

WRITERSMOSAIC

Laura Henry-Allain

In Conversation with Trish Cooke

‘Everything that I do, if it's fiction books, non-fiction books, working in TV, it comes from that point of leaning into my Caribbean roots.’

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Allain

Presenter: This is *WritersMosaic*, In Conversation. Playwright and children's author Trish Cooke talks to writer and TV producer Laura Henry-Allain about her love of libraries.

Trish Cooke (TC): Laura Henry-Allain, welcome to *WritersMosaic*. So Laura, just for the listeners, just could you give us a little bit of background about yourself?

Laura Henry-Allain (LHA): Okay. I was born in West London, Paddington, where my family, we lived for a few years. And when I was four, we moved over to North Kensington, W10, W11. My parents are from St. Lucia in the Caribbean, and a high percentage of that Windrush generation from St. Lucia lived, at that time, in Paddington. And I absolutely loved living in West London: W10, Notting Hill, North

Kensington, as we call it, or Ladbroke Grove, or Grove. It's known by so many different names. And I've been living in South London now for 26 years. But when anybody asks me where do I live in London, I always say, 'I live in South London', and I quickly add, 'But I was born in Paddington, West London, and raised in North Kensington', because my DNA, my soul, everything is West London.

TC: Okay. And would you say that being a Caribbean British woman has affected your choice of what you write?

LHA: Oh, a million percent, Trish. Absolutely. Everything that I do, albeit if it's fiction books, non-fiction books, working in TV, it comes from that point of leaning into my Caribbean roots. I.e. with *Jojo and Gran Gran*, we hook it back to St. Lucia. I've got a new TV series in development, children's animation, and I've linked in St. Lucia and Trinidad. Next year, in July, I have a new children's series starting called *Maya and Marley*, about a brother and sister, and I hook in Grenada. And even though my family's from St. Lucia, we have many family members right across the Caribbean. Like most Caribbean countries, even though your heritage is from one particular Caribbean country, you still have many links to different Caribbean countries. And I just feel it is super important for me, being in a privileged position as a children's storyteller, to share stories about my heritage to pass it on.

TC: Fantastic. And you started your career as an early years teacher. So what made you choose to be an early years teacher? Why early years?

LHA: I'm dyslexic, and I wasn't officially diagnosed, so I left school with hardly any qualifications. But what I did leave with, I was able to touch type quite fast. So I ended up working as a clerk typist. I absolutely—I loved that job, absolutely. And I've still got friends who worked with me in this particular company, who I'm still with—who I'm still friends with near enough 40 years, we're still quite close. However, I just felt that the job wasn't fulfilling me because it was very predictable. What I had to do, I had to type these reports, I had to be on the telephone with clients. To the point where if any of the listeners were brought up in the '70s, '80s, and even probably '90s, you may remember there was a telephone number one could dial and you could listen to music. So there I was at my desk at this old-fashioned typewriter, typing away and listening to the music, the tunes, because I love my music. And my boss would say, 'You okay there Laura?' And I said 'No, I'm just on the phone to a client.' And I thought, *I can no longer keep this up, coming in*. And it became a job, it wasn't the calling, it wasn't the passion for me. And I remember that when I was in school, which was the fourth year, which I think we call year nine or year 10 now, I did a two-week placement in a nursery in Ladbroke Grove, Clare Gardens. And I reflected back, and I thought, *I really enjoyed that, being with the children and the families*. And even up to now, I remember the activities that I did, I remember some of the stories, some of the conversations I had with parents. That's how powerful it was. And I researched on the qualification that one would need to work in a nursery, and it was the NNEB, the certificate in nursery nursing, and that was the only qualification that one could have at that time to work with children. And I applied to the local college, which was Paddington College, and I got in even though it was heavily subscribed. And I became the studious person ever. And this is where I thought I wanted to be in terms of working with children and their families. Now the

training lasts for two years, and then I did a variety of jobs in terms of early years education, went on to do more qualifications in teaching and in management. And it was just where I wanted to be. And I'm just—I'm also still super passionate about how children learn and develop.

TC: So how did you make that shift from early years teaching into early years consultant. What was the bridge?

