WRITERS MOSAIC

Candy Gourlay

In Conversation with Sita Brahmachari

> 'Oh and I just remembered something else! The papers say you Igorots eat dog for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Dog? How can you pet the creature one moment and then roast it over a fire the next? Is that true?'
>
> — Candy Gourlay

[Music]

Presenter: This is *WritersMosaic, In Conversation*. Sita Brahmachari talks to Candy Gourlay about her novels for young people.

[Music]

Candy Gourlay (CG): One of the most important things I learned when I became an author was the idea of the ordinary world. It's the world where your hero lives before he goes on the adventure. And it's an ordinary world, meaning it's so ordinary that the hero doesn't notice anything odd about it, whether they lived in space or in a dictatorship. So I grew up in a dictatorship, but I didn't really know that that was extraordinary. We went to the supermarket. We listened to music. It was the 1970s. There was a lot of original Filipino music being created. And the dictatorship, as a lot of dictatorships do, had a lot of cultural—explosive cultural events that made you proud to belong to that society. And what I didn't know was behind the scenes, I had a lot of relatives who were being put in prison, some were killed. I just had no idea. I had no idea about the political repression. I was used to having just three newspapers. I don't remember, but there were very, very few TV channels. And regularly, we only had the president on TV, lecturing endlessly about boring things. So that was ordinary to me. And it was only quite close to the revolution, when I was in university, that I discovered that there was another world that existed side by side with that ordinary world I lived in.

Sita Brahmachari (SB): So your school days were the carefree school days of the children that you describe in *Wild Song* and *Bone Talk*? You have an amazing sense of a connection to the landscape. So that was your childhood?

CG: Well, my childhood was not in a landscape like *Bone Talk*, really, because I lived in an urban jungle. And the Philippines is very poor, so one of the things that were ordinary to me were people with no shoes, poverty, people begging at your car window. These were all really, really normal stuff. And in my books, I actually visit a world that no longer exists in a lot of the Philippines, which I had to recreate for myself.

SB: Which you weren't aware of in your school curriculum. It was never taught to you in your school curriculum. What were you taught?

CG: Bizarrely, our school curriculum dwelt on only certain parts of our history. So for example, the Philippines was occupied 300 years by Spain, 50 years by the United States, I think five years by Japan. And our history lessons only covered the 300 years with Spain, and maybe the American occupation was maybe a week, two weeks of lessons. Because our school books, of course, were written by the colonial forces, so we didn't really—I was taught a very different reality to what I discovered later on. And a lot of my books are actually me filling myself in on what really happened. My two books are set in the Philippine-American War, which was never taught to me properly in school.

SB: So the gaps in the history are what you've actually ended up writing about in your stories, the hidden histories.

CG: Yes.

SB: I'm interested to know what your process of writing those books—the research process of writing those books are. And I know that you've been to the Philippines with these books, and I'm really interested to know that when you go back to the Philippines, what the reception of these books have been. But I'm also interested to know how you actually found—came across the research for these stories.

CG: It's really funny because, actually, the stories always begin with me cluelessly discovering something, something really random. I was helping write an anthology of writing by Filipino migrants to London. And then I thought, *oh, wouldn't it be cool if there was an introduction that talked about the Filipino diaspora?* So I started to research. This was slightly when Google had only just—Google wasn't the Google that we know now, so the information was patchy. And I found a photograph of Filipinos at the Saint Louis World Fair. And one photograph was of a boy in a G-string, half naked, dancing with an Edwardian woman, dressed in that fashion that they had in those days, the pigeon profile, where the women had—wore these corsets that made them look shaped like birds. And I thought that was so curious.

