WRITERS MOSAIC

Kit De Waal

In Conversation with Colin Grant

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>
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[Music]

Colin Grant (CG): This is *WritersMosaic, In Conversation*, and I'm Colin Grant. I'll be talking with a novelist, short story writer, and essayist, Kit De Waal, about her latest novel, *The Best of Everything*.

[Music]

Kit De Waal (KDW): My name is Kit De Waal, and I'm sitting in my office, which is in Leamington Spa, which is a little spa town in the middle of the country, in every way. And my latest novel is called *The Best of Everything*. And it's—I think it's my third or fourth novel, can't remember.

CG: Great. Well, I thoroughly enjoyed it. As you know, I reviewed the book for The Guardian. And I was touched by it because it reminded me of so many of the people that surround my life, which I'll explain as we go along. But can we begin by asking you about the origins of the story? I know that we all, as writers, we have many stories circulating, and sometimes they're like planets, they come into orbit at the right time. So why was it the right time for you to write this book, *The Best of Everything*?

KDW: Well, actually, I was—I had written another book, and it had six characters in it. Paulette was one, she was so minor, so minor, so on the edge. And when I had finished the book, it was not right, and I knew it was not right. It was unbalanced. And the reason it was unbalanced is because there were too many characters fighting for centre stage. And believe it or not, for such an ordinary person, Paulette was one of the people that was more or less saying, ‘What about me? What about my story?’, because she had quite a minor role in this one. So I finished it completely. It was like 80,000 words. And I just thought, *that is not the story*. The story is Paulette and the baby, at the time, that became a main character in Paulette's novel. He was a baby at the time, and Paulette was a nurse. And I knew it was them two. I just knew it was them two. So I had to start again and literally write it again.

CG: Wow, that's brave, because I think as writers, we like to hold on to things that we've invested in. So was it difficult to let go of the previous?

KDW: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. It was not like, *oh, I'll just rewrite it.* You know how many months, years you put into a book. It just didn't feel good. The first book didn't feel good. And the maxim I live by is if I let something out into the world, I have to love it. I don't have to just think, *oh, I quite like it*. I have to feel like I want to shout about it and I'm proud of it, I wouldn't take it back and change it. And I knew that book was not the thing. And I also knew that Paulette was the character that spoke to me the most. She was—I can't tell you how many Paulettes I know. Do you know what I mean? I grew up with Paulette a gogo. And so it was like, yeah, I have to do justice to this woman. And it was hard. It took a long time. But also, I say it took a long time, but also, it was easy because I knew her voice, I knew her diction, I knew what she wanted, I knew the story, so it was literally just bombing chair time as opposed to thinking time.

CG: Yeah, Paulette seemed very familiar to me as well, growing up in a Caribbean household in Luton. I wonder to begin with, if we could go to the beginning, 1972, if you could read just the first page and over the line to the second page?

KDW: Yes. Yes.

CG: So this is an introduction to the book, and it gives us an introduction to Paulette.

[KDW reads from *The Best of Everything*]

‘Midnight. Paulette is still awake. A thin, freezing wind slips through an inch of open window and makes the curtains dance. When the room is cool, Denton sleeps heavy and won’t feel the weight of her head on his chest or the leg she drapes over his, running the sole of her foot from his knee to his ankle. She pulls one of his arms around her shoulders like a fur stole and nestles in. Skin on skin. The smell of Denton is pure man – sweat, soap and sex.

Bonfire Night come Saturday. Paulette’s going to ask Denton if they can go to the big display in town and watch the rockets and Catherine wheels making patterns in the sky. They could eat candyfloss and toffee apples and mingle with the crowd. He could wear the good leather driving gloves she got him last week. The thing is, Denton never likes to make plans too far in advance, says he doesn’t know his shifts and he doesn’t like to let her down at the last minute. There again, Saturday is only three days away, so Paulette is hoping. She feels a warm slick of sweat run off her breast and, suddenly, she’s too hot. She doesn’t sleep so good when Denton stays over because the man takes up more than his own half of the bed, and anyway, she likes to make the most of their time together.’

