then I think it took me a good few years to understand that I wanted to devote more time to him—years, it would turn out. It's been a decade in the making, really, this book.

**CG:** Well just briefly there, to give the listeners some idea about Henry, just in a paragraph or two, could you explain about, he's been a child who was part of this Kindertransport period during the Second World War and what that meant to his fortunes when he came to Britain.

**CR:** Yes, so as you say, Henry and in fact his wife, Ingrid, were Kindertransportees; so they were two of the almost 10,000 predominantly Jewish children who came to Britain in the nine months leading up to the Second World War. So Henry came in the May of 1939 and he had grown up in Nuremberg, so, you know, in the absolute epicentre of the Nazi Party; where the rallies were held, you know, these were some of his early memories. He was the only son of a stationer and the stationer's wife. So it's his mother who was Jewish, and Jewish identity—Jewishness—runs down the maternal line. His father was Austrian, and actually a kind of, a lapsed Catholic. So

Henry came on the Kindertransport as a teenager. He was at the upper end of the age limit. He was 15 when he arrived.

What I probably found so powerful about his story—I mean, every single Kindertransportee has got an astonishing story because these children intended to come for the duration of the war and then go back, but almost none of them went back because there was nothing to go back to. They were orphaned by the genocide and their homes, their cities, their countries, their villages, were completely decimated. So they stayed. But what was so interesting to me about Henry, was that when he came, literally a year later, he was interned. He was one of many Jewish refugees who were interned in this country, during the Second World War. Now, I had no idea that Jewish refugees, you know, some of them the same ones who had been on the Kindertransport, fleeing persecution, and then months later they were imprisoned in the same country that had saved them! It seemed to me an astonishing and obscured chapter of history that needed—the light needed to be shined on it.

**CG:** And there's an extraordinary moment in the book where you come into the possession, or Henry comes into the possession of, documents from the National Archives which explain that he was considered to be a possible dangerous enemy

alien spy. In a way you're unfolding that story, as the reader reads. So you're almost acting as detective on their behalf. Was that your approach?

CR: Absolutely and I decided to open the book with these incredibly dramatic moments; the moment really where Henry is on the doorstep of the house of his sponsor in Glasgow, who herself was a Jewish immigrant called Mrs Etta Hurwich. He receives a communication saying, 'You must come to the High Court in Edinburgh' and so he's 16 years old; he goes to the High Court in Edinburgh, attends one of these wartime tribunals and within half an hour he has been charged with being a dangerous enemy alien and not only that but Category A, which was the highest category you could be labelled with! And so that's it: he was then interned for almost two years after that in six camps across Britain, including one in Bury, just outside Manchester, called Warth Mills, where the conditions were bad that some of the internees who had spent time in the concentration camps said that this was worse and Henry is actually the last surviving—he is the last survivor of Warth Mills and it's only been in the last decade that he's spoken about some of this; for example, that his children had found out that he was in that camp. And I think this was one of the huge emergent themes of *Homelands*, just how we speak through the silences of history and how many silences remain.



**CG:** I think the book explores that brilliantly, Chitra, but it does rely on memory, as you say, and one of the fascinating aspects is where memory comes up beside actual facts, or documents that might interrogate the veracity of the memory. I wonder whether you might read a passage from it which speaks to this dilemma.

**CR:** Absolutely, I'd be delighted. So this is from relatively early on in the book.

During the next five days the letter summoning Henry to the highest court in the land arrives. But over the years Henry's mind will unconsciously stretch those handful of days into four months. By the time he sits down to write an astonishing seven-page essay about his first 23 months in the UK, sending it to me with perfect historical alignment in June of another year, 2018, he is convinced that he returned to Mrs Hurwich not in June 1940, but in March, just after his 16th birthday. 'No possibility to return to school,' he writes, 'or to bicycle for fifteen shillings and explore the Clyde coastline. I love the outdoors.' Henry remembers the period in detail, writing about how one day he misread his map and ended up cycling an extra 30 miles home. He recalls joining the Hurwich family at Queen's Park Synagogue for Jewish festivals; a round of golf at Barassie links on the west coast, followed by high tea at Ferrari's No

10 in Sauchiehall Street. 'How kind to be taken,' Henry writes, 'Glasgow middle-class lifestyle I am learning.'

