

WRITERSMOSAIC

Zakia Sewell

In Conversation with Colin Grant

'Even to this day, I was in Wales over the weekend, and you see the Welsh flag everywhere. And it elicits a very different response in me to the St George's cross, which is ostensibly my flag.'

— Zakia Sewell

[Music]

Presenter: This is *WritersMosaic, In Conversation*. Colin Grant talks to Zakia Sewell about her book, *Finding Albion*.

[Music]

Colin Grant (CG): I should say that I read a lot of books, and I've never won an award, which I'm not unhappy about, but I do have a special award, which I call the 'best book read by Colin Grant award'. And that award this year goes to Zakia Sewell.

[Applause]

Zakia Sewell (ZS): [Laughs] Thank you, Colin.

CG: It's a really special book, and I think it's really nice to be in the presence of a burgeoning star, which I think you are. And I wonder if we could just begin initially to unpack the title, which is called *Finding Albion*. Can I begin by asking you, what did you hope to find? What did you hope to find?

ZS: Well, I think when I set out on this quest, I suppose I was searching for a more inclusive, progressive vision of Britishness that I could—felt I could be part of. I'm born in Britain. Both my parents were born here. My dad is English with Welsh roots. My mum is from an island called Carriacou in the Caribbean, which is part of the Grenadines. And so, in many ways, I feel very at home here. I have spent lots of time in Wales when I was growing up, exploring the enchanted landscapes of West Wales and hearing the stories of Merlin whispered on the wind. And I felt really at home until, of

course, I came into my teenage years and realised that I had this mixed identity, this mixed racial identity, and that I was torn between worlds. And I found it difficult to reconcile the love that I had for Britain and *Midsomer Murders* with my grandparents and cups of tea and biscuits and all the lovely, cosy aspects of British culture with the stories that I inherited from my mum's side of the family; what it meant to be part of the Windrush generation, to be faced with racism and discrimination; and the stories that I inherited about my ancestors who were transported from West Africa in tightly packed wooden ships and forced to work as slaves under British instruction. Now, as you [laughs] might be able to tell, it's quite a complicated place to be. And so, I wanted to seek out an alternative British story, one that wasn't wrapped in reverence of military, monarchy, and empire, but that was an alternative Britain that I'd always sensed. And perhaps we'll talk a little bit about how.

CG: Yeah, absolutely. I think what we might do to start off, we're going to hear some music that percolates through the book. And if you could ask Mark, I think he's called, to play the first song.

[*The Cuckoo* by Pentangle plays]

'Oh, the cuckoo, she's a pretty bird

She sings as she flies

She bringeth good tidings, she telleth no lies

She sucketh white flowers

For to keep her voice clear

And the more she singeth "cuckoo" the summer draweth near'

CG: So, that's *The Cuckoo* by Pentangles. What does that song mean to you?

ZS: It still gives me goosebumps whenever I hear it. The twinkling glockenspiels. Yeah, that song—well, my dad took me to see Pentangle when I was 15 years old. It was their 40th anniversary concert at the Royal Festival Hall down in London.

CG: You were 15?

ZS: I was 15.

CG: Did you have to be dragged to these?

ZS: Yeah, this is the thing. When I was 15, I was going through a bit of a Rude Girl era. So, scraped back hair, big hoop earrings, I was listening to grime and R&B, absolutely not cosmic folk. And yet, my dad was really into music. That was a big part—we bonded

over music. And I must have been quite open-minded even back then. So, I kept it a secret from my school friends. Nobody knew that I was going to see this strange old folk band. But something about the music that I heard that evening, it transported me to what felt like another Britain, a Britain that was magical and enchanted. And I just remember coming home from the gig, downloading *Basket of Light*, which that song is on—recorded in 1969, and hearing these age-old folk songs but embellished with jazz and blues and just being utterly captivated.