CG: Thank you very much. So Paulette, the main character, the protagonist, is unashamedly in love with Denton, isn't she?

KDW: Yes.

CG: And I was struck by that unguardedness she has. When I was researching for this interview, I came across an interview where you talked about the fact that you sometimes create a playlist for the mood of the book or the mood of the story that you're writing. What songs or is there a song that conjures Paulette for you or the mood of the book?

KDW: Well, it was *Caught You In A Lie* by Louisa Marks was the one where—her heartbreak, her heartbreak. And also, just that 1970s reggae that really wasn't reggae, it was more like ska or—do you know what I mean? Early, early reggae. I don't remember, I've got to say. But it was the times that I wanted, the innocence of the times. This is so pre mobile phones, it's a joke. There's a phone chained to the wall, as my son said, 'Why do you chain the phone to the wall?' And when you made an arrangement with someone, you made an arrangement with someone. You couldn't ring up and change. We didn't, in my family, we didn't get a phone till I was 14. You didn't have a phone. You went to the end of the road and used the phone box. So the music that I associate with that time was Johnny Nash. My dad used to listen to Johnny Nash. Old-school, old-time reggae. So some of that was in there. The rest of the stuff that was in the playlist was really—so I call it a register. The music I listen to has the register, not necessarily the words or the style, but it has the register of heartache. And it's that register that I wanted. And one of them is a song by Coldplay called—I think it's called *Clouds* or something like that. Anyway, beautiful. The words are nothing to do with this, but the register of the song is one of —catches you there. And I used to listen to the playlist, and then I'd be in the mood

to write. I can't have it on while I'm writing, but it can get me ready to access that emotion.

CG: Now, it's difficult to talk about this book without giving some things away. I won't give everything away, but there's an animating moment early on in the book because it's clear that Paulette doesn't know fully the backstory of Denton, does she?

KDW: That's right. Without giving too much away, she's madly in love. And she also believes that this is the man that she will have children with. Paulette's desires are humble. She wants a nice house. She wants a baby. She wants a man. She would like a wedding with a nice blush coloured dress. Do you know what I mean? She's not, *I want to win the lottery.* She wouldn't care if she never learned to drive. She just wants the normal things that are really quite in reach. And she thinks that's, *what I want, and Denton is the route for them,* because she loves him. And her love makes her naive and makes her believe him, lets her believe him. And that wholesale investment in Denton is what leads her to heartbreak.

CG: As we were saying earlier, you say there are many Paulettes in your life. When I was reading your book, Kit, I thought, *this is my mum. This is my sisters. This is my daughters, in a way*. There's an underlying kindness about her. Sometimes you might say a little bit of a guilelessness about her. But she's an innocent who wants to bring out the best in people, doesn't she?

KDW: Yes. And she wants to believe the best of people. And that very common Christian upbringing, whether you subscribe to the Christian way of life or not, it goes

deep in Caribbean communities, that sense of, *you don't do that, you don't do this*. Now, you might do it, but you have that sense of, *oh, that wasn't right*. Or even if you don't any longer believe in Christianity and God, you've got this rootedness in the morality of good and bad, right and wrong, righteousness, that is so much a part of the Caribbean, UK and in the Caribbean, experience. Very hard to walk away from. Very hard to just dismiss wholesale because it gets into the DNA of many, many people.

CG: Now, I know the answer to this question, but I'm going to ask you just because we can explore it for the listeners. Why does Paulette come from St. Kitts?

KDW: Yes. She comes from St. Kitts because I come from St. Kitts and because my dad comes from St. Kitts. And it's a different experience from coming from Jamaica, the kick-ass island. It's not Barbados, the English island, as I call it. It's a small, humble place. I mean, forget the tourist bit. It's a small, humble place where Paulette completely fits in. It's a different experience to come from a small island. Certainly, in the ‘70s, it was unknown in terms of tourism. It wasn't one of the places that people went to. It's changed now. So I put her there because I know it. I haven't, believe it or not, I haven't been, but my God, I feel like I know it. I know that place good from my dad. He never shut up about it. He would describe the geography; he would describe the high street; he would describe the houses. It was—he never settled here. Never. That was home. My dad would never say, ‘I'm going home’, meaning England or even the house we lived in. That's where we lived; that was not home. And so I grew up with that very strong presence of St. Kitts in my life.

