

# WRITERS MOSAIC

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Maggie Harris

In Conversation with Michael McMillan

‘And my mum shakes her head and, ‘Margaret, I don't know where you get these ideas from, girl.’ And I don't know. So I think that's just a gift.’

— Maggie

Harris

**Presenter:** This is *WritersMosaic*, In Conversation. Writer and academic Michael McMillan talks to poet and author Maggie Harris about her gift for poetry.

**Michael McMillan (MM):** So Maggie Harris, looking wonderful and glorious. Can you remember the first time you felt like writing?

**Maggie Harris (MH):** Well, I've got a poem called *Alphabet Shanty*. I don't know if you've ever—don't worry I'm not going to do it or anything like that. But it's just that that poem is actually about writing. And what I remembered because—I must have been about three or four when I went to nursery school up the road. I've just got a really sharp memory of learning to write. And in those days—you'll be a bit young for this and I don't—you grew up in this country so you had civilization.

MM: Thank you.

MH: We wrote, [laughs] we wrote on slates. We wrote on slates with chalk. It was very tactile. So you all had your little slate and you had your chalk, and you're learning to write the letters on there. And I was always really interested in the artistic calligraphic, if that's the right term, about writing because it's just symbols at that age, isn't it? It's like drawing; it's like doodles. And I really fell in love with learning to do all the scrolling and the—and especially when you've got to do [inaudible] writing. The poem is about the act of writing, and it's called *Alphabet Shanty*. And it's about the writing on slate. It's about the clumsiness of your hands. When you're little—you see how little children hold a pencil. They hold it like this, don't they? And it takes ages to develop that fluidity in which we write. So I fell in love with the act of just the drawing of the letter. But any serious writing itself didn't come until probably I was about 10, when I kept a little diary. But at 10 your daily chronicling of your world is very boring. And, 'I'll go into the market today' or 'so and so popped in today', that kind of thing. That's the purpose it serves. But the five-year diary, as the five years went on it became a little bit more interesting because you're leaping from toys to boys. And—

MM: And what—was there a moment when you felt, *I want to be a writer; I'm going to write?*

MH: Not at all. In fact, I don't think I actually even thought that until, probably my 20s. Because even though I did write, I used to write for a school magazine. I was

interested in drama, I used to do a little bit of acting in high school. I was one of these kids who was what they say 'good at English', so you didn't have to sweat too much.

MM: And you talked about the slate and down the road. And of course, that is your Caribbeanness and Guyanese, specifically. And that comes through your writing, much less we can hear it in your voice. And the style that you embody within your writing. But you've also lived elsewhere. And I wonder somehow, where are the places apart from Guyana, and please speak to Guyana in terms of your writing, but how other places and cultures and landscapes have shaped your writing, for instance Wales and Kent, when you came, when you migrated here.

MH: Yeah. Well, I was thinking about that last week. And I surprised myself in finding how much I did actually write about all these different places, because it's always the Guyanese ones that are highlighted. And I look back through the books that I've written, there is quite a lot influenced by Ireleand, a country was very fascinated in for different reasons. I was selected as a woman poet to go to certain parts of Europe back in, I think it was 1994. And it was 10 women from different countries, and two of the women were Irish. And they were the most amazing, wonderful, warm, lovely, bright, funny people. And we actually went on this tour. And so they were like the physical embodiment of anything you'd ever think about Ireland, in a way. I also did an Irish literature course, and so I had these interests in reading about similarities between Guyana and Ireland in terms of being colonial. And then that led on to thinking about other countries in terms of—even Guyana, as a woman. I've got a poem called *Migrant Woman Bodily Song*, which is written in the shape of a

woman. Also in this country, going to the Lake District is one of the biggest influences I had, not really in terms so much of words worth, although that was part of it, but actually seeing the landscape, which was quite new to me. And, I think, the first time I went to the Lake District, probably a good 35, 40 years ago, maybe. It was just something that I just found really stunning, because I'd grown up on the coastland in Guyana, never really had enough time to spend in the interior and see all the wonderful mountains and waterfalls and rivers that Guyana is noted for. And even in there—and in this country living on the coast. Visits to Wales when I was younger as well had also impacted on me, just how beautiful it was, and stunning. You step over to your car and you look at this landscape. *Jesus this is just fantastic.* So—and it was all new to me so it left impressions on me like that. And I remember trying to think in my head, *what is this fascination with this landscape?* So in a nutshell, yeah, everywhere has really—when I say 'everywhere', places that I've had a real affection for or have left some sort of impact on me are all in different books, either short stories or poems. One particular realisation was when I went walking for the first time with some women in Kent. Quite a long walk, and it was from—it was about 10 miles, something like that, which is long for me, it's long from me. Where I come from, nobody don't walk. You walk to market, you sit down, you fan yourself. What I realised then was the feeling you can get for a country through just walking because, in a way, your feet are marking and connecting, and nothing beats that, really. The whole physical realisation of the geography of somewhere.

