

WRITERSMOSAIC

Jason Allen Paisant

In conversation with John Siddique

'Silence is one theme that I dwell on [in] the book. Not silence, just in terms of meditation or contemplation, but the silence of our lives; the silence of trauma; the silence of our history. The silence of the shame that's linked to our history.'

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Colin Grant (CG): This is *WritersMosaic* in conversation, John Siddique talks to the poet Jason Allen Paisant about the move from poetry into prose, in particular with his new memoir, *The Possibility of Tenderness*.

John Siddique (JS): Hey there, I'm John Siddique. Welcome to Writers Mosaic *in Conversation*, and I'm really blessed to be in the studio with the wonderful Jason Allen Paisant. Jason, welcome. Your new book, *The Possibility of Tenderness*, which is absolutely beautiful, is full of conversations around silence, which is really

quite fascinating. Before we get into silence though, I wanted to ask you, how has the move been for you from poetry into prose?

Jason Allen Paisant (JAP): I didn't want the academic, kind of scholarly stuff to guide the way; I wanted the storytelling to be the guide, and then you can do whatever you want afterwards, right? You can put in the kind of factual information, the kind of thinking information that you want to share with your readers.

And I think it's important that erudition is always worn lightly. I like when erudition is soft and kind of not like, you know, being... What's the word for this? Like, in your face or it's kind of performative... just to be, give a concrete example, the history of coffee and how coffee drinking today and coffee drinking in the empire, right when it became like a big thing, connects Jamaica and the West Indies to Britain and to slavery. It's that sort of thing. But anyway, the long and short of it was letting the storytelling guide the way and everything else clustered onto that, so that the reader would have a good experience. I'm thinking about the reader. At the same time, I don't want to pander to a reader and that's very crucial because that's very important as well.

I want to challenge the reader as well. And a part of... when you do that, what you're doing is you're respecting your reader. I see it as that. You are trusting your reader to embark on a conversation with you. You know, I'm telling

different stories about nature, you know? Yes, nature heals you, but also nature is... it can be messy; it's hard work, right? If you're talking about farming and so on. They're real people who work the land, right, who are not just about going on a pastoral walk and contemplating nature, right? Nature is a thing that, that... it's about earth, it's about connection. You know, in a deeper way than just going for a walk.

JS: Mm-hmm. I want to just before we move into that, because I do want to talk about that, it seems to me that you made, you've made a choice though, on the healing path here. You said your, this book is written out of not anger.

JAP: Mm-hmm.

JS: Alright.

JAP: That's right.

JS: And so a couple of questions on that if you don't mind. Is, it seems to me that choice of not anger perhaps may be the route to the book being about healing. But then also I'm really interested in, as an author myself, coping with my own versions of these things, how you brought your creativity to not anger. Can you talk about that internal mechanism or the creative mechanisms a little bit?

JAP: It's an interesting grapple that I was doing in that opening chapter, which is one of the last things I wrote in that chapter. I wanted to contextualize the project. I was urged by my editor at the time to do it, but I saw the need. I agreed because the book sidestepped the typical lens of talking about nature in the UK at the time, which is typically there's a lot of racism and we're angry, right? And there is a lot of racism and we are angry, right? That's true. That's a legitimate sentiment, okay? But I, what I was doing was to look at our lives through a different narrative to say it can also be crippling when all that we're allowed as an emotion is anger.

When all that our narrative of our life or lives is read through is anger. Okay? So you are the angry people or you're the angry people and that's your only legitimate conversation or discourse or entry into the discourse. I wanted to say we can enter the discourse also through power; through the kinds of empowerment that we live in, that we know, and we need to go back to those.

JS: I mean, you say that's a choice that we have to make.

JAP: That was a deliberate choice. So, that's why I ground the book through the lens of the empowerment that comes from my people through the relationship with the earth. That's a story as well, right? That's a story that they tried to rob from us. And I'm saying, 'No, I'm recentring that story.'

JS: Mm-hmm. I think that's one of the most important things about the book, quite honestly. That choice is made.