LHA: What happened was I had my two sons. How did that happen, laugh out loud? And then I had a point where I thought to myself—I was in sort of a managerial post, and there was a big shift between my son, and I just thought, *I can't do both at this particular time*. So I took my foot off the pedestal. And then I worked within the community. It was a fantastic job, again, having this qualification enabled me to work with the health visitors. And my sister is a health visitor as well. And through that job I became a baby massage therapist. I work with the parents in their home, supporting with behaviour, sharing different activities around—to support children with their learning and development. And every Thursday, I remember this, I used to do the clinic, and my job was to weigh the babies. And on a busy clinic, I could sometimes weigh about 40 babies and still have the same energy from that first baby right up until that last baby in terms of the conversation, making that baby and their parent feel special. And then I worked for Ofsted, a local authority, lecturing. And by default, a colleague asked me to do some training in a local authority. And then I just started to get busier and busier that I gave up the job working in the college as Curriculum Manager and started to deliver training and consultancy across the UK, overseas; I've delivered keynotes in Hawaii, in New

Zealand, Malaysia. And this little girl from West London, who was super shy up until she was 11, dyslexic, from a low-income family, from a child whose parents came over from the Windrush generation, I would have never have believed—and I've met some most amazing people globally. And part of that role: training and consultancy, I worked with brands, then production companies. And one of the production companies was delivering some—was doing some consultancy work: sharing and connecting on early childhood development for this TV show you may remember, *Rastamouse*. And then I said, 'Oh, I want to have a go at writing a script.' I've never been—done a creative writing course, I've never done an English lit course, etcetera.

TC: So was this before your first book?

LHA: No, it was afterwards.

TC: Because you said script, and when you said script I was thinking, *so did you have the book out already?*

LHA: I did.

TC: Okay.

LHA: Yes, so *Jojo and Gran Gran* came out first after my grandmother passed away.

TC: Is that when you then put pen to paper so to speak and wrote *Jojo and Gran Gran* all in a week?

LHA: I did. And that came about after a reflection. My beloved grandmother passed away, who I based *Jojo and Gran Gran* on. And I was grief stricken. It was—it really had a massive impact on me. And then I kept on remembering, focusing on all the positive memories and all the beautiful things that she did for us as children. And I remembered quite a few stories. And then I thought, *oh, I had a eureka moment*. I worked with children, and there's probably something in this [inaudible] about a story about a little girl and her grandmother. And I think it was probably one Saturday night, I just flipped open the laptop, sparks flying up, getting this idea off my head onto the—into the laptop. And I was thinking what could I call it. My middle name is Josephine, hence Jojo. And then that was *Jojo and Gran Gran*. And then I did another book, *Twelve And a Half Days to Christmas*, which is quite a quirky title. And I self-published those first two books.

TC: Okay, so how did you go about doing that?

LHA: I'm always the type of person where if I don't know, I try to find out. Or there's somebody in my address book who I can go down. Or I think, *oh, I've connected with them, they may know somebody*. So how it came about was this colleague in early years; she was, I think, producing these postcards, notelet things, etcetera, and used an illustrator. And then she connected me with Amy Bradley, and then—

TC: Who's Amy Bradley?

LHA: She's an illustrator. And then she illustrated the first two books for myself. And then I was thinking, *okay, how can I then self-publish the books?* And then an educator called Sue Cowell, she had self-published—although she's a published author, she had self-published a few books herself. So I just asked her, how does one go about it? And then she shared with me what to do. And then I connected with somebody else in terms of how to upload it, X, Y and Z. And then voila, they were out there. And so they were doing quite well with just me and my little self promoting these books. So when I was going out doing work with schools and nurseries, other events, working with other brands and production companies, etcetera. And then I was working with—connected with the production company for *Rastamouse*. And then I then said, 'Oh, I want to have a go at writing the script.' I've never done—written a script in my life. And then I had a go because I was familiar with the show. And then I co-wrote that script with another colleague, and that was *Discovery Bay*. So *Discovery Bay* was the episode in *Rastamouse* series. And then the BBC came along to a meeting at the production company, and then I got talking to the Vanessa Rambley, who was quite a senior lead in CBeebies at that time. She was at the meeting and it's—you're having a coffee and a croissant, and then one says, 'Oh, I've got an idea.' And then I went up to CBeebies in Manchester, pitched to a couple of colleagues, and then they came back and said the computer said no. And I said, 'Okay, it is what it is, but I've still got the self-published books to lean into.' And then a few months later, I think about six months after that, when one does a search on your—on the emails and then you search through, because I was looking for another document, and that email came up. And then I did the post-mortem and I was, *oh my goodness me, such a—what a shame that it was a no*. And I opened up the email, and I went, *oh my goodness me, I've sent the wrong document to them. No wonder it*

was a *no*. So then I emailed back again, and one of the colleagues came back to me and said, 'There's been a little bit of a jig around in terms of the production team and the new colleague Ross Atelier, she's now leading Development.' Connected with Ross; Ross and I then met in BBC White City, where BBC Studios is now. And I do remember the day because I was going up to Leister and I had this red suitcase, and because of my dyslexia, I've got poor direction; my direction skills are awful. And so I remember then ringing Ross and Ross says, 'I've seen the past, it was quite comical, with a red suitcase. This is where you need to come back to.' And then we were just talking and—

TC: And Ross is who?

