

WRITERSMOSAIC

Anni Domingo

In conversation with Trish Cooke

'When people say, 'Oh, well, you go to so many shows. I go, 'yes, because that's instead of sitting in front of the TV. I've been working all day. Now it's my enjoyment time to go and see shows or to do some of those other things.' '

— Anni Domingo

Presenter: This is *WritersMosaic* in conversation. Playwright and children's author Trish Cooke talks to actor and author Anni Domingo about her rich and varied career.

Trish Cooke (TC): Anni Domingo, welcome to *WritersMosaic*.

Anni Domingo (AD): Lovely to talk to you.

TC: I was thinking earlier today how long we've known each other. We met in 1986, which is [imitates an elderly voice] 37 years ago now!

AD: No!

TC: Yeah...at Liverpool Playhouse when we were both in a play, *The name of the Daughter was Rose*, by—

AD: Yes, I remember it well! [Laughs]

TC: —Again, an actress who decided to write. I thought that was quite a way to begin the interview because I thought, well, our journey has been such a long one. And the fact that we both, well, I started off as an actor as well, but obviously both had this creative-writing bug that we wanted to follow.

Well, I'll start from the start and just for the listeners, just who you are, where you started off and where you were born. A little bit of background about you, Anni, please.

AD: [Laughs] Ooh, so I was actually born in England.

TC: Okay.

AD: At the time, my parents lived on Eversholt Street, which is Euston Station, on that road.

TC: Yeah.

AD: But I was born on a snowy February morning and there was no hospital. Well, they said there was no hospital beds. So she got sent from one hospital to the next and I ended up being born in Clapton. So I'm a true Londoner because I was born within the sound of bow bells.

TC: Aha! [They laugh.]

AD: That's my claim and I'm sticking to it. But my parents went back to Sierra Leone, West Africa, when I was about three and a half. And that's a whole 'nother story [laughs]. And so I went to school in Sierra Leone, but I'd always been interested in writing and acting. And the first thing I acted in was at school when I was four. And just continued.

My parents, when they went back to Sierra Leone, had their own radio programme called *The Two of Us*. And it was a request programme and

they'd interview people and they'd do request records and so on. And from the age of about six or seven, I used to work with them and read out all the requests from the children.

TC: Wow.

AD: So I started in radio at about six and then I did school plays. And then I started writing whilst I was at school, plays and, and I wrote a short series for the TV when I was about 12. And so it was always going to be this [laughs]. My mother was a fabulous singer and actress.

TC: Okay.

AD: And she wanted to go into that profession, but of course in those days she wasn't allowed. And she met my father in England where they were doing ballroom dancing and they became semi-professional ballroom dancers.

TC: Wow!

AD: And so, when they went back, they had the radio programme. But when television came to Sierra Leone, which had been in the early 60s,

they had their own television programme teaching ballroom dancing. So I used to be a demonstrator ballroom dancer on their programme.

TC: Wow. And how old were you then, around?

AD: I was about 12, 13.

TC: Wow! How amazing is that? So you've had that bug in you from birth.

AD: Oh, from forever.

TC: Yeah.

AD: And I used to also do ballet. I used to do jazz at the same time till my father stopped me from doing ballet when he saw my feet after wearing pointe shoes.

TC: Okay.

AD: My father was a shoemaker. He designed and made shoes. He had a shoe factory.

TC: Wow!

AD: And he was livid at what they were doing to our feet. I mean, when I was growing up, we had to go to the factory every six months to have our feet measured and we had these handmade shoes. I hated them. I wanted Clark shoes like everybody else. Now [they laugh] I wish, I wish I could have those handmade shoes.

TC: I bet you do!

AD: Yeah.

TC: Wow.

AD: So then when I was 17, well, I applied for Rose Bruford and my father only allowed me to because it had—I could do a teaching degree as well. So I applied for Rose Bruford, but I never came for the audition. I did it all on tape. It's so long ago, it wasn't even cassette. It was, it was Grundig reel-to-reel. So they never saw me, all they heard was my voice. And then I got a, I got a scholarship and I came over and went to Rose Bruford, that's the early start.