What was this boy doing dancing with an Edwardian woman when, in those days, it was really immoral to be half naked, much less holding hands—he was holding hands with this woman? And I then did a very, very cursory research—there was not that much information online—and discovered the story of the Saint Louis World Fair. And it was an astonishing story. So when you first—in those days, this was in the 2000s—when you searched the World Fair, you just got these things, like ice cream was invented there, the hot dog was invented there, the first—this massive Ferris wheel, all these incredible things, the first incubators for babies were demonstrated there, the first—it sounded like this incredible space. And I thought, *that's a great opportunity. If Filipinos were at the World Fair, I could have a Filipino character, who comes to the World Fair and discovers this incredible magical place and all of the technology, the new technology of 1904*. So I started to research the story, and oh my God, I had no idea [laughs]. It wasn't what I thought it was.

SB: How long is that process to go from the research to then imagining the spaces between? What is that?

CG: Well, I started writing immediately. So I actually have chapters telling the story of a little boy discovering the invention of the ice cream cones—were invented at the World Fair. So I was writing funny chapters, middle grade, quite a young voice, amazement at the Ferris wheel. And so I'd written this stuff, and then I started to

research it, and I discovered the deep, deep colonial roots of the fair, that it was the moment when the United States announced to the world that they were now an imperial power. It was just a few years after the United States had invaded Puerto Rico, Guam, Cuba, and the Philippines. And they had wanted to become an empire, and now they were. And that World Fair was a declaration: 'This is who we are now'. And the whole fair was designed to show that off. But when I discovered all of these things about the fair, I realised I just couldn't write that book yet. I wasn't ready. I didn't understand the history behind it. I needed time. This was in the 2000s. So my earliest chapters are in 2004. I found them recently, and I was like, *I can't believe this was where I started.* So I wrote other novels, and in the intervening years, I read up and read up and read. And to this day, I'm still researching the World Fair.

SB: It's a lifelong journey that, isn't it, to repopulate history with the stories that are absent. And actually, shall we hear a little bit from those stories, either *Wild Song* or *Bone Talk*, because I think they really steep us in the world of that time and also the legacies—we'll talk a bit more about your journalism work as well—but the legacies in today's world are very clear to see.

CG: Well, I'd like to read from the moment when—so in *Wild Song*, my characters decide to go to America. They're invited to go to America. They don't know what awaits them there, but they have to take this 30-day boat journey across the Pacific

Ocean. And this is the moment just before they see the United States for the first time from the ship. And my character is a young girl, who goes to the World Fair, agrees to go to the World Fair, because she hates the way she's being treated by older people, and she wants to be something else, but she doesn't know what. And this is her standing on the ship and looking out onto the ocean.

[CG reads from *Wild Song*]

> 'One early evening, when the moon was already casting a yellow ripple in the ocean swell, I heard a low wail. It wasn't human, I was sure of it. Then there it was again. Deeper this time. Then I felt it, a humming. It was in the ocean. It was in the air. It travelled through the cold metal of the rail and into my fingers. And then I could feel it coursing in my blood. The ocean was singing.
>
> And then, slowly beneath the waves, something moved. I leaned out, out, across the rail, not caring that the icy spray was needling me.
>
> A shadow pressed up against the surface. The water began to cascade around it like a waterfall.
>
> A great eye opened, the iris glistening and grey around a massive black pupil.
>
> The ocean looked at me.

It was an eye that had seen many things, that knew the answer to many mysteries. If the ancients had been here, they would have known what to say.

I swallowed. 'Ocean, what do you know?' I whispered. 'What awaits me in America?' My knuckles shone white on the rail.

For a moment, I thought I saw a spark, a tiny flash of light in that massive eye.

But then the lid pulled down. The waters swirled inwards. The ocean looked away and though I listened hard, I could no longer hear its song.'

SB: So beautiful. And I believe that you were—you just finished university, and then you began work as a journalist.

CG: That's right. So I was studying—so my degree was called Communication Arts. That meant we did TV, movies, we did radio, we did anything to do with media. I wanted to do fine arts, but then I thought I didn't want to take a vow of poverty [laughs], so I thought media. I love TV. I love radio. I thought I would become a film director or a screenwriter.

SB: You still are a bit of a photographer.

