

WRITERS MOSAIC

SATHNAM SANGHERA

In conversation with Colin Grant

Colin Grant (CG): Here we are. Thanks for coming. So, my name is Colin Grant, and I write some books. I've written some books. I suppose relative to this conversation, one of the two things that I've done in my most recent years, I used to work for the BBC or the Bumbaclaat Broadcasting Corporation, as my friends tell me.

And currently, I'm the director of an organization called the... it's called *Writers Mosaic*, which is a division of the Royal Literary Fund, which has been in existence since 1790. It started off to help people, writers, get out of debtors jail, because spoiler, apart from Sathnam and a few others, people don't make any money from writing.

And it's been going since then. In a way we'll be feeding some of those thoughts about the longevity of these institutions into our discussion today. But, welcome to the South Bank. Well done for coming out and realizing that there's more to life than football and tennis. Although, we'll be rushing back afterwards won't we Sathnam, to see how we fare tonight?

I'd like to begin by thanking Claire Hill, who joins us for the live speech and text transcription. This event is part of a summer season called You Belong Here, which is inspired by the unsung stories and forgotten trailblazers celebrated in our Hayward Gallery. I don't know why I say our... I suppose it is our, in a way.

Sathnam Sanghera (SS): For an hour.

CG: For an hour. We own these institutions, you could say, in a way. It's an exhibition by Tavares Strachan called There is Light Somewhere. And I think that's a title that perfectly conjures what Sathnam Sanghera has done with his latest book, which both illuminates the darkness of British and world history and offers hope.

Sathnam Sanghera was born to Punjabi parents in the West Midlands in 1976. He started school unable to speak English but went on to graduate from Christ's College, Cambridge with a first-class degree in English language and literature.

His first book, *The Boy with the Top Knot: A Memoir of Love, Secrets, and Lies in Wolverhampton...* Great title, by the way.

SS: It wasn't mine, so alas.

CG: Was followed by the novel *Marriage Material*. Also a good title.

SS: Not mine either.

CG: Not yours? Okay. His third book, *Empire Land: How Imperialism Has Shaped Modern Britain*, was named a book of the year at the 2022 British Book Awards.

That was your title?

SS: No, again, Penguin's idea. Yeah, I'm not very good at titles.

CG: But that book has inspired the sequel, which we'll focus on today, *Empire World: How British Imperialism Has Shaped The Globe*. Incidentally, that book will be on sale by the Foyle's team in the foyer after this presentation. Before becoming a writer, Sathnam's jobs included working at a burger chain. Unnamed burger chain.

SS: Burger King.

CG: Burger King.

SS: I should just say Burger King, shouldn't I?

CG: Hospital laundry, a market research firm, and a sewing factory. As a journalist, he's worked at the *Financial Times* and *The Times* and has cut his teeth at least once on a TV programme called *Have I Got News For You*, which I think you enjoyed, didn't you?

SS: Yeah, it feels pathetic that I've only done it once.

CG: After today, they'll be inviting you back, I'm sure. The author, Jonathan Coe, who's a great writer, I admire him, has said of Sathnam that, "whether writing autobiography or fiction, he always does so with incredible grace, generosity, and humour." Sathnam Sanghera.

SS: Thanks. I hate listening. You don't know where to look when someone's reading out your CV, do you? I wish I'd brought your CV along so I could reciprocate and make you feel awkward.

CG: Thank God you didn't. But we're going to speak for about an hour, and then some of you have sent in some questions, which we've vetted. And I'll be reading out some of those questions.

SS: To be honest, we can't see you because the lights are so bright. So...

CG: If you smile, we can see your teeth.

SS: I assume there's people out there who have sent questions.

CG: Yes, they have at least half a dozen. Sathnam... relative to the title of the Hayward Gallery Show, You Belong Here, does that resonate with you, that title, You Belong Here? What does it mean to you?

SS: Yeah, one of the most common questions I get about these books is, has studying the history of British Empire made you hate Britain? Has it made you hate white people? And I feel exactly the opposite.

It's made me feel like I belong in Britain even more profoundly than I understood before, because before I just thought I bought the narrative, the media narrative, which is that brown and black people arrived in Britain because of Windrush. And after that, basically to take advantage of the British and, abuse them.

That's the media narrative, right? But, actually, people of colour have been coming to Britain for centuries.

CG: Yeah, sure.

SS: And as a Sikh, the Sikhs took the side of the British, at the 1857 mutiny. They had been fighting for the British for centuries. And there are profound reasons for why you and I are here.

CG: Absolutely. So when I was about ten, I used to have this rather neat description for when people asked me where I was from. I would say I was British by birth, but Jamaican by will and inclination. And if ever my father, who was called Bageye because he had really baggy eyes, if ever Bag Eye heard me, he'd say, "Stop talk Tripe! You're born right here. You are Hinglish. I am British." Now, let's get that straight. Did you have any kind of construction of words to describe what you were when you were asked that question growing up?

SS: I think it's changed. I think a lot of people of my generation, yours, have changed the way we talk about ourselves during our life. So, I used to say British Asian. I used to say the, use the phrase second generation immigrant, which I think is a toxic phrase because I don't think the word immigrant belongs in our life story because our parents were. We were literally born here, so I don't use that phrase anymore. But to be honest, I'd say I'm from Wolverhampton quite often. That's enough to confuse people, because no one knows where Wolverhampton is, seemingly.

CG: Yeah. Close to Birmingham.

SS: Yeah.

CG: Ish.

SS: Don't, that's such an insult, isn't it? Yeah.

CG: Yeah, okay. I'll try not to insult you too much.