And it was really Pentangle's music that kick-started my obsession with all things folk. I started listening to some of the other folk artists from that 1960s, '70s revival, people like Shirley Collins and Davy Graham. I started becoming curious about the pagans and the druids and these strange standing stones and stone circles that litter the British landscape. And then from that, from then I—from there I started to become interested in the seasonal customs that happen all across the country, things like Morris dancing and the Tar Barrels at Ottery St Mary. And I think it was because they seemed to emanate from a very, very different Britain to the Britain that is celebrated in our more conventional national mottos and tales and symbols. They were eccentric and radical and mischievous and strange. And those are the aspects of British culture that I'm going in search of in the book.

CG: So, I know your grandparents are in Wales. I think you were brought up in Bedford, is that right?

ZS: My mum's from Bedford.

CG: Mum's from Bedford. Where were you brought up?

ZS: I was brought up in West London, quite close to Heathrow Airport, not a particularly folky place. In fact, I went to school—there's a big South Asian community where I grew up, so I grew up with going to Diwali celebrations and doing Asian dance at school but not really any English folk traditions.

CG: And did you—what relationship would you say you had with the landscape? Did you go walking, hiking?

ZS: In Hounslow [laughs].

CG: There's nowhere to hike?

ZS: It's funny, you think there seems to be no landscape in Hounslow. It's a very built up place, quite grey. It's the suburbans. I think it's zone five or six. It's the tail end of the Piccadilly line in London.

CG: That's near St Margarets and Richmond, isn't it, all those places?

ZS: There was a bit of that, but it was really—I had this split screen, I suppose, growing up. The very urban existence in Hounslow, where I was only really allowed to do loops of a block of flats on my bike, and then going to Wales, where I had this 1970s-esque childhood, where I was free to roam with a gang of local kids. And I think that it was in Wales that I first made a connection to the land. And I suppose that that's something that's also really stuck with me. Although there have been questions about whether I belong in Britain, and of course, there have been people who've let me know that perhaps I shouldn't feel any sense of belonging here, that connection to the land, when it's just me in a field, swimming in the sea, up on a cliff side being bashed around by the wind, there's no question about whether I belong. There's absolutely—I feel like I belong to this landscape. But it's unfortunately something that has been called into question.

CG: Yeah, it's curious because you're Brown. You're okay with Brown?

ZS: Yeah [laughs].

CG: I'm Brown or Black and Brown. And I grew up in a place called Luton, and the idea that we'd go for a walk—we lived approximate to another town called Dunstable, and there are Dunstable Downs, they're two miles away, but we never went there. I just wanted to wonder whether you have a theory about why Brown or Black people in the past, maybe less so now, wouldn't go out into the landscape, into the countryside.

ZS: Well, it's funny, isn't it, that we're, us Brown and Black folk, are associated with the urban. Because when I think about my grandparents' experience back home when I visit Carriacou, it's completely rural. My grandparents grew up growing their own food. They had pigs, and they had chickens, and they would slaughter them at special times of the year. They would be going on long walks. They'd be swimming in the sea. It was totally a rural existence. Obviously, that all changed when they arrived over here. I think there is a colonial mindset that I think has something to do with it. The idea that the city, the metropolis, somehow represented a civilisation and a moving away from back a yard and the idea that once you've got your nice house set up in wherever, in West London or in Bedford or in Bristol, wherever people migrated to, the idea of going back to the land, back to the back to the bush, was not really a very an appealing process.

CG: Yeah, I get that because people all over the world, don't they, they move from the countryside to the metropolis. And for a lot of Caribbean people, even people from the Commonwealth, London was the centre. The glamour of London was the pull. It wasn't the glamour of Suffolk, I suppose, or even of North Yorkshire or the Dales. One of the things you do early on is to remind people about some of the myths that some people think are foundation stories of Britain, including some confounding myths like the 13 Syrian sisters. Can you explain who they were?