JAP: And I don't think it's hard to understand. I'm telling the reader, yes, we are angry, but this particular book is not going to be about that. It's this kind of complexity that we have to inhabit, we have to embrace. And so that's the conversation around what I call non-anger, the right to non-anger. Right? So the right for our bodies to thrive, to have peace, to be in peace, to be in that sort of relaxed, kind of nervous system where we have... we, we inhabit our time, our space, whatever.

Where do we find that? We have to find that. We have to arrive at that; those forms of care that come through community. That's why community is so important in the book. Because it's a community in Jamaica where I'm from, talking about the community and how the community cares for itself and for each other. But it's also talking about the community in the UK; the community that I've found, but also the community that all of us need to find around nature for our wellbeing.

JS: What is the root of that consciousness for you, and for our dear listener, how might they find something of that for themselves? Because it sounds impossible if you don't know.

JAP: I feel that if I didn't have a community of friends, many of whom are artists as well, where I can just turn up at their door, go sit in their living room, have a chat, or we can just get together and we're always checking in on each other; and these are people who practice a lot of the things I talk about in the book. Let's just say they're more than human. They tune into the healing power of herbs. These are spiritual people, like-minded people to myself. And I have that kind of friend and I have several of them where I don't need to phone them up to say, 'I'm coming to your yard.' I can just turn up and knock at the door. You know, that kind of people. And I think if I didn't have that community around me, I don't know if I would have been able to survive.

JS: Mm-hmm.

JAP: Friends like those encourage you and they keep you laughing. They keep you happy, they remind you of joy. I think I also carry something with me that shall we say the spirit of my grandmother, that I speak about my grandmother in the book, but that sense of power that you carry, that you know that you're connected into a larger universe that is fundamentally benevolent I feel. Spirituality is a very significant thing. And I know it takes different forms for different people, but I couldn't have remained grounded to the extent that I am without a certain level of spirituality. And a reminder that in the face of these aggressions coming at you, sometimes left, right and centre, you have a deeper

place to go. Right? That's just more powerful than the 3D reality that's around you. So, those are the ingredients I think that help me.

JS: I just wonder how location and writing and how they fit together for you.

JAP: Location influences writing a lot because it influences the texture of writing. It's... location is sound, it's the spirit of a place, it's the sound of a place. And so when I'm in Jamaica, I write differently. Probably certain levels, certain qualities of the writing flow better as well. I think location is also the way you see, the way you look. And so that's one quality of the book as well. I found that one of the challenges and the beauties for me was to just be able to talk about certain things by having memory jogged in a way that wouldn't have been able to talk about them if I'd been over here. Probably it would, would've been more as nostalgia. But there, I'm able to bring certain realities into literature without... like, I'm speaking from the place, so I'm not speaking to... I'm not translating; that's the word, that's the word that I'm looking for.

JS: Mm-hmm.

JAP: Whereas sometimes you get, you can be tempted to translate because the de facto, kind of imaginary reader... Well, that's a temptation anyway to see that reader as a western reader that's not going to understand the language that you're writing about. But if you flip the gaze and you step into that reality, and

you're speaking from that reality and the wisdom of the people, the knowledge system of the people, I think the beauty is to stop explaining, to just inhabit that. And that's a greater gift to the reader as well I feel.

JS: I heard your voice very clearly when reading the book. It was literally you as if we're sitting here right now telling these stories in a way. So it's really interesting to see both those things; both the, you removing the projection of the reader and also the dissolution of the implied author.

JAP: Mm-hmm. Fascinating the way you put that. Yes, I did try. I did; I did. It was intentional, my thinking around those things. I'm talking about places that where people don't need to go to the supermarket.

JS: No, and that was amazing to read.

JAP: These places literally still exist but a lot of people I think don't know about them. Not... never consider that there are such places. I wanted to bring in this different reality of land. And like I said, this, it's also, describing these places is also seeing how people talk about land, right? There is an intimacy there that doesn't exist in places like these.

JS: And speaking of intimacy, one of the things that I found really interesting is how at the time you are growing up more than now, things will have changed now a little bit as you say in the book, but how unboundaried the land is and

that there's common land and, you know, people literally are growing their own food and so on. And, that is a dream for a lot of people here. But for people of colour, people of global majority, you know, it's kind of... I mean, my family are from, well, my dad's side is from India and so on, so that will have been there too. But then it's been kind of colonised and changed and packaged and changed up.