CG: Oh, I'm a compulsive documenter. I do it in comics and in photography. But those years, in 1984, there was an opposition politician who came back to the Philippines after exile, hoping to challenge Marcos, our dictator. And on the plane, he was met—so the plane landed, and the plane was boarded by soldiers. And the soldiers marched him down the stairway from the plane. And on the stairway, he was shot. And the soldiers claimed that a communist gunman suddenly darted out from nowhere and shot him, and they killed the communist gunman. But you could hear—so in the recording—so there were people recording. During the whole time, you could hear voices shouting, 'Shoot him. Shoot him.' The soldiers were shouting to each other, 'Shoot him. Shoot him.' And that was the first story that I had to cover. I was still a student when the assassination happened, and I was doing—I happened to be doing a journalism—a run of journalism in my course. And my teacher was connected with NBC, the American broadcasting company. And he asked me to become—he asked for volunteers to become gophers. I'd run around with a bag, collecting these videotapes from camera point to camera point. And that was when they were covering the funeral of the assassinated senator. And when I went out there and saw all these people weeping, a million people on the streets, and I witnessed, as I was running around collecting these things, I saw the fervor and the anger and the grief and people who had experienced so much that I had nothing, I knew nothing about, it really intrigued me.

SB: Your protagonists are very courageous children.

CG: You can be courageous if you're totally clueless. [SB laughs] And I think this is how I felt when I became a journalist. So I became a journalist. When I graduated, I got a job on a paper the day after my graduation ceremony. And I felt completely clueless. I could not understand what was going on.

SB: And the particular colonial experience that the Philippines experienced as well, I knew little about, really, before your stories. What did you find when you came here? How were you received?

CG: It's very strange. Arriving in a new country, all you want to know about is this new country that you're embracing. But you can't help noticing that people like you exist in the shadows. And one of the first things that I encountered was a lot of comments about how Filipinos work in domesticity. So there would be people asking me how did I meet Richard, and people being incredulous that I was a journalist because they had never met a Filipino who worked as a writer, and people questioning why did I speak English and saying, 'Well, maybe you're American.' And I'm like, 'I'm not American. I just speak English in the Philippines, so—'. But they can't understand why. And the other thing that was—when we

arrived, it was 1989 [when] we arrived in the UK. And so the whole story of the dictatorship was still fresh. We had had a revolution. We had unseated the Marcoses. The Marcoses had fled to Hawaii. And when they fled, one of the things that hit the headlines was that Imelda Marcos, the wife of our president, had left a room filled with 3,000 pairs of shoes. And that was all people wanted to talk to me about.

SB: But writing was always a place that you went when you wanted to express something which was—and in this instance, I think you go to poetry to express this feeling. Would you mind sharing that poem with us?

CG: Yes, I want to say I'm not a poet. But when I'm moved, when I'm angry, when I'm feeling strongly, I don't know why, I sit down, and I write poetry. So I wrote this, and it's called *Small Talk*.

[CG reads *Small Talk*]

"How is Imelda Marcos?

Are her shoes still on the go?"

When I first came to London

It was all they wished to know

I tried to say that there was more

To me than meets the eye

That a flat brown nose and straight black hair

Does not mean I can't ask why

They don't try to get to know me

Or find out what I do

Or say Fine Weather Isn't It?

Or ask me How Are You?

I tried to talk of normal things

Like Politics and Fashion,

Burglaries, Movie Stars,

Sport and Television

I wanted them to talk to me

The way they talked to each other

But all that seemed to interest them

Was Imelda's collection of shoe leather.'

SB: You're a comic writer. You're interested in the graphic novel. There are picture books that are emerging now. I think this is the latest picture book, the *Little Rhino* book. And I remember your dugong story, *Is it a Mermaid?* Just absolutely beautiful. So you've got a very visual imagination, I think, as well.

CG: That is a funny thing to say because I suffer from aphantasia, which is the lack of visual imagination. If you ask me to close my eyes and imagine a heart, I can't see it. I can't see anything in my head.

SB: Ah, how extraordinary.

CG: I see nothing. And I didn't know that that was not—

SB: Aphantasia?

CG: It's called aphantasia. I'm ‘aphantastic’.

SB: Oh, it sounds amazing.