LHA: She's Ross Atelier. She was the Head of Development for Children in CBeebies, but she's moved on since then. She actually became the Exec Producer for *Jojo and Gran Gran*, for series two and three. And then I was just sharing my story, like I am with you now, Trish, about my background, come from St Lucia. Then Ross said, 'I'm St Lucian background.' And it was like wow, this is just amazing. And then, after that, Ross pitched it. And we got a couple of no's at that time. And Ross kept on reshaping it, moulding it, doing what needed to do to get the yes. And then came—she kept on coming back to me and said, 'Okay, we're going to pitch it again.' And then it was reframed, and it was going to be called *It's About Time*.

TC: I remember that because I wrote an episode when it was called *It's About Time*.

LHA: That's right, you did. And thank you very much for that, Trish. I was super excited when they said that you were coming on board. And I think from research, when it got developed, when the green light happened and we were going into production, at that time, it was still *It's About Time*. And then halfway through production, it changed back to *JoJo and Gran Gran*. And I'm absolutely pleased it did.

TC: So how did you get to be a producer on *JoJo and Gran Gran*, because that's not something that is offered to everyone? Is it something you went for or was it offered to you?

LHA: It was offered to me.

TC: Okay, and what does that role entail?

LHA: So that just means looking over everything, consulting on the scripts, the characters, the animations, if there are any questions or queries that come up that I can answer, whether or not it's something that's linked in from my lived experience point of view or it's something coming back again from my expertise within early childhood.

TC: That's—what I get from this program is that they do have a lot of respect for the people with the knowledge, and you don't always get that with TV.

LHA: Exactly. And that's why I always say, I praise everybody. And I think everybody who's worked on *Jojo and Gran Gran*, because there's probably over 100 people plus, because we have the live action segments in the show, but everybody's super passionate. Everybody gets asked their views and they're able to contribute.

TC: And it's educational for those who don't know about the black experience, and it's very satisfying for those who do know the experience to be able to see ourselves on TV in that way. It's for the young ones. So going onto your book, *My Skin, Your Skin*, it's about race and racism. And it asks direct questions like, *what is racism?* And I'd just like to ask you—well some people might argue that children are too young to deal with big issues such as this. What do you say about that?

LHA: Children are not too young to have conversations around race and racism. And I know for a fact that we've had children in their early years—have been on the receiving end of racism in many different forms within their early years. For instance, a colleague shared with me that a three-year-old said to her, 'All of the black men are robbers'. Yeah. So the listeners may be familiar with the research, the Clark and Clark Dolls test, which shows children of different races having conversation about a black doll and a white doll. And even the black children favoured the white doll, yeah. And I've had parents say to me, black and brown parents, that their young children are coming home saying they don't want to be black, they want to be white. We know that children have—we have conversations with children about the environment, about recycling, about climate change. Those are quite big subjects for children in their early years. So as children are on the receiving end of racism, we have to talk about racism, but it has to be done in a way that's age stage and ability appropriate,

in a way that they understand. Because in the book, on the first page, I start off with talking about differences. So even if you had two white children, one has got brown hair, one has got blonde hair, both children have brown hair, one has straight hair, one has curly hair. It's that starting point of a conversation. And interestingly, when *My Skin, Your Skin* was first published, and even now, I have parents, educators, and teachers either messaging me on social media or I get an email saying, 'Laura, thank you for this book. I know it is for children, but it has equally been a starting point for myself in terms of race and racism.' And there is research that actually shows even children as young as three months can notice differences in skin colours, and going up to the age four and five, they do become more aware of differences. And I was in a school doing an author's visit, and a child said to me, 'You've got brown skin.' And I could see the teacher just wanting the ground to open up. And then I use that to scaffold, to point out the differences. So that's why when people say as an additional point, 'But I don't see colour, we're all the same.' And then when I explain it, I say, 'Well, it's coming from a good place you're saying that', because some people are saying 'But I'm not racist because everybody's the same.' I'm—when I explain, 'It's important that you do see me as a black person.' Because it really is important for us to have that acknowledgement.