ZS: Absolutely. So, Albion is the ancient name for Britain. Nobody knows exactly where the name came from. It's rich with mystery because of that. And so, it's a—it represents an alternative history or past for the nation. I see it as an alternative spirit of the nation. And I think it was first mentioned by ancient Greek geographers, I think back in the fourth century or something like that. And in the 12th century, you have Geoffrey of Monmouth, a 'historian' in inverted commas because I'm not sure how much of it was based on fact. But he wrote these legends of Albion, and he wrote about how Albion was a land of demonic giants until the arrival of the Trojan hero, Brutus, who wiped them out and renamed the island Britain. But after Geoffrey of Monmouth, you had other scholars and poets trying to fill in the gaps, well, how did the giants get there?

And then you get this fascinating story of Albina and her 30 naughty sisters. And Albina was supposedly the daughter of a Syrian king, sometimes Greek. And she and her 30 sisters were known for their extraordinary beauty but also their disobedience. And they plotted to murder their husbands in the night, and they were found out, and they were exiled from Syria. So, Albina and her sisters, they sail the seas, they go in search of a new home, and they discover—they come across a beautiful uninhabited island, which Albina names Albion. And so you get this very interesting part of the story where the sisters, who have been used to living in the lap of luxury, they learn to hunt the island's wild animals, they learn to forage and become self-sufficient, living in a feminist utopia for a little while, until they begin to pine for male company and procreate with demons, basically, and give birth to the race of giants. Obviously, there's a bit of misogyny in that story, but I think it's very interesting that in these foundational myths about Britain, we get Syrian refugees arriving in small boats to start a new life. And even Brutus, the supposed founder of Britain, was from Troy. So, I think—I came across this myth when I was researching the book, and I'd never heard of it before, and I think, *how different might things be if Albina was one of our British symbols instead of Britannia*, who represents, well, it's obviously taken on from the Romans but is a representative of this imperial might. What if we made Albina, a Syrian princess, a

Syrian refugee, what if she was at the heart of our national insignia? I think it's a story that needs to be known.

CG: I'd sign up for that one [ZS laughs]. So, you're also interested in changing the narratives because, actually, you are the story that you tell yourself. And one of the things you posit in the book is that of all the nations of Great Britain, the English are less sure about their identity. And I think you are suggesting that because they were invested in the notion of Great Britain, they let go of some of their identity. Is that right?

ZS: Yeah, well, I think that's, yeah, one of the—that's the chapter I'm thinking about Welshness. And Wales was where, as a child or as a young person, I encountered a sense of national identity that was infectious and joyous and celebratory and welcoming rather than threatening. Growing up, even to this day, I was in Wales over the weekend, and you see the Welsh flag everywhere. And it elicits and evokes a very different response in me to the St George's cross, which is ostensibly my flag. And so, I was thinking about why that was. And yes, absolutely.

Welsh national identity as we know it today, a lot of the symbols and stories of Welshness are rooted in much older tales and myths and symbols, but they are really consciously conjured after the union of 1707. There was an attempt—there was a

collaborative effort with poets and scholars and rich benefactors trying to cultivate a distinct sense of Welshness that could hold its own within the union. And of course, this was a sense of national identity that was forged in opposition to or always in the face of English domination.

Englishness, obviously, has a very different flavour because—I quoted a sociologist who talked about England being the driving force of the British project. And so, as a result, English symbols and British symbols and in fact Englishness and Britishness are quite often muddled and mingled, and it can be quite hard to separate them. I suppose because for a long time, cultivating that distinct sense of Englishness as separate from the British project was never really a priority. And you see this in the way that now that that imperial project that both the Welsh and the Scots benefited a lot from being part of, now that that's broken down, the Welsh and the Scots have returned to their older distinct identifiers, and that's reflected in the way that people describe themselves in the recent census. It was absolutely Welsh people putting Welsh first and British second and the same for the Scots, whereas for the English, British and English are still interchangeable.