MM: So the senses come into your poetry and your writing, and the visual as well. And you were a visual artist before you began writing. I mean, does that practice of the visual still live within your writing?

MH: It does. And when you asked me earlier about when I started writing, and I said I was—it wasn't until my 20s; it was because I always thought I was going to be a visual artist. And I was always drawing and one of these people who were good at art. It was just two things I was good at in school: one was English and one was art. And when I came over here, I did take it up. I used to go to quite a lot of art classes and a lot of related artistic things like pottery and haberdashery, and right across the board, really. And then I ended up doing these very fine black and white drawings, which one or two of them illustrate covers of my book. And I did get involved in taking part in exhibitions. I had something in the Mall Galleries once, local libraries in Kent, and that sort of thing. But it came to a point where I found that the two-dimensional space was not enough. It was a cusp, I suppose. I could have gone either way because, when my youngest daughter was about three or four, I went on to study. And I went to uni, but I could have gone to Canterbury Art College as well, and I was actually very, very divided right until the last minute. But then the writing won; I decided to go to uni instead. Because I'd started to think about questions I needed to ask about my own identity. When you get aware, you grow socially aware of living in a country that isn't your own, and the problems and different ways that you have to learn to adapt. And there's always a sense of loss. And I couldn't work out those ideas while drawing, really, so it went down that road, really, into becoming a writer. But the visual does still inform my writing.

MM: Do you think being a mother, a mature student, a gardener, to some extent, shaped your writing, your practice as a poet and prose writer?

MH: Indelibly. Indelibly, really. There's a poet called Adrienne Rich. She said, 'The child, tiny and alone, creates the mother.' And I love that because I'd never thought of that reverse way of looking at it. When you think of motherhood, the mother gives birth to the child. But she is saying the child is given birth to you because you've taken on this new role; you're becoming something else. And that is very true, and it's very powerful because they do shape you. And also learning to control how much time, and making time for yourself because, as a parent, you're very [inaudible]. It can take over your mind, take over your life as a parent because you're trying to do the best thing. It's also reflection because you're always involved into different stages of life that happens with your family. But one thing I learned is that you really have to be confident and believe in yourself, even if you have to put that aside for a while or you have to find an hour somewhere. And I don't think I could have survived or been a very good parent if I didn't—if I hadn't continued my artwork or writing. It was really important. It really identified me as a person.

MM: So that creative outlet, in a sense, provided a space for you to be you. And do you think also that—you talked about coming as a mature student at 39. I imagine coming to writing a bit later that, in a sense, you already lived a life, as it were, by the time you came to writing, and so you had material in which to write about already.

MH: That's true, yes. I mean, when I started going to creative writing classes—these classes are all about 14 people in a class; they're all at different levels; you do these exercises, but then there will come a point in which something will lead you down the road that you want to be led. And for me, it was when my tutor put some items on the table, and one of them was a conch shell. And it took me immediately back to

Guyana because, when my dad died, one of the things my mum did on advice from people around her was to throw this conch down the back steps because my father's spirit was in it. Because we had some very strange incidents that happened after he died, and they said that he didn't know he was dead yet; he wasn't ready to go; he wasn't ready to pass because it was a sudden death. And that act of her throwing that conch shell down the back steps—and I wrote a very short piece, but which ended up being a really powerful little piece, which encompassed all of those things. And, I think, it was actually the first piece of writing I'd actually done in Creole, as well, because I had to—another thing you had to do with this business was you had to swear. My mum had to curse this shell. And I love that. I love that. I was 15. You can stand on the back steps with your mother who was cursing. Your mother, lovely mother, who doesn't curse, right. And you were standing there, so you come in there, and now I'm standing there going, 'You're [inaudible], you're [inaudible]. Go and leave [inaudible].' And—which is really awful. I mean, I can't remember how long after my dad this happened, probably just a couple of months, maybe. My mum pulling me up short and saying 'That's enough, Margaret. That's enough.' She said [inaudible], because you weren't allowed to swear. You'd get a slap if anything bad comes out your mouth. So, yeah.

MM: Lovely story, Maggie. Lovely. And gardens. Gardens feature so much in your writing and, in fact, you have a collection on gardening.