CG: With a ‘ph’.

SB: [Laughs] You are. You are, Candy.

CG: But I didn't know it was a problem. In my ordinary world, I don't imagine anything. And I wonder whether that's why I have this compulsion to document. I have this compulsion to take photographs, so that I can remember things. I think it

affects my memory in a weird way. I don't have a visual memory of things. So documenting by photographing, and also comics. I've kept a comic diary for many years. I would make comics about my daily life. And words; I think words have a different meaning to me because I don't—when I read words, I don't imagine the scene that is being painted for me. The words themselves have a weight and a meaning, an extra meaning. And so in my reading, I find it hard to read things that are just descriptions of action, like, 'This happened, this happened, this happened'. I cannot conjure it in my head. But if the words combine to make a beautiful combination, the words themselves are the art. That's why I like authors like Toni Morrison, authors who use words, who love the words, the words are just so deep and steeped with story.

SB: They are the picture on the page.

CG: They are the picture. That's it.

SB: They are it. And I'm sure that—I know that you've spoken to so many young people about your work. I'm sure that is a way in for some young people who might feel like outside of—they may not have found the book that is—the book that has really got them into writing, or they may not feel that they're good at writing. I'm sure that's an incredible way for young people to access your story.

CG: I think it's really important to tell young people that you're not going to love everything you read. I mean, we're such reading advocates, so we're all like, 'Read, read, read. You should learn to love reading.' But you need to learn to love reading the things that you do love. Not everything will be your cup of tea. I don't love everything that I read. And so the real task before us is to find the thing that will make you love reading.

SB: You have this thing in your stories, which I find really fascinating, which at the bottom of all stories is this, the meeting of another person, the meeting of another person who is not quite like you, that hasn't got a language like you, the indigenous children that speak—obviously they're speaking Tagalog, that is not a language—you didn't learn.

CG: I learned it in school. It was not my native language.

SB: And one day a week? You learned it—

CG: Oh, we had a subject called Filipino, which is where we learned Tagalog. And everyone assumed that everyone else spoke Tagalog. And I was mercilessly bullied for not speaking Tagalog the way everyone else spoke Tagalog because we came

from somewhere else. We have 175 languages in the Philippines. So and then one year, some people decided, *oh, Tagalog is going to be the basis of a national language called Filipino*. So they constructed a national language, and they used Tagalog as the basis, which is not my family's native language.

SB: So in every aspect of self, from childhood to today, this interrogation of what it is to meet your ancestors, the spirit of your ancestors in yourself, to know them, to not know them, to find that path, is in every story that I think you write. So the *Is It a Mermaid?* is a dugong, which is an actual whale-mermaid creature?

CG: What's a dugong called? I think its common name is—oh, I can't remember the common name, but it's actually related to the manatee. It looks like a manatee, except the Asian and Middle Eastern dugongs have a mermaid's tail. The manatee has a paddle tail, a round tail. And when the explorers first arrived in Asia and saw these creatures in the shallows, they thought they were mermaids. But they look like manatees.

SB: So how we appropriate ideas in different cultures and how we bring them into ourselves is really important in your stories. The meeting of the—meeting with the other person, the expectation. And I'm thinking about when you were here and you're having your own children, and now I believe you have your first grandchild.

CG: Yes, I do.

SB: That does something to you, doesn't it, when you have your own children and you think, *well, what are the stories that I want them to hear? What are the stories that feel like they're missing?* And I'm really interested in your first novel, *Tall Story*, was really about the young person that is here that is struggling with the way in which their history and identity is being looked at, and then the arrival of somebody that is not expected.

CG: Yes, at the time, I was very conscious my children were growing up English here in London, and I was very nervous about them meeting my crazy siblings. I have six brothers, we are six children in my family. And so when they go to the Philippines, they're surrounded by these loud, chattering people. And you're always nervous when you're introducing this kind of alien culture to your children, and you just hope that they will love it. And I wanted to write a book where they will meet that culture and see that culture as family. Yeah.