TC: You're an actress, you're a director and now a writer as well. So that storytelling bug has been in you. Why do you think storytelling is so important to you?

AD: I think because there are so many different worlds and I keep telling people it's just because I'm a nosy parker. [They laugh.] I hear all of these stories. I mean, I'm one of these people, I'll be sitting in the bus or something and hear a bit of a conversation and I'll make up a whole story about those people and that. I've always done that. I'm just fascinated with all the stories we could tell and all the variations. I mean, I used to tell my brother's stories for everyone and they, when they were little, they patient and after a while I'd practically have to pay them to listen to me.

TC: No, I totally, I totally get that. I understand that totally because that's something I used to do as well. Because a lot of the times, people like to put you into a category. You're either an actor or a director or a writer—

AD: Yes.

TC: —and they overlap. They do overlap. And so that really it's all encompassing. That's who you are.

AD: Yes. I mean, I think for some people it's just there's so many different outlets that they can use to express themselves.

TC: Yes.

AD: So, you know, some people also paint or—

TC: Yes.

AD: —or, you know, I'm not an artist. I do paint, but I haven't painted for a long time. But what I do is I design and make clothes, so—

TC: Yes!

AD: —that's another way that I express myself, but also have that idea of taking something apart and putting it together and seeing how you can change it. All of those sort of things fascinate me.

TC: Yeah. And you make beautiful clothes. I've seen them. Gorgeous designs. So if you were—when you're thinking about your writing, would you say that acting helps?

AD: I certainly do. I think that I find that when I'm writing, people always say that your dialogue is so good. And I think that that comes from being an actress and being able to hear different voices.

TC: Yeah, yes.

AD: And knowing the cadence that I want and how long that person could speak for without being interrupted and so on. And it's all the things that come from being an actor or being with plays and having to listen.

TC: Yes.

AD: So that definitely comes into it. I mean, I've had to teach myself how to write the background bits that are happening and the setting, because that's not the thing that comes immediately to me when I'm telling my story, it's—

TC: Yes.

AD: —It's the people, the characters that come.

TC: Yeah. And so you've written a book, *Breaking the Maqfa Chain*.

AD: Yes.

TC: I'm really enjoying reading that at the moment.

AD: Oh fantastic!

TC: So for our listeners, the novel is set in the 19th century and it tells the story of two sisters, Fatmata and Salimatu, who are sold into slavery. And it's based on a true story, the one of Sarah Forbes Bonetta, who was ward and goddaughter of Queen Victoria.

AD: Yes.

TC: So can you tell us where the inspiration for that came from?

AD: Well, I was doing my master's in creative writing at Cambridge and it's coming towards the end and I had to think of what I wanted to write about for my thesis. And I wanted to bring something about my life and my culture into something that I was writing about. And I started thinking about stories from home. And then for some reason, Sarah Forbes Bonetta came into my mind because I know some of her descendants.

TC: You do?

AD: Yes.

TC: Okay.

AD: And one of them was very good friends with my parents, Uncle Arnold. And I can remember talking about it. And people laughing and thinking it wasn't true, you know, that old people make up these stories. And then when I came to England, I saw her name somewhere and I went, oh, and I started looking into it. And the more I looked into it, the more fascinated I was by her story. So I decided I was going to write that as part of my thesis.

TC: Okay.

AD: And so that's how it started. But I wanted to also talk about what life would have been like for Sarah before she was brought to England and wanted to write about her life in the village where her father was a chief. But she was captured when she was only about four or five. So I didn't think that she would have enough information to make that part of the

story live. And I knew that her village had been ransacked by raiders and that the chief and his wife, and he had more than one wife, they were killed. And that she had siblings, but nobody knows what happened to the siblings. So I fictionalised an older sibling who could therefore tell us about their life before capture. Because I thought it was important that we know. They say you never know where you're going unless you know where you come from.

TC: Yeah.

AD: And I wanted to know where she came from and I couldn't find that in all my research. So I thought, well, I'll make my own. [Laughs.]

TC: And you've made it very, very convincing, so in order to make it that convincing, you would have had to have done a lot of research.

AD: I did do a lot of research and lots of different places. I went up to villages in Sierra Leone.