MH: Yeah, it's not going to be published for another year or so. And it's not specifically about gardens, but it's a very large part of it. Because gardens were really the connection that got me into—it's a very holistic thing to do. There was this

missing of the landscape. So in a way, it's like a miniature world that you could create. You're minding your children, you're doing the bits and bobs, but then slowly gardening became quite important to me. And the garden and trying to make something beautiful, and learning as you go along. It's never-ending, really. And I think, for me, one of the most important things is the sense of reflection it gives you. Because you're in there and whatever you're doing, if you're sticking things in, digging things out, whatever, there is that physical pleasantry of being physically engaged with something that you have a vision for. It's very rich with all the metaphors. Especially when I lived in Wales, which was a really big garden near to woodland. I mean, all the terms that you use when you're talking about writing or culture: roots, things like roots, migration, so many terms that transfer. One of the poems I wrote when I was in Wales was about this connection I felt just digging because, I think I mentioned this to you before, is Olive Senior. One of her poems says something about in the Caribbean, one thing you always dig up is bones, always bones. And she's just a fascinating poet, anyway. I love Olive Senior. And you're thinking about that, thinking about earth and who's gone before. When you're digging up something, you don't know what you're going to dig up with history. It just puts you in a zone where a lot of the nonsense that we live with, to learn to accept day by day, it's just such nonsense. That even things like borders—I remember writing a poem called *Borders*. And the fact that nobody has drawn lines around the earth, that idea. And you see people from Ukraine or any other country, the refugees coming over, all this constant moving towards some freedom of existence. And those are the thoughts you have when you're doing it. And also when you have to become God, in a way, and question whether you're God. Whether I should kill this slug. Whether I should put some poison down, do this. Whether I should pull this up.



Whether I should leave this spot here wild so that we could have some butterflies, and whoever wants to come just come. Or do I remake it in my image? All those thoughts.

MM: Lovely. Lovely. You mentioned Olive Senior as one of your influences, but there are a number of others. I mean, I'm going to name drop now: Wilson Harris, Grace Nichols, Kwame Brathwaite, Pauline Melville. I mean, you've mentioned that these poets and writers have influenced. How? How have they influenced you?

MH: Well, Grace Nichols must have been one of the first ones because I encountered her at uni. And that's another thing: you go to university, you learn this stuff, and you're thinking, *why the hell didn't I know this? Why the hell, when I'm taking my child to school and to Brownies or whatever, I didn't even know this existed?* That goes to show how many separate, disparate worlds we inhabit in this world. Grace Nichols, yeah, her first collection, *I Is a Long Memored Woman*. That thing really stuck in my mind because I had never thought, in the writing that I'd done so far or read, of connecting back to ancestors, which may sound terribly ignorant, but a lot of people don't think like that. Why should they? They might think of a granny they had, but in terms of our memory, it's mega important. And that tracing of the journey really impacted on me. Kwame Brathwaite just absolutely blew me away as well. The history. The opening your mind to think about language and how it's put together. What it means. How can we break it? How can we express our anger in a way that's poetic and not just a rant? He was enormously, enormously influential. Pauline Melville, yes I loved her *Ventriloquist's Tale*. And I was so jealous of her being able to have been—to be able to go to and fro to Guyana, as she did. And she

had this intimacy with the interior. She'd been and she stayed with people who live there and they [inaudible] who live there. And they [inaudible] to giant otters. And had this totally different world that I've never even imagined. She did some short stories which are based in this country as well. And so you had quite a variety. So it expressed another way of West Indians living in London. And one of her stories I really loved was called *The Iron and the Radio Have Gone*, or something like that. I don't know if you've read it. But it's just bloody [inaudible] hilarious in a really dark sense. This guy invites this white women to come and visit anytime, not meaning she is ever gonna come. And she turns up in Guyana, and she gets sick and dies. And he's thinking, *oh my God. What the hell am I going to do with this woman's dead body?* Sort of thing. And, and people come and steal the iron and the radio, and it's just really, really there. Really alive, the people are real, it's darkly funny. I'm just really impressed with that subject matter and writing.

MM: What was your encounter with the great Wilson Harris?

MH: I've never physically met him. I mean, I studied him at uni, which I'm really grateful for because I would never have been able to understand his writing. But when I won the Guyana Prize, I did write to him because people used to say to me, 'Are you related to Wilson Harris, because he comes from the same town and everything?' And one of the questions I asked him in this letter was that, and he wrote back and he said he didn't think so. But then he mentioned my winning Guyana Prize, and he said it was 'well deserved.' And it was a handwritten letter from him, which I've still got, so I really treasure that. Yeah, yeah. But his writing—I

mean, I haven't read all his work but some of them, that left an impression on me as well. Back to Guyana again, back to the land again. It's just so beautiful.