CG: Yes, I'm an honorary Kittitian because a few years ago, I went to Leeds to do an oral history of the Leeds West Indian Carnival. And the Leeds West Indian Carnival was started by Kittitian.

KDW: Oh, wow.

CG: One of the things that intrigued me was where Caribbean people ended up. So a lot of Kittitians ended up in Leeds, partly because that's where their people went, and you go where you can find people who are familiar to you.

CG: Yes. Sorry, my dad's best friends lived in Leeds. So there was Stomp. Everyone's got a name. Stomp, Judas, Sugar, Maynard, they all lived in Leeds. And every year, my dad went to the carnival there.

CG: Oh, interesting. Interesting. What I loved about your book was moving on the story from the first generation of migrants who arrive to exploring the idea that, actually, home for the second generation is Britain. They may have an umbilical cord to the Caribbean, but that's thinning, isn't it? And that comes through, I think, in your writing as well. Were you keen to explore that as well, to show that this might be embedded in the Windrush—so-called Windrush generation, sorry—but it's a propulsion forward from that, isn't it?

KWD: Yes. And it's the sense that Paulette stayed when—so Paulette came over with her grandmother when she was a young woman, and she stayed when the grandmother went back. And she did make her life here, and not easily. Her life here

—she learned how to have an English accent. Even though she had the cadence of the Caribbean, she had an English accent, and she learned it because she was tired of being made fun of. And I've got an older brother who was born in St. Kitts and came over here when he was 12. And when he came, we didn't know anything about him. Literally knocks the door, and *wow, we've got a brother from St. Kitts.* And We used to get him to talk. So, 'Say this, say that, say this.' And we're just fascinated by this young boy with a West Indian accent. So I transferred that experience in a not so pleasant way because we loved my brother, and so if you don't have someone that loves you making fun of your accent, that's different. And that really was the beginning, for Paulette, of taking a back step, keep your mouth shut, keep quiet, don't get involved, and then you can't be made fun of. And it soon transposes into her personality.

CG: When I was reading the book, Kit, I was wondering, because I know she has a very strong relationship with her grandmother, I was wondering whether she was a barrel child. Do you know the concept of the barrel child? In the Caribbean, the parents come by themselves, they leave the child in the care of the grandparent, and the grandparent brings up the child. Twice a year, the parents in England will send barrels back with clothes and presents. So it's a solitary existence [inaudible] you feel about it, I suppose.

KDW: Yes. For Paulette, I wanted her to be wedded to her grandmother. I didn't want the parent interposing between that relationship. So for Paulette, her mother, who's a single parent, died of diabetes when Paulette was a child. So she was just brought up by her grandmother. And Paulette never even knew her mother. And that

increases her sense, certainly when her grandmother dies, increases the sense that she wants to recapture that home, that love that she had, she wants to give it, she wants to spread it because it was so good for her.

CG: Now, that word ‘good’ is central to the book, isn't it? I mean, this is a book, at its heart, about the power of kindness, which is a difficult sale to make, isn't it? How tricky was that for you?

KDW: I had no idea I was writing a book about kindness. I didn't sit down and think, *this is a book about kindness*. I knew it was a book about Paulette's love for someone that she doesn't have to love. And that was very, very much my childhood with my mother, who was a foster carer, who was a childminder. We had kids running in and out of our houses, some of whom we loved, some of whom we didn't. And I knew, having adopted children, I know the possibility of a deep, deep connection with someone you don't share blood with, you may not even share childhood with, you just have this thing. Whatever that thing is, I don't know, but it's deeper than love. And that's one type of love. And then the other type of love is kindness, and it's a softer love, but it's an active thing. Kindness isn't something you sit back and think about. It's an active, doing word. And I knew that because of who Paulette was, she was not going to be able to step back. She was not going to be able to say, ‘Oh, nothing to do with me.’ She was going to have to say, ‘I'm driven to get involved here.’ And it turns out to be a book about kindness.