SB: Yeah. You really did that in *Tall Story*. It's that sense of difference but connection, a really, really deep connection. How did your children, when they went to meet family, how did they experience that?

CG: I think they love the Philippines. My daughter now goes by my Filipino name. And they just love going home. If they could afford it, they would be visiting all the time. They love the food. My son cooks Filipino food. And it surprises me how many words they have absorbed from the Philippines. And sometimes, even my daughter-in-law, who's an actress, she can do a really great Filipino accent sometimes, and it's very disturbing. [Both laugh]

SB: Yeah, I can imagine.

CG: But it makes me—we were saying my characters meet each other. There's a term that's come up in the last 10 years, the 'meet cute'.

SB: Yeah, I don't know this 'meet cute'.

CG: The 'meet cute'. It's a romantic comedy term.

SB: Okay, so meeting another.

CG: Yes, in every romance, you will have a character—the characters meeting for the first time. And that's really important, especially in a romance because they

either hate each other, and the arc is that they love each other. And of course, in my books, there's a rejection, attraction that happens when you meet the opposite culture.

SB: Yeah, and there's often humour in that moment with you, even though there are these enormous moments in history. It's funny.

CG: Yes, humour and truth because it really is funny when you have these first experiences.

SB: Let's hear some meet cutes in your story.

[CG reads from *Wild Song*]

> I looked at her. The way she moved, the way she talked – she was unlike any American I'd ever seen. 'My name, Luki.' I was surprised at how easily the words came to my lips.
>
> 'Luki. Luki. Luki. Hmm. Sounds like Looky, as in, "Now looky here, it's an Igorot in a tree!"' Sadie said. 'Even with that coat on, I could tell you were an Igorot. I've read everything I can find about Igorots in the papers. Boy oh boy, I can't believe I've actually met one! I mean, that's why I decided to take Skyrocket for a little ride around

the lake, I was hoping to catch a glimpse, you know?' She smiled up at me. 'Everyone in the United States of America wants to hurry over to Saint Louis to meet all you scary Igorots! But you're not scary at all, are you? That's why I wanted to see you for myself. You never know if what the papers are saying is true.'

She laughed again, and this time I laughed with her, Mother, even though I could barely keep up with what she was saying. Before I knew it she was talking again. 'Oh and I just remembered something else! The papers say you Igorots eat dog for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Dog! How can you pet the creature one moment and then roast it over a fire the next? Is that true?'

Dog for breakfast, lunch and dinner? What was she talking about? Pet him one moment and then roast him over a fire? Is that what Americans thought we did?

I must have looked dismayed, because Sadie Locket was now regarding me with serious eyes. 'My golly. So the papers were lying, eh? I'm very sorry I brought it up. I don't know beans about these things, and I'm very sorry that newspapers in the United States of America are such a bunch of slimy, no-good scoundrels.'

She nodded her head so vigorously, the tree shook.'

SB: Well, I think that really speaks for itself, Candy Gourlay. [Both laugh] It speaks right into our times. It speaks right across time. It's incredible, really. But it is a meet cute.

CG: It is a meet cute.

SB: And it is the beginning of an opening up of a conversation between people that would not have met each other if they hadn't met in your books.

CG: Well, one of one of the most important ideas that I learned about writing is when you're writing a novel, something where a character has to go through this long arc of discovering themselves, it was really—one of the things, if it's a coming-of-age story, that character has to see examples of how they can be, because they don't know who they are yet. And that was one of the moments in *Wild Song*, where my character, Luki, meets someone who shows her that this is someone she could be, she could be somebody like this. And we go through that. When you're a young person, you spend your time meeting people and thinking, *could I be like that person? Could I be like that person?*

SB: One of the most amazing events that I have been to and most amazing moments of a book launch that I've been to was your book launch of *Wild Song*, where the Igorot people of Walthamstow, the indigenous people of the Philippines and their ancestors who then lived in Walthamstow, turned up at your book launch. Tell us a bit about that.