TC: Okay.

AD: Because I come from the city and I'd left Sierra Leone for a long time.

And when I go back, I go to the capital, I don't necessarily go to villages and that. So I did go to a couple of villages and spend some time there. But I also spent—I live in Cambridgeshire, but I spent a lot of time there. I spent some time in London. So I went and walked around London, the places that Sarah would have lived in. I even went off to Brighton, where she went, although that's not in the first novel, it's coming in the second novel. So I just wanted to see the sights that she would have had, the smells that she would have smelled, most probably. Because some of the houses around Mayfair and that, they haven't changed that much. It's not like other parts where buildings have been torn down and new things put in. You know, I had a walk in Hyde park and the places that she would have gone to. So I did a lot of research on that. But also, what was the times, first in Africa, but then when she comes to Victorian England and it would be minute things I would spend hours on. Just thinking about how to go from one place to another. When did they start having railway trains? What stations would it go to? How much would they pay for it? And so on and so on. So the minutiae, as well as the big things, were important for me. And I also wanted to talk about some of the politics of the time.

So I used a lot of Queen Victoria's diaries. Because she talks a lot about what was going on. But also, she talks about Sarah. And once I started

looking into it, I was fascinated at the fact that you hardly ever hear about Sarah in connection with Queen Victoria. And when you do, it's always the same thing. Oh, she was a slave that was captured and given to Queen Victoria as her black goddaughter. And I wanted to know, what was that child like? What would it have been like to come from Africa and slavery into this Western world and be treated as a princess? And to be in close society with Queen Victoria. I mean, and they were really close. One of the things that spurred me on with writing it is that when I read Queen Victoria's diaries, she mentioned meeting Sarah for the first time in November. And then as you read on in January, she says, Oh, met my black goddaughter for the fourth time. And I thought, Oh, why? With Christmas in between, has she seen this child so many times? So that's where the spur for the stories came from.

TC: Yeah. And I love how, like you say, in the historical facts, you will see it from the point of view of Queen Victoria, if you've gone through her diaries and so for you to then get inside Sarah's head and bring us along with the story and the sister that you invented as well, so that we see it from a different perspective.

AD: I wanted to have that black gaze.

TC: Yes.

AD: And what was important for me, I didn't necessarily want to be telling a slave story. We have lots of those. So I took the sister, not for, she talks about being a slave in America, but that's not the key point. What I wanted was for her to see England through her eyes. So we have an ordinary black person, an older as well, who was seeing sometimes being in the same place as Sarah as a child and seeing what they see. So that comes into the class and to how you identify yourself.

TC: Yeah. So just going over that, how important is it to you that we as black people tell our own stories?

AD: It is extremely important to me because I think that we don't, people don't understand our point of view. If they don't hear our voice.

TC: Yeah.

AD: So, and it goes right back to things like, why do we still talk about slavery? You know, 'it's over'. For us, it isn't over because we're still paying for the compensation up to 2015. Some of us who are living in England

and working have been paying for us to be free, for our ancestors to be freed. Now that doesn't sound as if we should forget about it, you know?

So yes, I think it's very important for us to say, to see a different point of view, which is fantastic. I mean, I've just been working on a play that does exactly that. And that has been really fascinating to see and to be part of.

TC: When you're writing fiction based on real facts, which you have done, and like you've said earlier, that you had to embellish on things, you had to create things that weren't written historically—

AD: Yes.

TC: —weren't put down, recorded. And I remember you mentioning to me a little while ago that Wikipedia had put one of your invented bits from the book in Wikipedia as if it were fact. [AD laughs.] So I was just thinking, do you think this happens a lot? And could this be a problem with history in general? I mean, whoever records it can reinvent history, right? Does that matter?

AD: Yeah, I think, I think it is a problem, which is why any historical fact or whatever, when I research, I have to find it collaborated at least in two other places.

TC: Yeah.

AD: And then if it's wrong, at least I tried. And I didn't just take the first thing that I read or saw.

TC: Yeah.

AD : Because it depends who's telling the story—

TC: Yes!

AD: —how much of it is told. I mean—and this is part of what I'm writing about as part of my PhD—who tells the story and what is left out, you know?