SS: It's just off the M6.

CG: Yeah.

SS: Just say that.

CG: But, but what, when you were growing up, when you were younger, what idea, if any, of the British Empire did you have as a boy?

SS: Almost none, to be honest. But looking back, I did actually have some education in the British Empire because I did GCSE History, and we specialised on Ireland.

CG: Oh.

SS: So, I learnt a lot about Irish history; the potato famine, the troubles. But during those six months of education of Ireland, no one once mentioned the phrase British Empire. So, I never made the connection between, there's actually

thousands of connections between the Irish and... The Sikhs, even in Wolverhampton, when the Sikhs arrived, we were accused of creating slums, of not integrating, of not speaking the language. Exactly the same accusations were made about the Irish, who were living in the same streets 100 years before us. They practiced a weird religion; they spoke Gaelic; they were drunk all the time. Literally, that's what Enoch Powell was alleging about the Sikhs. But again, no one made that connection. I think a lot of this is not just ignorance; it's the lack of connections that are made. So, it also applies to the world war history. No one mentioned during all those Remembrance Day services that we had that we were there too; that our ancestors fought in millions.

CG: And did you have an allegiance with the Irish people when you were growing up?

SS: No. Didn't know any, to be honest.

CG: You didn't know any?

SS: Weirdly, although it was a very racially diverse school, it was racially diverse in that I had a lot of black people and Sikhs. But I didn't meet a Jewish person until I was about 23. Didn't know any Muslims. I think in the census of 2012 found that there's something like twelve Jewish people in Wolverhampton. It's a really odd place. So, it's very intensely Sikh and very intensely Jamaican.

CG: Why would you go to Wolverhampton?

SS: Why would you go to Wolverhampton?

CG: No, why would someone...

SS: From the football club?

CG: No, but why would you, if you were a migrant, why would you end up in Wolverhampton, do you think?

SS: Oh, for the jobs.

CG: Yeah, what kind of jobs were there?

SS: It's really, the name Black Country derives from the fact, a lot of hard industry there. Iron foundries and metal work. So, all of my uncles who came, like a lot of Sikhs did really hardcore manual labour. My father, my grandfather was working doing heavy manual labour until he was 76.

CG: Wow.

SS: And he was working illegally. But a lot of people did that in that day.

CG: But I'm always curious about why people end up where they do. So, I read a book about migration to Britain from the Caribbean. And if you're from St.

Vincent, you end up in High Wycombe. If you're from Trinidad and Barbados, you end up in Reading. If you're from Nevis and St. Kitts, Leeds, and so on and so forth. And I did ask some people who were from St. Kitts, the reason why they ended up in Leeds when I was writing my book about them.

And they said that there was only one train when they were growing up, that ran for the whole island. And when that train broke down, engineers would come out from Leeds to fix it. So, in their mind, Leeds was Britain. So, when they had a chance to leave St. Kitts, they went to Britain, i. e. Leeds.

SS: All right. Wow. And I think this story, if I'm right, with Windrush, there's a lot of the people on the actual Windrush ended up in Clapham. They were housed there, right? Temporarily.

CG: Yeah.

SS: And that's how Brixton became a famously black area.

CG: Yeah.

SS: Is that random?

CG: Absolutely. You put down roots where you land...

SS: And there's a lot of Sikhs in Heathrow. Guess what?

CG: Of course. Yes, yeah.

SS: You know?

CG: There's a lot of Scottish people in and around King's Cross.

SS: All right. Because of the railways.

CG: Absolutely. So when you're, when you think about your parents' and your grandparents' relationship with Britain, or with the idea of the British Empire, what would you say that was? What was their relationship?

SS: To be honest, they didn't talk about it. They, they were all illiterate. My dad is illiterate and there wasn't a single book in our household. We didn't have conversations about that kind of stuff. If anyone raised racist abuse that we were having, I think like a lot of our parents of that generation, they would be like, "Oh, just suck it up and don't make a scene and just try to fit in." It wasn't about taking it on or trying to intellectualize it. Wasn't it?

CG: But in your book, I think you said, correct me if I'm wrong, because it's six months since I...

SS: Yeah, my grandfather would talk would go on about how amazing white people were and not in the sense of being a white supremacist, but in the sense of isn't it amazing everything they've done?

CG: Yeah.

SS: And actually I occasionally yeah but I mean traveling around the world, I do have moments like that. Oh my god, I'm in, I'm in Barbados. They're growing sugarcane because the British made them grow sugarcane and actually, my ancestors were growing sugarcane because the British said they should grow sugarcane. Opposite sides of the world and isn't it mind blowing that the British, who just happen to be white people, did all of this?

CG: Yeah, it shows great industry, I suppose. [Audience laughs]

SS: Yeah, slight downside of the slave economy.

CG: Yeah.

SS: Yeah.

CG: From 1950, there's a chap called Enoch Powell, who was the MP for Wolverhampton South-West, and would have been so during your childhood and young adulthood, I imagine. Infamously, he wrote the Rivers of Blood

speech in 1968 where he warned there was the danger that the black man would have the whip hand over the white man. So, did Enoch Powell ever figure in discussions in your home with your family or friends or in your imagination?

SS: Only indirectly in that I remember when people would come and solicit for people's votes at home, my mum would say, we should vote Labour because they don't mind immigrants, whereas the Tories want to send everyone back.

CG: Wow.

SS: And that was the narrative. We used to have his successor come and talk to us at school, who was even more right-wing than Enoch Powell. Enoch Powell actually lived at the back of our school. And it's interesting how, he's probably one of the most important politicians in terms of his influence of the 20th century, but he's not commemorated in any way.