And so, in the book I'm saying, well, perhaps we need to do something similar to what the Welsh did in the 18th and 19th centuries. There needs to be a collective conscious

conjuring of new symbols, new stories, new anthems and mottos, to carry us through this next chapter. And I think that we should, like the Welsh did and like many other nations did during that era of nationalisms, look to some of our older stories and customs for inspiration.

CG: One of the things you do explain, I think very clearly, is that all these traditions are invented. And you mentioned the 19th century aristocrat, Augusta Hall. What impact did she have on the idea of Welshness?

ZS: Yes, she was this rich benefactor, the Lady of Llanover. And she was really one of the main people who was celebrating Welsh folk tradition during the era. And she used to hold Welsh folk dance events on her estate, and the typical Welsh national dress was semi-invented by her. She brought together various different traditional modes of dress in Wales. They weren't one distinct outfit at the time, and she championed this as a new expression of Welsh identity. So, it's very interesting to think about the constructedness of national identities. And yet, I don't think that's necessarily a bad thing; I think it gives us permission to reimagine them and dream them anew.

CG: I agree. One of the things ---my parents are Jamaican. One of the things my mum used to say to me is that you've been known by the company that you keep. How do

you feel about associating yourself with Morris dancing? [ZS laughs] Were they welcoming?

ZS: They were very welcoming, yeah. Well, as I said, this was something that I kept secret for a long time, my enthusiasm about folk culture, because I didn't grow up in a folky atmosphere, and there weren't many people like me that seemed to be interested in folk culture. And I think there is a sense of shame or definitely embarrassment, I think, that a lot of people feel, particularly in England, about our folk customs. It was quite funny, there was a quote that I found that Charlie Corcoran, who was leader of a particular Morris organisation about 10 years ago, feared that Morris dancing would go extinct because young people were too embarrassed to be involved in it. And it's quite interesting thinking about what that shame or embarrassment is about. Is it because when we see Morris dancers bashing sticks on cobbled streets that they counter or challenge some of the more highfalutin ideas or visions about what Englishness really is? But for me, that's part of the joy.

But the Morris dancers are very welcoming. I've got a big up an incredible Morris dancing side based in Stroud called Boss Morris, who actually gave me a Morris lesson, although it's very hard on the knees, I will say [laughs]. But they're really trying to reimagine the Morris tradition as an inclusive tradition. They dance in these incredible

outlandish outfits. They dance to UK Garage remixes of Morris tunes. And they've just started this incredible series of events where they're teaching Morris dancing to young people of all different walks of life, trying to democratise and trying to show people that there are aspects of English—the English folk tradition that are welcoming and inviting and that we can all be part of. So, they are part of this much wider wave of people becoming more interested in folk traditions and trying to promote them as an inclusive aspect of our culture.

CG: So, does it help that they no longer don blackface?

ZS: Well, Boss Morris never did, just for the record. But yeah, absolutely. I mean, that was—when you start, your first question was what did I hope to find when I set out on this quest? And I think you heard Pentangle earlier and you heard the magic of that music. And so, I think that when I set off on my quest to learn more about our folk culture in this country, I probably hoped that I would find this unsullied, uncompromised [missing word], right, Albion, some joyous paradise where I would feel like I could belong. And then I realised that there had been blackface in Morris dancing, which rather punctured that fantasy.

This is a very troublesome aspect of the folk tradition, and it's not the only troublesome aspect. I think for a long time, there are certain sides within the Morris tradition that have historically painted their faces black when they perform. They would say, probably, that this relates to an older tradition of disguise, working-class people wanting to conceal their identities when they were out on the streets at the various fetes and fairs that they'd be performing at. The more recent research suggests that, actually, there's limited evidence for the use of blackface before the minstrel craze, basically. And so, as a result, the Morris Federation back in 2020, after the murder of George Floyd, said, 'We don't want anyone to feel hurt or offended by the use of blackface, and we recognise that traditions have always evolved and changed with the times,' so they banned its use. But this is just one example of where these more troublesome aspects of our history, the shadow aspects of the British psyche, find their way into folk.