TC: Yeah.

AD: And it goes back to something like the piece I wrote about Charles Dickens, that, you know, he was writing all these stories about the lifestyle of poor people in London, but he never once wrote about the black people who were there! So it's like they were never, they never existed. If

people don't hear that we were here, they still think that we came with Windrush.

TC: Yes, yeah.

AD: You know, so that's why it's important that we tell our stories and be involved and—British history is also our history.

TC: Yes, yeah, totally agree. Going on to your book, *Breaking the Maafa Chain*, your process of writing it.

AD: Yeah.

TC: When did you start writing it and when did you finish? How long did it take?

AD: It took quite a while because, as I said, I first wrote it as part of my thesis. And I only wrote the first four chapters, most of which are no longer there anyway [laughs].

TC: Yeah.

AD: But you had to do a reading of it and you then send it out and so on.
And it came back with a distinction.

TC: Fantastic.

AD: And everybody who'd read any bits of it kept saying, 'oh, you must finish it. You must write it!' And I thought, *oh, well, no, there's so many other things I want to do*. However, I got with two friends and we started a writing group. We were each writing our own. And to give ourselves something to aim for, we decided to enter the Lucy Cavendish competition. Lucy Cavendish is one of the colleges in Cambridge. And it was for women's novels and first novels and it didn't have to be finished [laughs]. That was the important thing. It didn't have to be finished. And still, I sort of hemmed and hawed about it. And they kept pushing me. And I was so late that I hand-delivered it at quarter to 12 when the deadline was 12 o'clock. And I was quite surprised when it was first long-listed and then short-listed.

TC: Wonderful.

AD: And one of the people who were judging was a literary agent who was very interested in it and says, 'You have to finish it'. So I sort of started

dipping in and out of it, but I was working, I was teaching, I was acting. But I had a lot of family problems. My son had a car crash and broke his back.

TC: I remember!

AD: And he was in hospital and then came home in a wheelchair and so on. And just as he was home, my husband then had a stroke. So I had two of them [laughs] and I was their main carer. So the book sort of got done in bits and pieces. So it took me about five or six years to write and then it took a whole year trying to find publishers. It's very difficult because you send it off and it might take them three months, four months before you hear anything.

TC: Yep [laughs]!

AD: And then you st—so in no time at all, just sending it to three or four different publishers or agents, you have spent a year.

TC: Yes, easily.

AD: So that took a while. But in between that time, I was doing some editing and good friends read it and sort of gave me some ideas and so

on. So, in between that, I heard of Margaret Busby was doing *New Daughters of Africa*.

TC: Yes.

AD: And they had a competition. And somebody said, 'Why don't you send it?' And again, I hemmed and hawed and sent it at the last minute. And I was very surprised when it won. Because the prize was that the winner would be in *New Daughters of Africa*. And so I got an early version of it in *New Daughters of Africa*, which just blew my mind. Because for me to be amongst these writers—was such a buzz. Thrills me to know that that happened. And from that, it then got published. And even then, the publishers, Jacaranda, who were interested in publishing it, said they'd have to hold it a year because they were doing 20 by 20; they were going to publish 20 books in 2020 [Twentyin2020]. And that was already on the go. But I wanted them to publish it because they're black publishers and I get on very well with them and I felt that they understood the book. So it had taken me that long to write, one more year would not kill me. So, yeah.

TC: So when you had all that interest in your book, were you then able to say quite confidently, Confidently, I am a writer?

AD: No. [They laugh.] I still find it, even now, a little bit difficult. Even though now I've had poems, I've had short stories and other things published. I still think, 'oh,' you know, 'me, a writer!' I'm beginning to believe it. But it's hard. When I see some of the other people I talk to and they've written, I don't know how many books, and people like you who are writing wonderful books and I think, *I can't put myself in that class.*

TC: It's tricky because, I don't know what it is; we're writing, we're doing this thing and yet it's always quite a hard thing to actually to say out loud, 'I am a writer'. I've started to say it now, a bit more than I could before; but it's a weird thing. You're doing the work, you know, and it's a lot of work. Like you said, you put all those years into it: you're a writer!