There's a battle to get a statue or a plaque put up, but obviously he's a toxic, got a toxic heritage there. But I think it's important to remember him, because otherwise you create a narrative that kind of racism wasn't mainstream, when it was really mainstream; he was hugely popular.

CG: Yeah, when that speech was made, people think he was vilified, but they had to lay on special vans from the post office. They had so many people writing letters of support.

SS: Yeah, and there were marches all around the country, and the trade unions backed him. And now we see the trade unions as being intrinsically left-wing, but they really took his side.

CG: Did you ever meet Enoch Powell?

SS: No, I didn't, no.

CG: I followed him once.

SS: Strange voice. Can you do the voice?

CG: I can't do the voice. No, but I followed him because he used to wear this Homburg, didn't he?

SS: Yeah.

CG: I remember where I saw him at Euston once and I just sort I'm just going to follow him for a while. And I followed him for a little while, for about four or five minutes, and then he turned around, and his eyes were on fire. He was quite an intense man, I think.

SS: Strange man because he wanted to be Viceroy of India. And then when that didn't happen, he decided, weirdly, that the British Empire didn't exist. That

was his position. It was like it never happened. A strange coping strategy for his career failure.

CG: Man in denial, yeah. Now look, the new book, *Empire World: How British Imperialism Has Shaped the Globe*, is a sequel to the previous book, *How Imperialism Has Been Shaped, Has Shaped Modern Britain*. So, was it always going to be a two book?

SS: No.

CG: What happened?

SS: No, to be honest, I didn't really want to write another book because it was, about empire because it was amazing, but also toxic, being in the culture wars, quite a lot of abuse at events like this.

CG: Were you surprised by that?

SS: I've worked out...

CG: No hecklers, by the way. No hecklers.

SS: You know what? I think this audience are going to be okay, because I've worked out what it is, it's about the price of the ticket.

CG: Ah.

SS: Yeah. If you do a ticketed event below ten pounds, someone who hates you is willing to pay ten pounds to come and shout at you. But I've checked the ticket prices. You've paid more than that. We're fine.

CG: Okay, but seriously so your publishers came to you and said, "Look, the first book's done well, you've made us a lot of money, how about another book?"

SS: No, it didn't work like that. I wanted... very much wanted to do something else. It's just that I would do events and people would ask me certain questions and I didn't have the answer for them. Questions like, "Didn't British, the British Empire introduce democracy to large parts of the world? Didn't the British Empire introduce the rule of law to the world?" And all these questions that I didn't really have an answer to and were global in nature and I thought I should have answers for them. Also, I went to Barbados and...

CG: Okay, we're going to get to Barbados shortly.

SS: I had a bad time.

CG: So, the *Guardian* reviewer of your book wrote, "Modern writing about imperialism has prised the stopper from the genie's bottle, releasing malodorous truths. *Empire World* makes it more difficult for revisionists, whose

hearts may swell when reciting Kipling's *The English Flag*, to return the genie to that bottle." That was me.

SS: That was you, yeah. I was going to say.

CG: How did you feel about that?

SS: I thought that word, 'malodorous', how do you say that?

CG: Malodorous.

SS: I thought I should use that more often.

CG: Yeah.

SS: And that's what I thought.

CG: It's a bad smell, basically.

SS: Yeah, I know. Yeah.

CG: Yeah.

SS: It's a good word, isn't it?

CG: So, *The English Flag* includes the line, 'What do they know of England who only England know?' Or words to that effect. I imagine you'd agree with that sentiment.

SS: Yeah, there's a gap between the way we don't talk about empire or our dysfunctional way of talking about it and the way the world understands it. In general, the world has quite a good knowledge of the British Empire because they remember what happened when we turned up in boats and with guns and permanently changed their countries. And it's quite well taught in places like China and the Caribbean, India, even Nigeria and yet we don't. So, this makes it highly dysfunctional especially when we're trying to go around the world at the moment trying to get new Brexit deals and we're turning up in Mauritius going, "Hey guys, give us better economic conditions." And they're like, "Oh! Should we talk about what you did to us and how you shaped us or especially the Caribbean?"

You turn up there and you're like... and we do it routinely. David Cameron, you know, turning up in Jamaica you know, and trying to set up a new economic deal for a new prison, with no memory of how we punished the enslaved; how we created the conditions for their crime rates. And how the... actually Enoch Powell, go back to him.

He was the minister who poached, who first poached health workers from the Caribbean. So we, that's misery upon misery. So, we don't give these enslaved good healthcare or any healthcare. When we leave, we don't give them money to set up a healthcare system. And then in the 20th century, we turn up and we steal their workers. And we do this with no awareness of what we've done before. And we do this in so many different ways around the world.

CG: It's amazing how you can live through that kind of denial. You've written about the kind of commonplace abuse that you suffered when you wrote the first book. You said it, it was as commonplace as my morning bowl of porridge. So, did you have any nervousness about writing the next book, having had that experience and that kind of vitriol directed at you?

SS: Yeah, to be honest, it was on my mind all the time, which is why, one of the reasons the bibliography is so long. Because people are going to really come for you. And...

CG: What form do they come for you? What kind of... what happens?

SS: Some of it's just basic abuse on Twitter; some of it's shouting at events. But actually, with them this book, a succession of shadowy funded right-wing websites were attacking the book before it even came out. Really long essays from right-wing historians explaining why I'm a twat over eight thousand words.

Just one after another, before the books even come out. And it's quite mentally, it's quite a lot to deal with.

CG: Yeah.