When I show Henry the Red Cross letter he sent from **[?...ennie?]** on 5th June revealing that all of this happened but at slightly different times, he is shocked. 'Well, if that's the evidence, my thinking must be wrong,' he says. He looks crestfallen and I feel terrible. I have become the thoughtless biographer waving a letter in her subject's face to prove his lived experience is wrong. 'How you remember it is as valid as how it was,' I say. 'It was a long time ago. So much happened in such a short space of time. It doesn't matter.' But of course it does, to Henry. He goes quiet and later, in the middle of another conversation, interjects, 'Can I just say that I'm upset? I really thought that I was back in Glasgow in March. I thought I bought a bicycle. I'm sorry I can't be clear. I've told you what I know. I'm sorry if this disturbs the beginning of your book.'

**CG:** When you read it back to yourself now, do you remember that moment, that moment when you punctured an understanding that Henry had of his own story?

**CR:** Absolutely. And there were a few moments like this, because of course, even in the ten years that I've been interviewing Henry, he has gone from being a man in his eighties to being a man in his nineties, so his memory has changed even within that time. So we have done interviews, you know, maybe two or three interviews about the same, say, the same six weeks of internment on the Isle of Man and we have, as a result, got three different—slightly different accounts. And I had to make a decision, really: was I going to, you know, get as close to the veracity of the actual experience as possible, or was I going to somehow allow that kind of ambiguity and the theme of memory to just kind of filter up, you know, to remain at the bottom of the sieve, is probably a better image; and just to allow those moments to just sit there, and for it always to be clear that I am interviewing a man in the latter years of his life about things that happened many, many, many decades ago; and not only that, but traumatic things.

**CG:** And you do so by almost writing the book as a metabook, because you're explaining the method of writing as well as the writing itself. Why did you decide on that decision?

**CR:** Yes, and I think that is such a difficult decision to make and then to stand by and to negotiate. Because you do too much of that and I think you distance your reader from you. But you don't do enough of it and then you lose some of the authenticity

of the narrative. And I did decide—I was quite influenced by Deborah Levy and her trilogy of what she calls ‘living autobiographies’ and this idea of letting the telling of one’s own story, or in my case Henry’s story alongside mine, into the book as well. And I think what that does is exactly what we’ve just been talking about. It allows for these absences, these silences, the fallibility of memory itself to become part of the tapestry of the story. And it’s an integral part. And it doesn’t discount anything, rather it humanises it even more. And that, if there’s one reason why I really wanted to write the book, that’s it above all. I really I did want to pay very, very close attention, almost in the way of a nature writer, really, and also almost in that political sense of attentiveness, almost like an act of political resistance, to sort of change the narrative; the way we talk about refugees and dehumanise them so regularly and so routinely and so viciously in this culture. And I wanted to do the extreme opposite which was, you know, pay very close attention to one man’s life and see it completely in the round, as well. So of course, the journey; the moment at which he becomes a refugee; the reasons why he becomes one are so central to the story but they’re not the whole story, you know? This is a man who has lived a long, rich, varied life.

**CG:** And he has an extraordinary memory for detail, actually; I’m struck by that when reading the book again and again; just the minutiae of the detail. One of the things

you also do: at your elbow you have a book *Austerlitz* by Sebald. Why was it so important for you to walk weave in reflections from that book into your own?