CG: And that's very clear when there's an incident where a man, Frank, presents her with his grandchild and more or less asks her to unofficially adopt him, doesn’t he?

KDW: Yes. And she—initially, she's like, What? You don't be ridiculous.' She goes home and she's vexed, like, *what are you talking about adopt?* And then she starts thinking, *well, if I don't, what's going to happen? This man's clearly giving away his child today, so what is going to happen to him?* And that drives her to action. And that is against all proprietary, against every reason she has to dislike this man, she overlooks the man, and she looks at the child, she overlooks how the child got there, and she thinks, *that's an innocent child. Whatever the circumstances, whoever brought him up, whoever birthed him, that child's innocent.* And that sense for Paulette, certainly who loves children, is the driver for her. Let's look at the here and now, not the how did it get here.

CG: Now, I hate it when interviewers bring up other books that may not be familiar to the person they're talking to, but for me, when I was reading your book, it took me back to when I was 19, and I came across a book by a woman called Carson McCullers, called *Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*. There's something about that central character, Paulette, it's sacrificial. She's doing things for others but not really paying attention to her own needs.

KDW: Yes. That's one of my favourite books. I absolutely love it. That's a book with heart. I mean, that is a book with—it's devastating in its simplicity and the message in that book. I would say everyone should read it. It's way ahead of its time in terms of the issues that she addresses in that book as well. And yes, it's definitely something where you, when you have finished that type of book, and when you have finished a book that gets in, it leaves you slightly changed about the world. It moves

you in a way. And yeah, I mean, if I could be half as good as Carson McCullers, I'd be very, very happy

CG: You're more than half as good as Carson McCullers because your book has lodged itself in my heart, actually, and made me think about my friends and relations and maybe not paying enough attention to my siblings now that my mother's passed and what role I should play. So all those things came up in the course of reading your book. So I was really delighted to have that experience, so thank you very much for that. One thing I did notice also is the way that you—there is violence in the book, but it's more or less off stage. Yes. And that's purposeful.

KDW: Yes, absolutely. I didn't want it to be—sometimes books can turn on massive, massive, shocking, explosive events. For most of us, that's not our experience of life. We might have one or two shocking big events in our entire life, but most of us, our lives turn on small things, chance encounters, words overheard, a quietly broken heart, a devastating piece of news that doesn't mean anything to anyone else. And I very much wanted Paulette's world to turn on the things that are small. There's an event where her son goes to America, and her friend goes, ‘Wow, that's great.’ And she's like, ‘No, it isn't.’ Because it looks so good to everybody else, and yet, those really small incidents in our lives can break us. And it's hard to explain sometimes to somebody that hasn't felt it or had it. And I very much wanted that to be Paulette's experience that again, overlooked, again, not taken seriously, again, no one's looking and walking in Paulette's shoes.

CG: Another thing that really resonated with me was the friend, the neighbour, the Irish neighbour. So I'm sure this is true of you, maybe not so true of you as it was for me, but when I grew up in Luton in a Caribbean household, all of my friends were Flynns, O'Loughlins, Dunnes, O'Hearnes, Glynns. And there was an allegiance between the Irish and the Caribbean people. And that comes through in your book as well. Was that evident in your own upbringing?