SS: It's hard to not let that get to you.

CG: So, what was your approach to deal with it?

SS: I didn't read them. The problem is people tag you. So, well-meaning people, like you guys, possibly will be like, "Can you believe that this person has said this about you sat down?"

And you've been trying not to notice it. But I've actually come off social media completely. So, I had a social media manager, so it wouldn't affect me. But it was really intense, because it can make you very self-conscious about writing a single word, when you think that loads of people are out to get you.

CG: Yeah, it's terrible, because most writers live with the little devil of doubt on their shoulder anyway.

SS: Yeah.

CG: So, you'd have thousands of little devils on your shoulder.

SS: Yeah. All the time. Yeah.

CG: Were you surprised though? I suppose what I'm, what I'm interested to find out is why you think there is so much antipathy towards any kind of serious interrogation of the darker sides of British history. What is it? What's going on do you think?

SS: Well, I'm sure you've had this with your Windrush books, but, and your memoirs, but there's, let's face it, something to do with my skin colour as well because, as William Dalrymple said, you he's been writing stuff like this for decades and he hasn't had a single letter of abuse and I've got hundreds sitting at home.

CG: Why are they still there? Why don't you burn them?

SS: Because occasionally I have to write about it. And I did have to refer to some of the abuse in the book, so it's good to have the evidence.

CG: Yeah.

SS: Sometimes you have to tell the police. If people routinely are getting in touch with you, it turns into a stalking situation. And, I had one guy turning up at every single event. And he wasn't the guy, he was actually an Asian guy.

CG: Oh, wow!

SS: And he asked the same aggressive question. And it's mate, you don't want an answer. You want me to fucking agree with you. And I'm not going to agree with you. You can keep on asking, but the ticket prices are going to go up. I hope you can afford it.

CG: Has he stopped following you?

SS: Actually, he might be here tonight, but today, sorry. It's dark. Easily confused. Yeah. I forgot what the question was there.

CG: I suppose it's, yeah, I was wondering what the psychology is that makes people nervous about interrogating their past or have their past interrogated for them.

SS: It goes back to empire itself. Empire was so often an expression of British patriotism on the right and a lot of people were taught that the nostalgia about British Empire was true. They learned it at school. They left school holding on to this as fact. It's part of their identity. Their family might have served in the British Empire.

And then a black person or a brown person turns up and says, David Olusoga or me or you, and we go, actually, it wasn't like that; it's more complicated. Actually,

British people were racist. Yes, we beat the evil racist Germans, but we were really racist. And actually we helped create modern notions of racism. And you can see how that can really affect someone's sense of identity to the core and why they would get so furious about it. But part of the problem is that people leave school thinking that history is facts and it's argument.

CG: Sure.

SS: And it's a failure of our education system on a very basic level.

CG: Yeah, because historians don't write history, they curate history.

SS: We had Rishi Sunak, R.I.P saying in relation to slavery, he was saying... he said in parliament, "We should not unpick our history." And it's mate, that's literally what historians do. They unpick history about the Roman Empire. I did an event with Mary Beard this week. She unpicks the history that her understanding of the Roman Empire has drastically changed in 30 years. Our history of understanding of empire is changing wildly. Since Neil Ferguson's book, 20 years ago, there's been total sea change in what historians understand of what happened in empire.

Of course our understanding will change, but there's certain people out there who think... that think it should remain fixed actually. Nigel Farage's Reform

Party, they, it's part of their manifesto that they want to use history as an extension of patriotism.

CG: What the British are very good at is the propaganda of turning the story around on its head. When I was growing up in Luton, the capital of Britain we were taught that weren't the British great because William Wilberforce brought about the end of slavery?

SS: Yeah.

CG: The former part of that sentence was never really expressed.

SS: It reminds me of that line, is it Eric Williams, the historian who said that the way the British talk about slavery is almost as if they only got into history, into slavery so they could abolish it and be great? Let's forget about the three million Africans that were enslaved, killed, raped and so on.

CG: Yeah.

SS: We abolished slavery.

CG: Yeah.

SS: Aren't we great?

CG: I suppose in life, I'm sure that you and I are the same, we want to feel good about ourselves. So you latch onto those things which you think are worthy and you quietly put under the carpet those things which you are a bit nervous about sharing.

SS: It's mad. History is so complicated. The analogy I, one of the analogies I think is like saying, I want to understand the climate, but I'm only going to study the sunshine or the rain.

CG: Yeah.

SS: But it works both ways. Actually, doing that's not going to help you give you a good sense of the climate of the last 300 years. You have to study the weather in between. And fundamentally, the British Empire was highly contradictory.

CG: Sure.

SS: It involved slavery, but it also involved anti-slavery.

CG: Yeah.

SS: You know? And...

CG: Yeah, well, you bring that really well in your book. You begin the book by establishing some of the virtues of empire. Richard Turnbull, do you know him? The governor of Tanganyika, from 1958-1961, once remarked that, "The empire would leave behind only two monuments: one was the game of association football, and the other was the expression, 'fuck off.'" Can you give us your, can you give us some ideas of your [inaudible]? What are the...

SS: That's a good a good day to mention that quote, isn't it? Actually, tonight's final, it's an imperial spectacle, basically. So, the majority of the countries who ended up playing football is because they inherited football directly or indirectly from the British Empire. Even Argentina and Uruguay. As you've, you've probably seen the meme of what the British, the English football team would look like without immigration. You could do that diagram again and say what would the English team look like without Imperial immigration? I think it'd be pretty similar; in that it would look very different. And also, the racism which has been part of the English game, the supporters, for most of my life, that comes straight from empire too.