CR: Yes, it was so important. And I—he did become a bit of a—almost like a spirit guide for the story. I think in some ways, because that book *Austerlitz* is itself a fictional treatment of a real person's story. So it's almost like the mirror reflection of my book, in that my book is, is non-fiction, it's fact, but of course it's trying to grapple with a lot of what we've been discussing around memory and in some ways I wanted to use those kind of fictional techniques to move the story along as well. So it's in no way a conventional biography. And then Sebald is doing the opposite, really. He is novelising about a real person's life and experience.

It's very rare, actually, that you get a novel, certainly one as titanic as this one, about the experience of a Kindertransportee. I mean, this is the big one. While there are so many differences between each individual's experience (and I think the same is true of, you know, immigrants and the second generation as well. Each story is so different but there are these commonalities, and it's the common ground that is really foundational in this book, and even tiny details. Like I remember, there's a moment in—not in *Austerlitz* actually but in another of Sebald's books that was a huge influence on this one, called *The Emigrants*, and one of the characters in that book who is based on a painter, Frank Auerbach: he talks about arriving in Britain

and his first night staying in this little Bloomsbury hotel and trying to fight his little bandy legs into the sheets, because he'd been used to eiderdowns in Germany. And Henry had the exact, carbon-copy, same memory. And so I loved the way that these kinds of details, one supposedly fact, one fiction, that they kind of spoke to each other and that there was so much truth in them.

CG: Well, there's so much truth throughout the book. I think it's a very profound book and axioms, the truths and the maxims are rigorous and bear re-reading again and again and again.

CR: Thank you Colin. And actually, just one final thing about Austerlitz—

CG: Go on.

CR: —which is maybe the most important thing of all is it was really, really almost like a kind of structural/ethical decision, because the way that Sebald writes that novel, he is writing it at a certain remove, so he is this kind of unnamed narrator himself appearing in the book, you know, who both is and isn't Sebald, and he's then speaking to Jacques Austerlitz about his memories.

CG: Mmm.

CR: So this idea about there being, kind of layers of witnessing, and how you will never quite get to the truth of it and always sort of admitting that; having that admission, there's a kind of structural presence in the book was really important to me. So there was a kind of ethical dimension to it as well.

CG: The subtitle of the book is '*A history of a friendship*' and one of the things about writing, especially non-fiction writing, is that it relies on empathy, and I think you have a tremendous amount of empathy for Ingrid and Henry, and partly because of your own story, I think, of the various uprootings that you've lived, that have visited themselves upon you, but also that you have visited upon yourself. One of the foundational stories in your own life is the story of your family home being repossessed, which you include in the book. I mean, did you include that to show that there are these connections of migrant families, these connections of being unsure about where you will end up permanently because you've lived life to a degree in a state of being in transit, not having a kind of sense of permanency?

CR: Yeah. It's a great question. And this sense of whether or not to include things like the repossession of our family home in the early 90s were a bit problematic for me, to be honest, because on the one hand I felt that this was the reason I was writing the book in the first place, because Henry and I were friends; so the

friendship had to be absolutely fundamental to the story, therefore I also had to be in it. But I am a bit of a reluctant memoirist in that way. So I had to bring myself into this story, but I had to do it also in such a way that I was never doing a kind of compare-and-contrast exercise; because there's no part of my experience of, say, repossession that in any way can stand alongside Henry's upbringing in Nuremberg and his experiencing of, say, the Nuremberg laws.

CG: No.

CR: So I was so worried; I mean, to me that was such a high-wire act, morally: to somehow put our stories next to each other's so that they would almost be in conversation but their differences completely foregrounded and clear. So that's why I put the repossession in, because obviously it is a story of the loss of home and it's my version of the loss of home and it's nothing like Henry's, but these are all reasons why we might be friends in the first place; or as you say, why those kind of reaches, those empathetic reaches we make towards one another might be possible.

CG: Well you say in the book that visiting the Wugas is like visiting your grandparents and that in fact, so, you think of them as adopted grandparents and they think of you as an adopted granddaughter, do they not?