And to kind of read about these kinds of open landscapes with food growing and [indeterminable] bringing your carrot juice and so on, and... and things. And just that removal of boundaries, how that feels in the body is really quite interesting because I was reading this book with my body, as it were, and you can literally feel... I live in the countryside. I've lived in the countryside for more than quarter of a century, and I grew up in the countryside. I grew up in a town, but with countryside very nearby and it would be my escape from racism and the skinheads of the eighties and all this sort of thing. I'd go running off into the... so everything I know has been the hills, but it's always been a sanctuary. But what I noticed is that where I live now, people think it's the most beautiful open space. But actually when you walk through that land, all you're doing is walking through between two narrow walls on a path that you're just about allowed to walk on.

JAP: Yes.

JS: Whereas I'm reading your book and it's like, you can go anywhere you want. Almost, you know? And if you do wander in, you're going to get fed.

JAP: Mm-hmm. Yeah. Yeah. Almost. You know, there are, you know, property, as I discussed in the book, property does exist in Jamaica as well. There are laws, but because of history, a lot of properties are common law properties and they're administered differently. So it's, you know, the feel of the place is different in the country parts. And you don't have that level of policing and that, that level of hostility definitely about, around, around land. So yes, it gives you a different feeling, as you say, a different feeling in your body.

That's beautiful. That's liberating. And you know globalization is a thing that has affected these local, peasant-based communities, as it has communities around the world. But thankfully they still are able to thrive and survive. And one of the important things was to be able to shift traditional accepted mainstream capitalist discourse around the peasantry, which has, you know, terms like poverty, backwardness and such the like, to say, what if we looked at these kinds of spaces and livelihoods? What if we took another gaze? To not have... it's not about creating a dichotomy in the romantic sense of modernity and nostalgia or anything like that, to look at what's positive and affirming about the rural lifestyle, right? The independent food growing lifestyle. And there are several things you can do: one of them is to gain lessons for what we can do in our cities

because a lot of us are still going to live in cities, right? You are a writer. I'm a writer, right? But, so gain lessons.

Secondly, we can look at land in different ways. A lot of people are already, which is why you get the post-COVID phenomenon of people just... land in country areas getting more expensive because a lot of people are wanting to move back. They want a piece of earth to cultivate on their own. This happens in Jamaica as well. So it's not like a dichotomy to say better, worse, or modernity, nostalgia. But it's the kind of how, it is, the kind of way we reframe our thinking around land, around food growing and about all sorts of that, that sort of thing. So, that was the challenge of the book, alongside this thing that I'm doing around history, showing how a lot of what we take for granted today was built on the backs of, you know, people like me, like, like my ancestors and disenfranchising them of land; but also this more, shall we say, contemporary thing of looking at what the land there teaches us today.

JS: We've been talking quite sort of elegiacally, you know, the body and the earth and so on. Just one darker thread I kind of want to lean into is we started out referencing how you would, how in your earlier books you talked about silence so much. And silence kind of surfaces again in this book but this time you're talking about silence as being a cover for shame, for muteness, for

trauma, for illegitimacy; and how those are threaded throughout that landscape as well. So, I don't know if there's even a question here, quite honestly.

JAP: Yeah. But that's... I'm glad you bring that up because that's part of what I mean when I say I didn't want to write a nature writing book that's about like, stillness and contemplation, right? So I bring in those messier elements.

JS: Yeah, the darker aspects. Yeah, absolutely.

JAP: I bring in reality: history and life. And so speaking about silence is one theme that I dwell on in the book. Not silence, just in terms of meditation or contemplation, but the silence of our lives, the silence of trauma, the silence of our history. Silence of the shame that's linked to our history. Because I do talk about history with a big age for us was a history, is... involves a history of slavery. That's how I'm Jamaican. That's how a lot of you know, my ancestors came to this land as captured people from Africa, brought as slaves to work the land. So, the relationship with land does have that complication as well.

So from that, you form a thread that goes to my grandmother, my and the generations that involve her. Many of them I talk about are women because it's the women who bear the load in my family. Right? I mean, there's a lot to say about the absence of fathers, but it's the women who are these people who keep the family afloat, who, who nurture.