So, there's so much about emp... about football that would not make sense or wouldn't happen if it wasn't for the British Empire. I don't know if you saw that meme or that video a week ago of the Indian and Pakistani cricket supporters.

CG: Oh, yes.

SS: Yeah. So, they broke... I'm sure you guys, most of you have seen it, but it was during a game between India and Pakistan. They obviously hate each other, but they all came together to watch England take the penalties and they all supported England, thereby undermining Norman Tebbit's famous cricket test, right? Which is that you have to make a choice between India, Pakistan, and England. And actually, most of us managed to have multiple sources of patriotism and pride and whatever connection.

CG: Yeah. Someone from the Punjab or from Jamaica is more likely to support England than someone from Scotland.

SS: Probably. Yes. Yeah.

CG: Yeah.

SS: Yeah.

CG: Now, I remember when I grew up in a place that's a lot of Irish people. All my friends are Flynn's, O'Loughlin's, Dunn's, O'Hearne's, Glynn, and we would have this...

SS: This is Luton?

CG: Luton, yeah.

SS: Very Scottish, is it?

CG: Scottish and Irish.

SS: All right, okay.

CG: And South Asian and Caribbean and a smattering of English, white English people.

SS: I still don't want to go.

CG: Okay. We would have this kind of, you allude to it, and we're going to talk a little bit about this later, you allude to this sort of hierarchy of suffering. We would have these arguments with our Irish friends, and we'd say, "Look, we've been under the heel of the English for 400 years of slavery." And they'd say, "No, nothing. That's nothing. We've been under the heel of the English for 800 years and more." And a friend of mine who's half-Irish and half-Yoruba and I, we put on a talk the other day, and we called it, Tired of Being Black, Try Being Irish.

One of the things that I really wanted to explore, though, was what are those things that you feel proud about, or pleased about, that the English have done, in your name, even before you were alive, that has still some sort of lasting, relatively useful consequence?

SS: Yeah, I think pride and shame have no place in history. So, I wouldn't say I'm proud or ashamed or anything, but I find certain things really interesting.

CG: Such as?

SS: Like tea, I find tea is really interesting. The main reason, obviously, British people drink a lot of tea, although the Irish drink more tea than us, and the Russians do. It's because of empire. It's because the East India Company is making a fortune importing tea from China to Britain, but actually the reason Indians drink tea is also because of the British; and this is, Indians don't really understand this, in that in 1900, almost no one in India was drinking tea.

If, by 1980, almost everyone was drinking tea, it's because the British Empire decided they could make a fortune from selling tea to Indians. And actually, then you get these weird, people go crazy occasionally about the fact that Starbucks sells chai tea. I understand the phrase is annoying because it's like saying TT, right?

It's annoying. But actually, all culture is appropriation, and chai, arguably, you could argue is a British creation. Although, it's also an Indian creation in that what happened is that the British were trying to get Indians to drink tea. They didn't want to drink it in the British way; they started bringing spices into it.

The British were like, "Don't do that." it tastes terrible, and also, you're using less tea, so we're making less money. So, you could argue that chai is a rebellion against British Empire, but it's quite convoluted and it's complicated. It's not what people think it is. It's not a straightforward thing where tea is Indian.

Most of the tea growing in India now is a mixture of being Indian indigenous plants and Chinese indigenous plants. That's really interesting, I find. I'm interested by the nuance. I'm fascinated by Ganja. Not that I smoke it.

CG: We can admit it here, we're amongst friends.

SS: But, intrinsically Jamaican product, but introduced by Indian indentured labourers.

CG: Absolutely.

SS: When you think about it, of course, Ganja is an Indian word; it's a Hindi word.

CG: Ganja, yeah.

SS: Yeah, and introduced by the one million Indian indentured labourers, sent around the world to replace the enslaved. And of course you have Goat curry,

roti in Jamaica; all these things that come from Indian culture. And again, amazing how the British Empire did all this.

CG: Did you know that Queen Victoria had heavy periods and to help her with her menstruation, she was prescribed marijuana?

SS: All right.

CG: Yeah. And...

SS: It's probably a break from the cocaine that all the Victorians were taking every day.

CG: But the reason why marijuana was made illegal, is because it wasn't practical; you couldn't make it, it couldn't be put in a syringe and made voluble and squeezed into your body. So, it made those new developments in medicine redundant. So, that's why it went. Didn't go because there was any kind of moral outrage about it; it was a kind of practical solution to bring in on some other medicines. One of the interesting things about Sathnam's book is the way you divide up the chapters in an unusual way.

So, there's a big chapter called The Useful Plants, which explores how plants forged empire. Focuses on Kew Gardens and the evolution from 1841 onwards as an incubator of economic botany; developing, for example, species of

Cinchona, which would be used more effectively to yield quinine. Why is that important?

SS: Yeah, actually, this is one of those surprising things, because I think most of us know that gin and tonic is an imperial legacy, but actually it's not. I discovered in the book because there's not enough quinine in your gin and tonic to help you with malaria. It would need to be four or five times stronger.

So, if you want it to have a medicinal effect, have five, right? But yeah, so cinchona is the bark of a tree, contains quinine, which doesn't cure you of malaria, but helps you survive it. And the British spent decades trying to build Cinchona plantations, trying to perfect the technique to gain quinine.

Eventually, they did it alongside the Dutch. And you think, so what? It's just plants, right? But actually, it's because of this that Africa got colonised. Because before Quinine, the average Englishman going to, say, Mali, had a 400, was facing a 400 percent chance of mortality, which meant they would probably survive for three months.