CG: One of the things I love about your book is that you show that culture is porous. It's not boxed in; it's going to leak in and leak out. And I think the next song, please, Mark, I hope that's your name, could we have the next song which speaks to this notion?

[Music]

CG: Can you tell us what that song is and how that fits into your thesis?

ZK: Absolutely. So, that is a piece of music recorded by the American ethnomusicologist, Alan Lomax, in the early '60s on a visit to Carriacou, which is where my family come from. And it is an example—it's a quadrille. It was performed by a violinist called [missing name]. And I absolutely love that piece of music because in that, it's just the collision of worlds. You can hear the Irish, Scottish folk influences there on the violins. And then there's this wonderful tumbling—these tumbling West African rhythms imported to the island, brought to the island by enslaved peoples. And that piece of music—Carriacou, there was a big Scottish influence and presence in Carriacou during the colonial era. There's one on a part of the island where everyone has Scottish last names, and there's a wooden boat building tradition, and they play this music. And I suppose, this is just one example that I found through my research of British folk traditions that made their way to the former colonies and were reimagined and reinterpreted. And I also discovered the use of the maypole dancing tradition in Jamaica. I don't know if you know about that one.

CG: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

ZS: There was one folk researcher who found versions of mummers' plays on an island called Saint Kitts, as well as Morris dancing. I had absolutely no idea about the way that these traditions had travelled. And yet, they were fascinating for me to discover these strange fusions of culture and to think about, as you say, the way in which these traditions flow back and forth and have done for many centuries. They counter the idea that Blackness and Britishness, Caribbean and Britishness, is something that started when the Windrushes came over. Actually, there's this long-entangled history, and beauty came out of that darkness and the shadow aspects of our past.

CG: I agree. I mean, I did a documentary about mento, which is an early form of reggae before ska. And before mento, there was folk music. And I remember I was taught when I was in Jamaica to rent a tile. Do you know what rent a tile means?

ZS: No.

CG: So, you go to a dance hall, you stand on a square tile, a foot square, you grab someone that you're interested in, and you just rent the tile all night long [ZS laughs]. Yes, rent a tile [ZS laughs]. One of the things that you do very well also is to explore the fact that the land is not always available to people. And there are various folk songs of people who've transgressed, become poachers, and have been sent to colonies to rid

them of the disgrace. And some of those stories have worked their ways into folk songs. Can you talk about one or two of those?

ZS: Absolutely, yeah. I suppose it's important—what is folk? It's quite hard to define. But one of the things, I suppose, that is common when we're thinking about folk culture, these old songs, old customs, old tales, they're traditionally the expressions of marginalised people, be that the working classes, women, subjects of the empire, people who are traditionally excluded from the institutions and the academies, who had to find other ways to tell their stories. So, when we look to, for example, the folk song repertoire in England, what we get are these alternative histories that often trouble the dominant narratives, and that's why I think they're a really important place to look when we're seeking alternative visions of England or indeed Britain.

So, one of the songs that I focus on in the book is a song called the *Rufford Park Poachers*, which was covered by a couple of musicians during the '60s revival. But it was recorded by, well, a very dodgy fellow called Percy Grainger, who was a bit of a fascist. That's a whole other story. But he recorded this folk singer called Joseph Taylor, singing it in 1908. And I'm not going to sing the lyrics, but I think I can remember them. There's this beautiful refrain in it which is, 'A buck or doe believe it so/A pheasant or a hare/Were sent on earth for everyone/Quite equal for to share/So, poacher bold as I

unfold/Keep up your gallant heart/And think about those poachers bold/That night in Rufford Park'. And what he's singing about is a real-life clash that happened between poachers and gamekeepers on the land of the Earl of Scarborough in 1851. And although the speaker in the song suggests that these animals were put on earth quite equal for to share, the reality was that for working-class people at that time who were hungry and often had for many years poached wild animals to supplement their meagre diets, you could be transported for up to 15 years to a penal colony for doing so.