MM: So Maggie, you have produced multiple poetry collections. You've had your poetry anthologized. You've written three short story collections, as well as a memoir, *Kiskadee Girl*. You seem to write poetry and prose with ease, actually. You've also won numerous literary awards, including the Guyana Prize, as you just mentioned, for literature, the Commonwealth Short Story Prize. You're a Caribbean winner for the University of Kent T.S. Eliot Poetry Prize. What keeps you going as a writer?

MH: I don't know. I mean, it all sounds terribly impressive when you read it like that, and thank you. But it is over very many years, and I didn't really start until I was 40s, writing seriously. It's just me. I think it's—I really don't know what I'd do if I didn't, to be honest. Even now, when I think, *oh, I can't be bothered. I'm not going to write another bloody poem, who wants them?* And then something will come in your head, maybe it's four o'clock in the morning or whatever, and you've just got to get up and follow these ideas through. I find it a gift, actually. I find it a gift because people do ask if they particularly like something, they like this phrase or this. One of my sisters, she shakes her head. And my mum shakes her head and, 'Margaret, I don't know where you get these ideas from, girl.' And I don't know. So I think that's just a gift. But I think all artists have a particular vision. They have a particular way of viewing the world. I think that's what keeps us going because I don't know what we'd be without it. It's probably the same for you. You have a passion for being a creative person. And it's also something that—it's enriched by collaboration. It's enriched by working with other people because you can achieve so much. You might not be able to put

money on it, you might not be able to put price on it, but the creativity—I don't think there's enough creativity that's fostered at all. And I think if more children had the opportunity to be more creative and not so judged when they're growing up—because it doesn't mean that they're going to become a painter or a writer, they can still be a scientist and a doctor. But creative thinking, it's vital to our well-being. I think it keeps me sane. It keeps me sane because some of the awful things that we have to deal with, either in our personal life or just watching the news, and you think you feel so helpless, and *what on earth can I do?*

MM: One of your poems that really struck me, and I was rereading it again, *and the thing is*. And I was struck by the lyricism, the rhythm, and that Creole—points of which the Creole drop in. I mean, and of course, it's won the 2020 Wells Poetry Award. What motivated you to write that long extended poem?

MH: I've been defined and also defined myself as various things as the years have gone on. This is from coming from a country where me and my family would be called coloured. I mean, my mum was Portuguese and white. Even though that sounds really strange, they don't call Portuguese white in Guyana. Portuguese is [inaudible], white is white. She wouldn't be described as coloured, she'd be described as white or Portuguese. But my dad was. And he was also called a red man, which is another thing that came up when I went to St. Lucia because somebody said to me, looking at my bangles—so I've got some Guyanese bangles belonging to my grandmother. She looked at them and she looked at me and she said, 'Youse a red girl'. And when I was at uni—and also reading black literature, and I remember spending time with Amryl Johnson, who was a wonderful, wonderful

poet. And one day she looked at me and she said, 'I wondered where you were coming from.' She goes, 'But I think you're a black writer.' I said, 'Am I? Okay.' Because it's just a way of seeing something. And so all those kinds of terms. And then some terms go out of favour, they come in again. And sometimes I don't know what to call myself. So I just call myself a mixed race writer now. That was one of the ideas: how do you feel being mixed race? Bits of those ideas have been in my mind for a long time, but trying to write a poem—but you could never—it never came out right because I didn't really know what I was trying to say. It's just basically about the lives that my mum and my sisters experience when they're here. And then again, a very distilled view because there are millions of things you could write, couldn't you, about this and that and the other? And making a poem and you have to stick to some focus. You can't put lots of varying things in there because you would lose its power. The end of it all, I never see myself as being a solitary figure. I'm always best when working with people. Most things I write will place me back as a human being amongst humans. I mean, it sounds a bit stupid like that but I mean, I think what I'm trying to say, I'm not in isolation as an artist. So when I was writing a poem, I was thinking about different ways that people have to leave their countries, and relating to the refugees. And we have had, in this part of the country in Kent, thousands of refugees who've come on these shores. And so frequently. I mean, I've got friends who live in Broadstairs, up by the Foreland. And there were a group of refugees just turned up outside her door going, 'Please [can we] have some water.' It's almost fictionally war time. The terrible—the whole crisis is just—but it's right here on our doorstep. And that particular beach which they came on in Deal, we go there sometimes in the summer. And how odd it is to be sitting there and seeing people rise out of the water like Neptune, which is why that poem ended the way it did

because I wanted to place us all in that context, even though they're different levels, varying levels of how dramatic or how much worse we were—our journeys have been.

MM: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I mean, that comes across and it's quite powerful, that sense of connection with other communities. Thank you so much, Maggie.

**Presenter:** Maggie Harris was in conversation with Michael McMillan. To hear more writers, go to [writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk).

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

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