So, they couldn't colonise. As soon as they had quinine, they could colonise a whole swathe of the planet. So, that's a plant that changed the course of the world. Tea changed the face of the world. Rubber. When we discovered rubber and we set up rubber plantations in places like British Malaya around Singapore,

that became Malaya. British Malaya became the most valuable colony for the British.

They're making wild profits from these plantations. And it actually resulted in a war that we never talk about. One of the darkest episodes of the Empire they called it the 1948 Malayan Emergency. And I love the fact about why it was called the emergency. Do you remember this? Why was it called an emergency rather than a war? For insurance reasons. Because if they called it a war, the insurers wouldn't have paid out. So, they call it an emergency, but also, that enables us to forget it ever happened because it doesn't sound like a war, does it?

CG: No.

SS: But actually it involved awful like Mau Mau levels of extreme repression.

CG: So, in a way, when you're walking around Kew Gardens, you're not really aware of that history, are you? People aren't really focusing on that.

SS: No, people, it's usually loads of Sikh aunties, because they're living near Heathrow, who have come to see the flowers.

CG: Yeah.

SS: Yeah.

CG: Have you ever done a talk at Kew Gardens? You should.

SS: I have. Yeah.

CG: Okay.

SS: It's... there's a growing desire amongst the staff there to talk about these colonial histories, but they've been caught up in the culture wars. Whenever they try to do work, they get lambasted by the *Telegraph* for being woke.

And, oh, it's only flowers. Why are you trying to bring in colonialism into flowers? And obviously, it also involved war and slavery and repression.

CG: Can you understand what the *Telegraph* is doing there and why they're doing it? This comes back to this idea of not wanting to have unpalatable truths illuminated, expressed.

I wonder though when you're... because you start the book by actually listing, in detailed ways, some of those things that people might find attractive about the legacy of Britain around the world. There's a Trafalgar Square in Barbados. Nelson's Column in Barbados. There are double decker buses; red double decker buses in Jamaica.

Were you doing it because you just generally were intrigued by that or were you actually, in some way, placating the detractors who were going to come after you?

SS: No, I think I generally I'm not I'm not someone who reads a lot of history books or haven't written that many. And I find history books quite foreboding in that they assume a lot of knowledge.

CG: Right.

SS: And they can be quite boring and unfunny. And so, I try to bring people in. I was trying to make it accessible as a subject to people in terms of relating it to their daily lives. Because this history does explain a lot of our daily lives, the stuff we've talked about.

CG: When I wrote my first history book, I had a, what I thought was a rather backhanded compliment in the Guardian. And the reviewer said the book was very readable.

SS: That's the ultimate compliment, I'd say. I think my, actually one of the people, one of the writers I most admire is... and no one ever mentions him like in a serious way, is Bill Bryson because he had such a talent. And he became more and more so that he was... he began as a comic writer. Then he started explaining really quite complicated history, complicated science in the most

accessible way. And I think that's what I want to do. I want to explain things which are very difficult.

CG: Yeah. You unpack and you distil a lot of important and heavy work and make it intelligible and readable. So, all hat hats off to you. For the book there, you have the joy of traveling to several places including India, Barbados, Mauritius, Nigeria to gather testimonies and thoughts. Can you talk us through that decision? Why those places? What were you thinking?

SS: I'm not a great traveller as a you've probably worked out, right? I don't really like leaving the house. And you know, as a kid, we never had a holiday. So my only holiday was... we had a day, one day at Weston-Super-Mare. Nice place. I recommend it.

CG: Was it a good day?

SS: It was a good day. So, and Nigeria is very difficult. Every Nigerian I know including David Olusoga told me not to go.

CG: So, we interrupt you there. Before going to Nigeria, Sathnam completed a proof of life document. What's that?

SS: Oh, yeah. So, this is if you go to a very dangerous place, you know, where there's a lot of kidnapping, there's a lot of kidnapping in Nigeria you have to tell

your loved ones, give them a question that only you can answer, so that when the kidnappers ring, they can say, oh, can you ask this proof of... my, I'm going to tell you what my proof of life question is. You should all think of one for yourselves. Mine was my coffee order, because it's so pretentious that no one could possibly, it's... I have a decaf old flat white, right? So, that's proof I'm alive.

But yeah, it's quite a good question to work out for yourself.

CG: But if you have to fill out a proof of life document, does that make you nervous about the country you're going to?

SS: Yeah, absolutely. I emailed my nieces and my editor, telling them what's going on. This was my proof of life question. And I still haven't told my mother. My mother thinks I went to France. Still haven't told her. She would probably hit me if she knew. Yeah.

CG: But were you surprised by what you learned there and was it as dangerous and as fearful a place?

SS: To be honest, it's quite scary. And actually, I've had my girlfriend's brother-in-law got kidnapped recently and David Olusoga's family has got in trouble. There's a real... it feels out of control and but it's fascinating because this country entirely created by British Empire. The word Nigeria, it was a *Times* leader writer who came up with the word randomly.

It was like, "Hey, we should call this part of the world, Nigeria." And they called it Nigeria. And the country was entirely created by British colonialists. And these are people who had never been brought together before. And then there's a civil war along that line. And obviously, but the thing I was most surprised by was how the education there, the schools that the British set up are still teaching imperial nostalgia of the kind that we've actually got rid of.

Our education is quite bad, but it's not as bad as that. So, you can then understand why someone like Kemi Badenoch, who was, I think, educated in Lagos would think that Nigerians love the empire because that's what they've been taught. So, you've got this odd situation where a decolonised country is teaching colonising material and then that person comes back and then raves about the empire.