TC: Yes. Yeah. I like in *My Skin, Your Skin*, it's a celebration of difference. And rightly so. And going back to the question that I asked you, children are not—I agree with you, children are not too young to address subjects. And it's important that these things are brought into the classroom early so that they can be given the correct way of looking at the world, instead of finding out how to be racist indirectly. So well done. I love what you're doing. And I love the fact that you're getting them into schools, and

you're getting things on TV that might not have been there before, so that it becomes the norm.

LHA: Exactly. And I think to add to that, I did an author's visit in a library. As you can tell, I love libraries. And I had a parent; she had twins, and she emailed me afterward and said—this was a white parent, and said, 'Oh, I was just so profound and in awe of this book', because she was reading the book. 'And hope that, by the time that my twins grow up, we don't need to be having books like *My Skin, Your Skin*, in this conversation.' So I just think this is why it's important, that if you're black, brown, or white, we can have this conversation because it's from talking that we are able to make the changes.

TC: So tell us about your next book, *My Family, Your Family*. The next one that's coming out, should I say.

LHA: Equally, with *My Family, Your Family*, I wanted to have this celebration and picking up that not every child comes from a home where it's mum and dad, two children. And I wanted it to be a celebration, coming back again to the voice of the child, where children could see their families in this book. So we have many children who live with their grandparents or a relative as a kinship carer arrangement. Then we have children who may live with two mums, two dads. An extended family where they live with their uncles and aunts. Children who have been raised by one parent. And then linking into different communities. So I give a nod there to the Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller community because I include different places where children live. So I'm making sure that, for instance, that I included some children live in a

caravan, some children live on a boat, some children live in a hotel. But living in a hotel, not as a point of luxury, but it's highlighting that many children who are homeless live in hotels. And then looking at the different celebrations. And introducing language around step family, half family, blended family, grandparents, non-biological parents. And even if you don't have children, you could—you're still a parent, if that's your particular situation. So it's not about being a blood relative to a child. So I wanted to really explore that. And six years ago, actually, I started off a thing called My Family Week, which is literally very similar to the book, *My Family, Your Family*. And I just feel it's really important that—not when I was growing up, because my parents divorced. And I felt, to be honest, quite ashamed and not wanting to say that my parents were divorced. So I feel now, I really want children to talk about their identity and their family with a sense of pride.

TC: Yes. And you're giving them that space to do that. And that's something, like you say, we may not have had when we were younger. And that builds up confidence in children so that they can just be who they are without any shame or anything. So that's brilliant. So a little bit about you now and your own welfare and your life-work balance. How do you manage that?

LHA: Okay, it's really important. And I've learned over the years, Trish, if I'm honest. And I'm still learning to get that work-life balance in place. But I think it's important to have regular breaks, short breaks. I tend to—for instance, tomorrow, I include during the week linking with friends and colleagues, albeit for lunch or a coffee, to have time with my partner, with my family, with my friends. And knowing when I'm feeling really tired. And I go to the gym, I practise yoga, I eat healthily, and to be able to say no

without feeling guilty, and to be able to say no without having to justify why I'm saying no to something. What I get now is so many emails, direct messages: 'Can I have a conversation?', 'Can I have a coffee with you?', with regards to what I've just been sharing. It got to the point where I want to help people because it's all about passing that baton on. And I thought, *well how can I do this?* And so in May this year, I delivered a webinar, and it was titled *Laura How Do I?* So I had 40 people registered, where I shared with them my experiences in publishing and the TV world. And it was just about making it easier. So I'm not going to be—I'm not saying no to anybody who contacts me. Probably at the end of this interview, there may be a few listeners who may want to contact me. But to contain it now, once a year in May, I'll have this free workshop. And then that way then I am still helping and supporting.

TC: Laura Henry-Allain, thank you so much. It's been a pleasure talking to you today.

LHA: And thank you, Trish, for your time. And thank you for being a leader. Many of us look up to you for everything that you've done for children's books and in children's TV. And you must get your flowers because you have done so much. And I hope that you continue to flourish. So thank you for this opportunity in this interview.

TC: Thank you.

Presenter: Laura Henry-Allain was in conversation with Trish Cooke. To hear more writers, go to writersmosaic.org.uk

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

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