And so, with the kind of history that's behind that, there is, there's a lot of shame. And as I say, the sound of shame is silence. That's one of the meanings, the resonance of silence that I deal with in the book. All of what's not said, this thing of you soldier on, you move on because there's no time to, no, no ability really, no vocabulary for really articulating what's driving you; what's behind some of the decisions that you're making; these unspoken things of, you know, where are the fathers? Where is your father? Right? These are conversations that don't make it to the dinner table.

JS: Yeah.

JAP: And so, yes, the reader might wonder, how does a conversation around nature connect with that? That's what that, that was. exhilarating, not necessarily exhilarating, but freeing and interesting aspects of writing a nature writing book that could talk about those things.

JS: Perhaps your access as a poet...

JAP: Yes.

JS: [continuation]... kind of allows you this because I felt that, while you can't actually speak to these things, they exist. They're there in the land, they're there in the quality of the sunlight. They're there in, in mama tilling the earth. They're there in, in your mother. You know, the men who are not there, and all this is

held in kind of like the ordinariness of the day. And the poet somehow goes, well, I can't get the word, but I'm going to point at it anyway. Or the writer, a good writer can do this. That's something that I really loved about this, is that it wasn't just the nature book as it were, you know, and that actually, you know, this is the quality and the contemplation of so many lives, but particularly people of the global majority, black people and brown people as well.

And even though the words may not be there, the recognition of it is quite, deeply significant. And for that to be sitting on the nature shelf is deeply significant as well, I think.

JAP: And I'm the first published poet in my family, so I realise that there are clearly some things that probably I'm the first to be able to do. I'm the first to have space and opportunity to do. So, what do you make of that? That's significant as well.

JS: Mm-hmm.

JAP: Okay. Here's a writer who now lives in England, in the UK, who can publish a book with a major publisher. That's an opportunity to speak, an opportunity to tell a story that is meaningful, but would've otherwise gone, you know, it would've lived where it lived, but it's an opportunity to poke beneath the surface.

JS: Mm-hmm.

JAP: And really bring some lives back to bring some people back to life.

JS: Mm-hmm.

JAP: Bring some narratives out of the shadows, I would say.

JS: Mm-hmm.

JAP: To be able to publish a book with Penguin, that gives you a certain level of distribution. That level, and it's coming on the backs, the back of the accolades that I've received so far. So, it's weird and strange and exciting how the life and the gifts and the work keeps on creating space for itself. And the gifts that you're afforded keep on opening further doors for your story.

So, right now I'm working on a novel, and this novel is about silence in a way. The protagonist is based on, you know, my grandmother, but it's entirely fictional because it imagines her undisclosed life. The experience of it is like discovering a whole new different person. I've never published any fiction before, but it's really interesting doing that work. Right? Different tools called upon as well.

JS: Mm-hmm.

JAP: You see what I mean?

JS: Mm-hmm. Yeah. Well, you are literally kind of giving life into the muteness, aren't... you know, around some of these things. I mean, Mama comes across as a beautiful woman, a very beautiful human being, indeed. But she's carrying so much and the story's not told. A family to be blessed with an author who will then dignify the lives by writing about them with love and tenderness and honesty.

JAP: Mm-hmm.

JS: You know, even if it is in fiction.

JAP: And with the flaws as well.

JS: Yeah, absolutely.

JAP: Because that exists as well, you know?

JS: Yeah.

JAP: The interesting thing is to always get to the truth of what's driving us. Right? And sometimes that's neither a flaw nor a beauty; it's just what is.

JS: No, the complexity of...

JAP: Its complexity is because of the choices that we feel that we have to make at a given time. So, that's the character that I'm grappling with now, right, in trying to understand, trying to get into her head; this character that I'd never known... Four. So yeah, that's the new stage of the work.

JS: Okay, well we'll leave it there.

JAP: Yeah.

JS: Thank you so much for talking to us, Jason. It was a really, real privilege. Thank you.

JAP: Thanks a lot John as ever.

CG: John Siddique was talking to Jason Allen Paisant. To hear more writers, go to writersmosaic.org.uk.

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

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