AD: Yeah. Yeah, I think, I think once you've been published, even if it's just one poem or something, you can begin to say I'm a writer. But it still sounds so presumptuous.

TC: So having so many strings to your bow then, writer, director, actor, has that made having a career in the UK a lot easier?

AD: I think so. Because with something like writing, I could go anywhere and write. I don't have to be in England. And I've been at this acting business now for, oh God, over 50 years in England. So I feel that I've established myself at a certain level. I don't see myself as going to be doing some fantastic film and going to move to America and all of that. It'd be nice to do the odd film [laughs]. But I don't see my life changing tremendously because I love my life. I like having the different bows to my arrow. Oh, is that the right—?

TC: Yes.

AD: —different arrows to my bow or something—

TC: Something like that. Yeah.

AD: —You know, different facets. Because they're all part of me. It's part of the mosaic of my life and I would not particularly like to just say, 'OK, I'm just going to go back and do just acting' because that I'd be cutting off some of the parts of me that also feed me. I love writing. I love directing. And so on. So I wouldn't want to cut off any of it. So if I went somewhere else where I could do all of it the same way, then that would be fine. But at the moment, I think that I've got enough doing in England that satisfies

me. And also, I'm not getting any younger. I've got to know that sooner or later, I will have to stop at least some of it. I've cut down on some things. I don't do some of the extra things that I do besides writing and directing and so on.

TC: Yeah. No, just keep doing what you do, Anni. You're brilliant and enjoy it along the way, which you do.

AD: Oh, I am really enjoying it.

TC: And your work-life balance? Is that...? That's important to keep.

AD: Yes. But you see, this is what people say to me. But my work-life balance is my work—

TC: Your life is your work.

AD: —because what I enjoy doing is going to the theatre.

TC: Yes.

AD: I love going to the theatre. I've always loved reading. I read a lot. I love to travel. And that's part of my life. When people say, 'oh, well, you go to so many shows'. I go, 'yes, because that's instead of sitting in front of the TV.' I've been working all day. Now it's my enjoyment time to go and see shows or to do some of those other things. My life-work balance is pretty good.

TC: Good.

AD: Pretty good, yeah.

TC: So your new book, tell me about that. *Omenera*?

AD: *Omenera*. Yes. Now, when I started writing *Breaking the Maafa Chain*, I realised that Sarah's story is so rich that I didn't want to cram it into one novel. So I decided that it would stop at a certain point and then I would write the rest of it. But when it came to writing it, I didn't want to just be a continuation. I wanted to have a look at Sarah's life, but also from a different angle. So the second book, *Omenera*, is written from the point of view of Sarah's daughter, Victoria, and Faith's daughter, because Fatmata became Faith when she went to America, but Faith's daughter, Maluma, who is named after her grandmother. And it's looking at what was

happening to Black people, especially Black women in America, because this was in the Reconstruction period. So the story is 30 years later, and it starts in 1880 when Sarah dies in 1880.

TC: Okay.

AD: So it's looking at—in that interim time from when she was 1850, when she first came to England, to her daughter in England; because Victoria was also Queen Victoria's goddaughter. But you never hear about her as much as you hear about Sarah. And I was looking at it and wondering why. And the only reason I can find is that Sarah had this sort of exoticism attached to her because of the slavery, of being rescued and so on, whereas Victoria didn't. So when they talk about Queen Victoria's Black goddaughter, they always speak as if she only had one, which was Sarah, and she didn't. And also, Victoria had quite a close relationship with Queen Victoria and visited her several times and knew the younger members of Queen Victoria's family. So I wanted to look at that continuation of the story, but looking at it at the latter period of Queen Victoria's life. But that also means looking at the history of Black Americans, as well as the history of Black people in England, that they were not all the same. They always talk as if all the Black people who were in England until Windrush were poor, were ex-slaves, or so on. And I

wanted to show that there was a middle class here, who—several generations living here. We have been here for a long time. Goodness gracious, Queen Elizabeth I passed an edict in the 1500s about too many Black people in London!

TC: Wow.