It's mad, isn't it? You've got this insane situation where the British converted large parts of Africa to Christianity and now the most vibrant churches in London are Nigerian churches. And they want to convert British people to Christianity. So it's like, what's going on there? It's mad, isn't it?

And then there's a homosexuality where the British, where a lot of societies in India and Africa and the Caribbean had quite liberal attitudes towards homosexuality. The British introduced anti-homosexual laws, which are still in place. And now Britain is lobbying these countries to get rid of those laws and

the Africans are accusing the Westerners of trying to make everyone homosexual. It's crazy. It's like, where does it begin and end? It's such a... I find it fascinating the way it works.

CG: One of the things that intrigued me was your visit to Barbados, where there is money to be made in tourism by showing people the homes of enslavers. What was your experience there, of talking to people who worked, for instance, in those houses?

SS: Yeah, I've done slave tours of former slave plantations around the world because I really know how to have a good time. I've done it in the deep South. I was asked awkward questions at the National Trust homes I go to, and you expect it there; but to go to Barbados and go to three plantation homes and for them to barely mention slavery at each one, I was shocked.

Then I talked to one of the workers who was a young black man who, a student... who was even more upset than me, understandably. And he was... the reason he'd taken the job was to talk to people about the history and he was told not to, because basically the people coming to these houses were coming off cruise ships.

They wanted to go straight to the buffet or the rum tour. They didn't want their day ruined by thinking about slavery. They wanted to marvel at the

achievements of their white ancestors in building these Jacobean mansions in the middle of the Caribbean, but they didn't want their day wrecked. It's quite depressing that's still going on in Barbados of all places.

CG: You say of all places. Can you explain why you should say that? Because Barbados used to be called Little England, didn't it?

SS: Yeah. We forget that actually Barbados and the Caribbean in general, how much money it made the British.

It was a much more valuable colony than America. We think of America as being about, it was, it made a fortune for people like James Drax, whose, and his descendant, Richard Drax, who was, until last week, a Tory MP; whose wealth, he was the second richest MP in Parliament. His wealth coming largely from what James Drax did, which is he came up with the idea, well he nicked the idea that the Dutch were doing, which is using the enslaved to produce sugar on an industrialised basis.

And the entire society there was based on this industry, and lots of British people there, and they built another Britain. I think it's called Little Britain, was the nickname?

CG: Little England.

SS: Little England. That was it, yeah. So, you go there, and it feels very British, but there's ancient reasons for that.

CG: One of the interesting things you also talk about in your book is this idea of generational trauma or post slavery, post traumatic slavery disorder. So I've done a little bit of research in this myself and I went to Barbados, and I was struck by what would seem to be counterintuitive. A lot of the people I spoke to were educators [who] were convinced that they shouldn't teach children about slavery because it's such a negative, horrific story that it leaves you feeling really bad about yourself. And what they were doing, they said that they should talk about the entrepreneurship of the enslavers.

SS: That sounds like something Donald Trump wants to do.

CG: Yeah. That's what they were, that's what they were positing. That actually there's so much damage that can be done to people who have been the descendants of slavery, that you don't want to continue that damage by laying on the fact that they are to be considered victims.

SS: Yeah, and actually I was really struck by this. In Nigeria and Jamaica, [I] came across so many people who didn't want to talk particularly about the British Empire, and they were like, "We need to face up to our terrible politicians.

Empire ended a long time ago." There's such a lot of anger towards how politicians have not made the situation better for their people.

CG: So, you went to Mauritius Why Mauritius?

SS: Mauritius is a society entirely created by, largely created by Indian indentured labour. So, Mauritius is run by a Hindu majority now and all the politicians are Hindus. And it's because so many Hindus went there to do this work. They, and then they did quite well, and they're quite prosperous, but the enslaved community is still there too, and they, they don't have such great outcomes. It's interesting to see how slavery as a system crushed people, I think, much more than indenture. Sometimes people compare them. I don't think you can compare them.

CG: And has it led to some sort of polarization in the way that people vote then?

SS: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. And yeah, it's and they've got the Hindu majority politicians there [who] have got quite deep connections to the BJP in India. And you see how actually the Hindu nationalist movement is international. You see it in Britain, and yeah, it's a form of racism.

CG: You talked earlier about the disadvantages of being a historian who's not white and being the target of bigots. But is there a benefit to be had if you're a

person like yourself traveling in former colonies where people look like you? Do you have an advantage? Are there, do you become like a participating observer? Are you let into secrets that you wouldn't get if you weren't the kind of person that you were?

SS: Yeah. You get like weird... it's quite weird being an Indian because obviously those people speak to you. They sometimes assume you're Indian and then you can't speak Hindi very well and sometimes they think you're pretending.

Yeah, and that's quite peculiar. But the most peculiar thing is when they can tell before you've even opened your mouth that you're British. You're like, what is it? Is it my haircut? Is it my awkward manner? How can you tell? Do you get this?

CG: Yeah, man. When I was 19, I'm born here; born in the capital of Britain in Luton. And when I was 19, I went to Jamaica for the first time. And when I was growing up in Luton, I always admired the way that my father and his friends walked.

My father, the walk was just faster than slow. And I thought it was a really cool walk. And so when I was 19, I went to Jamaica for the first time by myself; I was staying in a guest house. And every day I walked to the market, and I'd pass the...

the higgler. Do you know what a higgler is? That's a street seller. They had what they call a 'bend down' market.