**CR:** They do, yeah, they do. And, you know, he signs off in cards as 'Opa' and, yeah, this has been a massive thing for me. And I'm sure this has happened to you writing books, as well, but sometimes it's only after you've written them that you kind of understand what it is that you were trying to do. And I do think there is something to be said about my friendship with Henry being an almost kind of second-generation yearning for a heritage.

**CG:** One of the things I loved about your book was your clear-eyed writing; you write with compassion but you're clear-eyed about it. And I think you do transverse this high wire with a very sure-footed approach. And there are some difficult moments in the book. I mean, there's difficult moments in your own life with the telling of the story of your mother's death. And in a way there's rehearsals, aren't there, because sometimes when people are poorly they seem to die before they die, and there's a sense sometimes that you're mourning for living people as well.

**CR:** Absolutely! And also, because I made the decision to write this book in a kind of—in the present tense but also in that present way of allowing the present to filter into the book it meant that, for example, while my mum, she was dying and in London and I was up here in Edinburgh and it was during the pandemic, so I wasn't able to spend any time with her at all, I was abso—you know, it was a deeply

appalling circumstance where you're resisting all of your normal impulses. I remember I just didn't know what to do with myself apart from, you know, obviously having the children here full time all through the pandemic, I was just doing vast amounts of dishwasher loading and all the rest of it. But creatively I didn't know what to do with myself and I wasn't really able to work on the book, and so instead I plunged into these letters that Henry's mum wrote to Henry in the, sort of the aftermath of the war. So she was back in Nuremberg. She had managed to survive against all the odds, I mean, an absolutely astonishing woman. And she wrote these, you know, couple of dozen letters in the ruins of Nuremberg. And these letters, by this woman who I have no connection to in any way—she actually died in the month that I was born; you know: we didn't even occupy the same space on this earth at any time—nothing helped me more than the kind of extreme fortitude and courage of this woman who had survived what she had survived. Her grief somehow reached out and helped me with mine and I chose to put that into the book as well.

**CG:** Well, there are some extraordinary passages from her letters which you include and I want to talk a little bit about the fact that you include them in a non-judgmental fashion and include Henry's response to them in a non-judgmental fashion. You just allow the reader to just sit with them, to think about what might mean; there's levels of possible complicity or feeling guilty or feeling that you might have betrayed someone. There's one extraordinary letter where Henry's in Glasgow.

His mother, after the war, writes to him because Henry's written to her to say that he's been advised not to admit that his father wasn't Jewish.

CR: Correct.

CG: And his mother, Lore, writes back to say that she's deeply hurt. What is that moment like, (a) to hear that story and (b) to find a way of writing that would both be true but also would be attentive to the emotional integrity of Henry?

CR: Yeah, that letter for me is like an absolutely huge moment in the book. And I had actually—Henry had shown me that letter quite early on in our friendship; years before I started to write this book. And it actually took me a decade, in some ways, to really understand the depths of both Lore's hurt but also why Henry even told her in the first place and why it was important in the Jewish community in Glasgow of that time. But he didn't say that his father wasn't Jewish.

So there's so much going on but, without getting into the granular details of it, what it really showed to me and was something that I understood so personally and intimately just from growing up in a kind of white, middle-class suburb of London in the decades that I grew up in; watching my parents is: all these tiny otherwise-invisible, completely unacknowledged little negotiations that refugees and

immigrants have to make all the time in order to live in a new place; often in a new place that is hostile towards them, are astonishing and they take huge amounts of energy and resolve and what I kind of eventually refer to as a kind of constant generation. You're constantly generating your own sense of identity. It's such an active process and it's ongoing and no-one can really see it. And it's so rare to see it written about, as well; so that's how I really identify with that as, you know, the differences between generations, between countries; how these things can show up in a tiny conversation between a mother and her son. And she's heartbroken by what he's told her, and he doesn't even understand why it's a problem.