AD: So we have been here a while. So I wanted to look at that. So Victoria and Maluma tell the story of themselves, but also goes back to the story of their mothers. And we go backwards and forwards and see what happened to Sarah and also Faith, but also this new generation. So, yes.

TC: Wow, a busy, busy time!

AD: Yes. And then I'm doing a thesis on some of the people that I talk about in the novel who are Sierra Leoneans, but who have strong connections with Great Britain, like Samuel Ajayi Crowther, who was the first Black African bishop, or Adelaide Casely Hayford, who grew up in England, but went back to Africa and founded a school in Sierra Leone. The people I talk about are people who have connections with England and Sierra Leone.

TC: Amazing. I look forward to reading that one too.

AD: I'm enjoying writing it.

TC: You are a very busy woman and you keep yourself entertained and you keep yourself doing things that you love and enjoy. Do you have any advice for new writers that are just coming into this field of work?

AD: I think that the first thing is that you want to write it. You know, and so you're not going to be stopped by anyone. If you have a story that you really want to tell, then you have to find a way. And I mean, when I'm busy, busy, sometimes I will wake up early in the morning and I will write, but I'm a late bird, so I will write late into the night.

But I always have a notebook with me and I jot down things, either ideas or names or something, so that even when you're not physically writing, you're writing, you're involved with the story, it's in your head.

And then just take your time. Don't let anybody tell you, oh, you've been writing it *that long*? You know, a story takes as long as it takes.

TC: Yes.

AD: And sometimes it will come very quickly and sometimes it will come slow, slowly, and then you have to go back and go back and go back. It's all part of the—part of it.

TC: Yeah.

AD: I mean, I always overwrite. I write and write and write because I think that if it's down on the page, then I can shift it around or I can cut it out, or whatever. So when I finished *Breaking the Maafa Chain*, it was extremely long and that was one of the reasons why the other agent said, 'There's a lot of work to be done on it. It's too long'. And I go, 'Fine, I can do that'. And I actually cut out 70,000 words—

TC: Whoah!

AD: —which is about a small book.

TC: It will probably help you with the next book.

AD: Yes! Yes. But what it taught me was that nothing is too precious.

TC: Yes.

AD: And that—I could have spent a whole time writing it and then cut out the whole thing. But it gives you that fibre. It gives you the practice. Writing is practice.

TC: Yes.

AD: And that's what I would say: practice and practice and practice. Write anything, even if it's just writing about your day going to work. You start finding words. You start finding—playing around with language and finding—I mean, I always finish a piece and then look and see what phrase or something I'm overusing. Because there's always something that you cling on to. So it's just finding words and language. And what is it that you want? Is it to amuse? Is it to terrify? Is it to—What is the emotion that you want from your reader? Why are you telling me this story?

TC: But I think as a performer, as an actor and a director, those kinds of questions come to you naturally—

AD: Yes, yes they do.

TC: —because it's part of the structure of a story. And you've got that and you know that.

AD: And that's why I think I'm very lucky and why I wouldn't want to put any bit of it aside.

TC: Yes.

AD: Because it all feeds into each other. And I can see that, when I'm working, if I'm writing or if I'm directing, I can see some of that and so on. Yeah. And I love it [laughs].

TC: And we love you—

AD: Aw!

TC: —Anni Domingo, thank you so much. It's been such a pleasure talking to you today.

AD: It has been an absolute pleasure to talk to you, Trish, my one-time granddaughter! [They laugh.] Do you remember that?

TC: I do!

AD: This is where we started from. My daughter—yes.

TC: I was 24 playing a 14-year-old and you was playing my grandmother.

AD: Yes. And I was 30-something playing a —

TC: —Grandmother—

AD: —60-year-old. And it's caught up with me now.

TC: Yeah. Me—well, I've gone beyond. I didn't go backwards like Benjamin Button.

AD: Well, but you must have a portrait in the gallery somewhere in the attic because you don't look changed at all.

TC: Ah, thank you. Well, you neither. You neither. Okay—

AD: —It's been such a joy talking to you and working on this. Thank you.

TC: Thank you.

Presenter: Anni Domingo was in conversation with Trish Cooke. To hear more writers, go to www.writersmosaic.org.uk.

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