CG: Well, one of the things that astonished me was when I discovered—so I wrote *Bone Talk*, which is a middle grade book, and it's set in a town, in a place called Bontoc. And *Bone Talk* is actually a play on the word Bontoc because the Americans couldn't pronounce Bontoc; they used to say, 'Let's go to Bone Talk.' And the characters in my book are called Igorots. They're indigenous people who live in the mountains. But Igorot was not a word that they used to describe themselves. They were, of course, many, many, many, many communities of people with different names for themselves. Igorot was like the N word in the Philippines in those days. It was a word that—it meant 'people of the mountain', but it also meant 'savages', it meant 'naked people', it meant all kinds of—it was a word that was a bad word. And then over the years, the people of certain parts of the mountain appropriated the word and called themselves by that word. And when I wrote this book, I was amazed when I discovered that there was a whole community in Walthamstow. So when *Wild Song* came out, I did an event for BookTrust. And I was the—what do you call it?

SB: BookTrust Writer in Residence.

CG: I was the BookTrust Writer in Residence. And you have been the BookTrust Writer in Residence. At the end, they ask you, 'Would you like to—here's a budget, would you like to do something? What would you like to do?' And I was just—I had finished *Bone Talk*, so I said, 'Can I do a day with the community in Walthamstow?' So we took over a community centre. I filled a room with my collection of children's books from the Philippines. We did all of these children's activities with children from the age of—from babyhood to—there were teenagers, there were their parents. And it was the most amazing experience. And when *Wild Song* came out, I invited the community again. And when they RSVP'd, they sent me a list of names, and they had a hundred people coming to this venue that could accommodate 60. And that was because 60 children and 40 adults accompanying them. And I was like, 'Actually, I don't have that much room.' [SB laughs] So they trimmed it down. And I think we had, in the end, 30—20 to 30 children came. And what was really, really surprising was they came dressed in their native costume. And this was in the winter, so some of the boys were in G-strings and bare-chested. And they said, 'Candy, we're going to do a ceremony to honour your book.' And they danced and they sang at my book launch, and it was the most amazing experience. I don't think

I'll ever have a book launch that can beat that moment because you just felt how this book, I really wrote it for you, and here you are, you are here to receive it.

SB: I mean, it was incredibly moving. And I think we've spoken about, as fellow writers who've started writing at a similar time or publishing at a similar time, who do we write for, and who do we—what is the impact on the communities that we're writing about when they read our stories? And I know that that's something that's really important for both of us.

CG: It's so important. A lot of writers will say, 'I write for myself. I write for myself when I was a child.' And to a certain extent, you do, because you're writing for that child who didn't see these stories as a small person. But I've got that community in my head all the time.

SB: It's not an artifact, this book.

CG: Yeah, it's not an artifact. And there was one moment, I had a character—I have an enemy in the story. There's an enemy, a tribal enemy of the community that is featured in my story. And at first, I wanted to use a real enemy that they had.

SB: Yeah, historically.

CG: Yeah, the Bontocs really had historically an enemy called a certain people in the Philippines. And I had written the whole book with that name. And then I met a little boy who came from that enemy community. And I thought, *I can't call it that by that name. I can't, because when that boy reads this book, he will feel like he is the enemy.* And so I researched the language, and I found a word, 'Mangili'. 'Mangili' in Bontoc means 'foreigner', 'outsider'. And that was the word I used. There was a certain amount of historical—I couldn't use the historical enemy. I had to use a fictional enemy.

SB: You're writing a picture book. I think this is your *Little Rhino*. *Little Rhino Lost*.

CG: *Little Rhino Lost.*

SB: Ah, it's a lovely title. Is it a picture book that you've just published?

CG: Yes, it's about a little girl. It's actually set in Manila. And it's actually set—

SB: Where you were at university.

CG: Where I grew up. And I asked my editor, Janetta Otter-Barry, if we could get a Filipino artist because I wanted it to really look like the place where I grew up. It's an urban jungle, really horrible asphalt, concrete. And she captured it, the illustrator, Jamie Bauza, because she happened to live in the same neighbourhood where I grew up.

SB: No.