**CG:** One of the things my mother always says to me in life is, 'Find your people' as you walk through life, you'll find lots of enemies out there but also you'll find lots of allies and clearly the Wugas and you were clearly made for each other. You found your people when you found Henry and Ingrid and that shines through the book. There's one moment in the essay which you've written for *WritersMosaic* where you talk about the importance of the book by Toni Morrison, *The Bluest Eye*, and you say in your essay, and this is about identity as well, 'until I read *The Bluest Eye* I didn't know I existed'. Can you just explore that notion a bit more? What do you mean that?

CR: This, interestingly—when Toni Morrison died and, obviously like everybody else—I was just completely devastated in quite an extreme way, as though I had known her personally, you know, I mean I was very, very upset. And the first thing I thought was, *I want to write about The Bluest Eye and I want to write about*—in this essay that's then taken me years to actually write about it, I'm so glad to have done it for this—in this way, for this platform, because it's been something that's brewing in me for a long time and it's taken me a long time to articulate, just what picking up *The Bluest Eye* as a young teenage girl growing up, you know.

I'm always very interested in the social and historical context that's kind of swirling around whether it's Henry Wuga or myself. And I grew up in a very white, middle-class environment where it was, you know, it was very impolite to talk about race, so in other words I was kind of almost treated in that way of, 'you have no race'. It was so confusing and produced vast amounts of self-loathing and then I picked up this book, *The Bluest Eye*, and I write in my essay, that this book has got three beginnings, and the second one begins, 'Quiet as it's kept'. And when you read Toni Morrison in the edition that I've got, she wrote a kind of—afterwards, twenty—I think 25 years after the book was published, this absolutely exquisite afterword where she talked about, you know, beginning the book in this way, in these words. And of course she's using a kind of black vernacular from her childhood and she's writing in a completely different way, for different people, for different reasons. I had

never been spoken to. I mean, she and I don't share any history either. I couldn't see the history of my parents in Toni Morrison. It's American history and it's Black American history. In some ways it's got nothing to do with me. And yet it was another one of those empathetic reaches. It had a huge impact on me. It was the first time I had ever read anyone who seemed to be writing for me. I would go so far as to say it was life-changing, actually. It made me like myself.

CG: Well that's brilliant. That's so fantastic to hear, Chitra. And I think, Chitra, you exemplify all that we are trying to do on *WritersMosaic* in terms of the reach of your writing, the idea that you don't have to stay in your lane.

CR: Yeah! [laughs]

CG: So much of our culture these days is pushing people to sort of stay in these sort of silos of separation but you've shown through your friendship with this Jewish, White Jewish man, you've shown with your interests in the writing of Toni Morrison and James Baldwin, that we are living in a very porous time when we should allow other cultures to come into our own being, because we are not silos of separation, we cannot exist in separation from other people. And I think it's a tribute to the Wugas and to your family that you've brought this book into being. So congratulations on *Homelands* and we look forward to the next one.

CR: Thank you so, so much. And that's a wonderful thing to say. And it's taken me so long, really, to feel like I can find a kind of space in which to write these kinds of stories that are, that might be about Jewish experience or history or Black American authors, or as you say, this kind of opening up of all of the silos, as you put it. But it is really also about how I grew up; and I think for so long I felt that there was something sort of deeply inauthentic about me because I wasn't the right kind of Indian, because I was too, you know, to use a word from my era, I was too 'westernised' and that was a problem and it would—not only did it mean I couldn't be a good or happy person, it also meant that I could never be a good writer. And I think it's taken me a very long time to kind of carve out this space where there's a kind of validity to it and it's both possible to be completely sort of embodying my brown body within these traditions.

CG: Well, all power to you, Chitra and all power to your arm and your continued writing! Thank you very much for joining *WritersMosaic*.

CR: Oh! Thank you, Colin, thank you so much.

Chitra Ramaswamy was in conversation with Colin Grant.

To hear more writers, go to [www.writersmosaic.org.uk](http://www.writersmosaic.org.uk)

©Chitra Ramaswamy