And sitting with that song and learning about the history behind that song revealed to me this long history of protest in England: protests against enclosure, the Luddites who were setting fire to mills very close to where that clash between coaches and gamekeepers happened in Nottinghamshire, stretching back to Kett's Rebellion, the Diggers who set up communes during the English Civil War and declared the earth a common treasury for all. And this was a whole radical history of England that I didn't really know about. I hadn't learned about it at school. And yet, when we're trying to think about alternative narratives, alternative heroes to counter the toxic and exclusionary visions of Englishness that are getting a lot of airtime at the moment conjured by the far right, this feels like a really important place to look.

And another very fascinating thread that was revealed as I began to unpick that song was this interrelated destinies of the White working classes in England and the subjects of the empire, enslaved peoples, the money that flowed from the nefarious activities of the British Empire into the land. As people like Corinne Fowler and others have made known in recent years, the huge payout that former slave owners got when slavery was abolished, so much of that went into buying land, which further—which enclosed more of the landscape and pushed severed communities from the land. So this, to me, is like this—it's evidence of a shared struggle, and it's a story that should get a lot more airtime.

CG: I think you're right. I think when I grew up in Luton, I grew up with Irish kids, so it was anybody but the English. And we used to have this game where we'd play who'd been done worse by the English [ZS laughs]. And we'd say, 'Yeah, we've been under the heel of the English for 400 years, man. They're terrible people, terrible people.' And the Irish kids would say, 'No, no, we've been under the heel, I think, for 800 years.' And a little while ago, I did a talk with a friend of mine who's half Irish, half Yoruba, and we called the talk 'Tired of being Black, try being Irish.' [ZS laughs]

One of the things I also love is that you talk about these alternative histories or alternative narratives, and you mentioned some folk musicians, like the Shuffle Dance

Collective, who are bringing a new spin to some of these old songs, and sometimes including—and writing their own songs. And one of the people we're going to hear now, please, Mark, is Angeline Morrison. We'll talk about her and what she's doing for folk music.

[*Cruel Mother Country* by Angeline Morrison plays]

'O mother, my mother, cruel mother country,
How sweetly your siren-song sound o'er the sea!
If it weren't for your arms, an orphan I'd be.'

CG: We both love Angeline Morrison, don't we? Why do we love her? What's so great about her?

ZS: I love Angeline Morrison because she, well this song that you just heard is from an album that she made called *The Sorrow Songs*, and that came out a few years back. And they're a series of songs steeped in the old folk cadences and melodies, but they're new songs that she wrote that are inspired by the lives and experiences of real Black Britons over the centuries. And I saw her perform a few years back, and she was singing—they're quite dark, they're beautiful, they're quite melancholic, and they're dark. They are *The Sorrow Songs*, so perhaps that's unsurprising. And she goes around

to the folk festivals multiple times a year, and she sings these dark songs that are basically forcing often White audiences to confront the colonial past and doing it with grace and doing it in song, in a way that I think—in a way that reaches people in a way that sometimes the intellectual—on the intellectual level it's harder to accept. And she, actually, she sang at my book launch, and I got—as I mentioned, I'm not deep down folksy, my friends are not folksy at all, and she got the whole room singing these old folk songs. And there was just something about the magic of singing together. I saw people come out of their shells. I saw the power that singing these old songs, that deal with universal themes of love and loss, the power that they have to connect us, regardless of our backgrounds, regardless of our perspectives and where we're coming from. And so, as a channel for that spirit of folk and the unifying power of folk, I think Angelina is absolutely incredible.

CG: Yeah, she makes me think that folk music is pretty cool. In a way, you've found the centre of Britain through this book, I feel, a new centre that we ought to go to. [Music] So, let's put our hands together and thank Zakia.

[Applause and music]

ZS: Thank you.

[Music]

Presenter: Zakia Sewell was in conversation with Colin Grant. To hear more writers, go to writersmosaic.org.uk.

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