KDW: Oh, yes. Yes, my mum's from Wexford, so again, I made the woman from Wexford. And exactly as you say, the Irish and the Caribbean experience is so mirrored, certainly in the '50s, when my parents both came over as immigrants. It was extremely poor, usually, my experience. You're poor, you're an outsider, you're look down on by the English, you're probably going to live in the same lodging house at least temporarily, my parents did, and you want the basic—you've come for a better life. You've come for the basics of the better life. If you can make some money, that's great, but you've actually come to not starve. Both of my parents came to have a house like Paulette, to have children. They both came to go home as well. Neither of my parents came and thought, *oh, I'm going to stay in England till I die*. The notion from my father that he would die in England was horrendous. And he did, and he never, never wanted that. And so that experience of being the outsider, being the immigrant, and having to mold yourself and sacrifice things just to live in England, to use a different vocabulary, to use a different way of being, to go home, and no, your children don't fit in and don't want to be there because you've raised English children, that's such a similar experience. Also, just the love of a good time. Both sides of my family, they experienced a good time in the same way. An Irish wake and a West Indian wake, it's the same event.

CG: But the Irish characters are a counterpoint to Paulette, isn't she, because she's much more open and voluble, whereas Paulette's quieter? And as you say, she's reserved, isn't she, Paulette?

KDW: Yes, she's very reserved. And Maggie, the Irish next-door neighbour, she's like, 'Let's go. I'm here. Let's go. What are we doing? Let's have a drink. Let's go out. Let's have a man. If you want a man, get a man.' She's really—she's worked out a way of being that she gets what she wants and takes no prisoners, and Paulette is the opposite. Paulette's almost waiting for someone to notice her and love her, and Maggie's like, 'I'm not waiting for someone. I'm going to get—I'm going out there.' They are very, very different women.

CG: Absolutely. I love the way that you were able to be faithful to the nuances of language because that's sometimes the battle that writers of colour have to fight with the publishers, don't they?

KDW: Yes, they do. And I can remember, the first book—so if you're from Birmingham, for a start, you never say M-U-M, mum. It's M-O-M. Nobody in Birmingham says 'mum', that's for posh people. We don't say it. And so my first novel, *My Name is Leon*, the proofreader went through, and she was like, 'Oh, you're using the American spelling.' I said, 'Leave it alone. Leave it alone.' And any West Indian person there is—and Irish—the words might be English, but the sentence structure is different. It's a different sentence structure. And there were a couple of occasions where the proofreader said, 'Do you mean this?' I went, 'No, I mean that,

leave it alone', because any black person reading this book is going to know with the ear what that sounds like, and if you change it, it just becomes a different beast. So yeah, I was absolutely wedded to the fact that Paulette was going to sound like a woman from the Caribbean, of that age and that class.

CG: And I quote you in my review saying that often when you think about writing about working-class lives, the writing is written 'in celebration and not apology.' Can you unpick that? What do you mean by that?

KDW: What I mean by that is not everybody wants to go skiing, and not everybody wants to have the middle-class experience. There is an idea, I believe, in middle-class lives that, *oh, you want to be like us, if only you could have what we have.* Thus, denigrating the richness, the beauty, the complexity, the solidarity of the working-class experience. I am so glad I—we weren't even working class. Let me tell you, we were subclass. But let's say it's working class for the sake of it. I'm so glad I had the experience. I understand. I have empathy. I have an understanding of having nothing. I am grateful for what I do have. I am able to have solidarity with lots of people that struggle in different ways. And even if you forget empathy, the joy, the joy. I remember reading this, it was in *Common People,* and it was this woman saying, 'My tower block saved my life.' And it's because she would come home, and her mother worked really, really hard, and she would come home, and sometimes without knowing it, her mother wasn't in, and there was a note on the door, and the note would say, 'Jean, number 14.' And it meant that Jean at number 14, five rows down, five floors down, was going to have you that day. It might say, 'Brian, 17'. It might say, 'Margaret, 14'. Whatever it was, she said, 'I felt held by my tower block. I

could eat. I knew where to run for help. I knew who would help me. I can play in 25 different houses.' She said that was a world and a community of joy. That's not the message that we get from tower blocks. It's like, *you've got to get out of the tower block.* Well, for some people, that's a very, very good place to be. And I think we don't—maybe we do, as working class people, celebrate it, but not vocally enough, and certainly it's not celebrated if you're not working class. So I wanted this, certainly *Common People* and for all working-class lives, I think we should celebrate where we come from, own it, love it and talk about the joy of it, not, 'Oh yeah, of course we were hungry.' Of course we were hungry. 'We didn't have the right clothes.' That's okay. That's okay. The other things are way more important.