CG: So when you look at the drawings, they look exactly like what I imagined would happen.

CG: How does that feel? I mean, I've experienced that. It's an extraordinary feeling, isn't it? How did that feel when you saw the spreads first of all?

CG: I was so like, *wait, this really*—I grew up in a place called Cubao. I was like, *this looks so much like Cubao*. But I wrote this story because I read an article that said, 'Thousands of years ago, rhinoceroses roamed Manila, long before Manila existed.' And if you go to Manila, if you go to Cubao, where I grew up, you could not imagine a wild animal surviving there. And so just out of that astonishment, I had to write this story about a little girl who meets a lost baby rhinoceros. And I love it. I love what came out.

SB: Another meeting with an outsider.

CG: Another meet cute. [Laughs]

SB: Another meet cute.

SB: And I believe that you have a grandson now.

CG: Yes.

SB: And what are you hoping, in terms of the stories that he has in the world, what are you hoping for the future, in terms of his life going forward and the books that he reads, connecting to part of his history and his identity?

CG: Well, when he was born, I gave him a rhinoceros. [SB laughs] And just yesterday, my son sent me a little video of him basically sucking the rhinoceros. He's five months old now.

SB: He's already into that book, I can tell.

CG: [Laughs] Yes, really into it. It's really different when you have a grandchild because—it's weird because with your children, you feel the weight of the world and what will happen to my children, but in a way, because you're growing with your children, you feel like you have some way of saving them and looking after them. But when it's your grandchild, and he's so tiny, and I keep counting the years and thinking, *okay, I'm going to be 70 when he's a little boy, and then I will be 80, [and] he will be 20, and I'm not going to see the world, I won't be there when he's having to live it as an adult.* And somehow, you feel helpless. You feel like I can't be there to protect him. And then all the terrible things that happen in the world feel even more terrible because this is the world that we are leaving for him. And it made the urgency of our work—it's even more painfully urgent to create things that give hope, that sculpt a world that they can live in, that they can love, that they can have a quality of life that they deserve. When I think of all the children in Palestine, who are not being given the world that they deserve, and the continuous lack of regard, it's just shattering. It's just so awful. And I hope that my son, my grandson, never has to experience anything like that.

SB: Your novels are so moving, the way that you help to open up spaces by creating these beautiful protagonists with a real sense of power and a real sense of agency that you never lose hold of in the stories. Of course, your grandson will inherit these books, and in these books, he will inherit part of a history, a hidden history that has

hardly been documented, spoken about, or imagined in such a brilliant way as you have done, Candy. I know that you're working on a project at the British Library coming up. Is that not right? Just tell us a little bit about that.

CG: Yes, I came together with a group of other East Southeast Asians. And we do it with a little Chinese accent, 'ESEA'. That means China, Japan, Thailand.

SB: It's how we unfold the continents.

CG: Yes, Vietnam. I mean, it's huge. It's the other side of the world. And there are so many authors in the UK from these places. A group of people established September as the East Southeast Asian Heritage Month. And I was a part of a little WhatsApp group of East Southeast Asian authors called the Bubble Tea Group.

SB: Bubble Tea Group? Oh yeah, lovely.

CG: Bubble Tea. It was started by Maisie Chan. You probably know Maisie Chan.

SB: Oh yeah, wonderful Maisie Chan.

CG: Yes, so we just chat all day long about books. Basically, they don't actually chat about books, they chat about food because everyone's just obsessed with food. So we had all of these panels at the festival that talked about important things that we dwell on, like for example, writing in English, writing in the language of your conqueror. And we had something about sci-fi and fantasy and how sci-fi and fantasy use all these Asian elements. They disguise them and sew them into—a lot of speculative fiction uses Asian elements.

SB: Candy, it has been such a pleasure to be in conversation with you for *WritersMosaic*.

CG: Thank you for having me.

[Music]

Presenter: Sita Brahmachari was talking to Candy Gourlay. To hear more writers, go to writersmosaic.org.uk.

[Music]

Candy Gourlay was in conversation with Sita Brahmachari

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