A market, a bend down market is someone puts a cloth on the floor, all the wares on the cloth, you bend down to pick it up. That's a bend down market. Every time I passed this higgler, he'd shout out to me, "Hey, Hinglishman! Hinglishman! Hinglishman!" So, I just would ignore him and eventually after about five days, I said to him, "What makes you think I'm English?"

He says, "You walk like an Englishman." whether you're of some other culture, but you're here, you've actually been brought up here to gesture, to speak like a person from this country. So, I'm not surprised, really... [continued]

SS: Yeah.

CG: [continuation]... that you're mistaken for who you really are.

SS: Yeah. Yeah. No, it happens a lot, and it's, yeah, it's confusing. It's confusing for everyone, not least me.

CG: How does the book fit into, this is a rather long question, how does the book fit into the world of literature, which is tackling these difficult subjects of talking honestly about some of the darker, more shameful aspects of British history? Incidentally, we think these are modern critiques. But, for instance, on

the 27th of July 1959, Enoch Powell delivered a speech in the Commons about the Hola camp in Kenya, where 11 Mau Mau were killed after refusing to work in the camp.

Powell was appalled and argued, "We cannot, we dare not, in Africa of all places, fall below our highest standards in the acceptance of responsibility." So, the debate's been going on for a while, but more recently I'm thinking of books like Corinne Fowler's *Our Island Stories* and Nick Rankin's *Trapped in History*.

So, how does your book, do you think, fit into these ways, which why we are interrogating some of these more unpalatable truths?

SS: I guess I see it more in relation to Neil Ferguson's books and Jeremy Paxman's book. Because Neil Ferguson's book was massive, and it really had a massive influence on Michael Gove who then hired Ferguson as an educational advisor.

And Jan Morris' books; she wrote a trilogy on the British Empire which had huge influence upon very specifically Tories who went to Eton, who then inflicted their imperial nostalgia upon Britain. And the thing is, I can read Neil's and Jan Morris's books and be okay with them. I disagree with them, but they're not factually incorrect.

They acknowledge the horror of slavery. They observe the Tasmanian genocide, but what you've got now is imperial nostalgia. I'm not going to name the writer, but you can probably guess who it is, that goes way beyond that cherry picks evidence that denies the Tasmanian genocide, which both Jan and Neil didn't do.

And it goes, it's just, it's much more extreme than Neil or Jan Morris or even Enoch Powell ever was. So, this is what the, that's what the cultural war has done. It's taken us into such dark territory that even these people didn't really go into. And I think Neil's book is okay. I agree the conclusion's mad, but historically, there's no factual errors in it; whereas I could point out many factual errors in modern imperial nostalgia.

CG: You've answered this, but let's have another go. Are we, I've written down, are we still...

SS: By the way, I think the clock has frozen. Has it? No, that's the time now, isn't it?

CG: Yeah, that's the time now.

SS: I thought it was a countdown. Oh, ignore me. Carry on. I was like, "15 minutes left?"

CG: Are we still trapped in history, which is the phrase James Baldwin first coined in *The Fire Next Time* in this country, or have we wiggled free?

SS: No, I think we've still got lots of work to do, clearly. I'm feeling a bit more optimistic because I feel like the culture war... it's quite something. You expect to be trolled and stuff, but to have government ministers egging these people on was really depressing. To have you know, Boris Johnson in the middle of a pandemic taking time out to say, "I am going to protect the statue of Winston Churchill with my last breath", you know, when people were actually dying of their last breath because he wasn't doing his job properly, you know? And the statue was not under any threat. And when Oliver Dowden the culture secretary said he was going to chain himself to the statue of Nelson to stop it being torn down, and it's, "Go ahead, mate. Feel free."

CG: Nelson's Column?

SS: Yeah, he was like, he was going to climb up and chain himself because he wanted to create the idea that the woke wanted to tear it down. No one serious wanted to tear down the statue of Nelson, but they want to create the point about culture wars, if you go into the history of the culture wars, which go back to Germany, is that they never end.

You want to create a never-ending sense of grievance, which they've been very successful at; which is what the right-wing press will do. But I do feel hopeful but Keir Starmer speaking out in defence of the National Trust, Lisa Nandy, the new cultural secretary, saying that there's going to be no more culture wars.

I feel positive about that, but equally I know what the right-wing culture wars will say. They say they are the culture warriors for saying that. Because it's in the eye of the beholder, isn't it? Who, who the terrorist or who the culture warrior is. And so, I feel they're going to be with us, but at least the government is not going to be endorsing them. So, I feel like we're moving on in one respect.

CG: Aren't you encouraged by the people here then?

SS: I can't see them.

CG: But they are out there, and there are several hundred out there, and they paid good money to come and listen to you. So, it's the sense that there is an audience that is receptive to what you're writing.

SS: Yeah, absolutely. And yeah, the books have done well. And it's amazing going to schools and I get so many letters all the time from students saying they now want to study history because of *Empireland*. And I always say to them, look, often they write because they're applying for university.

And I say, "Look, if you're going to go to a university interview, don't go in saying you've been inspired by my book because, or if you do go in and be prepared to tell them what the problems are with my book, because history is argument, and they want to see evidence of critical thinking." And the nature of history is such that in 10, 20 years, there will be a book out explaining why I'm totally wrong, but that's as it should be. I hope I don't react in the way that some historians do, where they go mental and, they decide that their version is the only version that can only possibly exist.

CG: I think you're quite a sanguine fellow. I think you'll be okay. And I'd really like you to put your hands together to applaud, and to celebrate, and to welcome into your hearts, and to think about going and sharing the love when he signs your book. Sathnam Sanghera.

SS: Thank you, Colin. Thanks very much. [Audience applause]

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

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