CG: Yeah, that comes across in your wonderful memoir with this brilliant title, *Without Warning and Only Sometimes*. There's a scene in that where you go around to a girlfriend's house, and the mother's presenting this lovely tray of food and sandwiches, and your friend shoos her away, she doesn't want that, but you haven't eaten all day.

KDW: [Laughs] It happened all the time. And in fact, for the launch of this book, that same friend came. I've known her now for 60 years. And we talk about it all the time because she was so—I mean, she wasn't spoiled, but my God, she had everything. Middle class white girl. She had everything, six Barbies, and her own bedroom, and all this. And she's like, 'I'm going to eat later.' I'm not going to eat later. Get the tray in here with the cake on it. And it was very, very, very different experience. She was lovely. She was a great girl.

CG: A lot of writing depends on empathy, doesn't it?

KDW: Yes.

CG: I think you have enormous empathy. And again, I heard an interview you did where you talked about the fact that you like to come in second. Can you explore—explain what you mean by that?

KDW: Do you know, second is so good. I don't know why people don't understand second. It's the best. So what you get from second is some of the glory, some of the attention, but you don't—your face isn't there, you're not getting the questions, you don't get the limelight. I'm not keen on the limelight. Second is so sweet. I've come second in quite a few competitions, and I'm like, *yeah, man, I can live there. I can live there.* I feel it's a good place for me. I'm a second child. And it's just good. I feel like someone else is breaking ground, and someone else gets the attention, and I can have just that bit of anonymity, just that bit. No one remembers second, no one remembers second, no one remembers second at the Olympics. Second, I don't know. And that's what I quite like, that ability to hide, but also be appreciated if you're second at a competition. Second is good.

CG: Yeah, I'm with you on that. I used to play basketball a lot when I was at school. And I went to a school run by American monks, so we have a very good basketball team. We often won. And I could never really enjoy winning because I always felt empathy for the losers. And in a funny way, I'd much rather be on the losing side than the winning side.

KDW: Yes, there's something about that. There's something about having participated and enjoyed it. I also used to play—there's five children, and we used to play Monopoly. And we would play Monopoly, four of us, because one was too young, but we'd play Monopoly, and my sister or brother would go around, and they get stung by some tax bill or whatever, and they didn't have the money. And I used to say, 'I'll give it you.' And my other sister used to say, 'That's not the game. They have to be bankrupt.' I'm like, 'But why do they have to be bankrupt?' No one would play with me because I just give away my money or like, 'Let's join in, and we can buy some houses and Mayfair.' And the others used to go mental, like, 'Let's stop it.' But I just thought, *well, let's all play.* You know what I mean? I don't want anyone to be bankrupt.

CG: Well, I think you've given us—last question, by the way. I think you've given us everything in the best of everything. I think it's a wonderful book. And just to spool back briefly to the beginning of this conversation, where you said that you wrote a book which is like a rehearsal. So when did you feel that you had landed this book, that it was what you wanted to write?

KDW: It was a particular scene, which I won't talk about, and I just thought, *yeah, man, that's it*. I knew—you'll know as a writer, there's sometimes where you feel like the key has just turned and it's like unlocked the pure story, and it was about two thirds of the way through. Before that, I was like, *is this going to work?* And then I found the place [music] where I just thought, *yeah, this is this has been unlocked.* And it was very easy then to finish it because I knew what was going to happen.

[Music]

CG: And I don't want to drift into hyperbole, but I must say this is a fantastic book, and hats off to you. It's been a delight reading it, and it's been a delight talking to you as well. So, Kit, thank you very much.

[Music]

KDW: Thank you so much for inviting me.

[Music]

CG: I was in conversation with the novelist, Kit De Waal. To hear more writers, go to writersmosaic.org.uk

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Kit De Waal was in conversation with Colin Grant

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