

# WRITERSMOSAIC

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## John Jackson

In Conversation with Jonny Wright

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[Music]

**Presenter:** This is *WritersMosaic, In Conversation*. Jonny Wright talks to John Jackson about writing for TV series and his own original scripts.

[Music]

**Jonny Wright (JW):** Hi, it's Jonny Wright here for *WritersMosaic*. I'm here with the wonderful writer, John Jackson. How are you doing, John?

**John Jackson (JJ):** I'm alright, thank you, Jonny. Pleasure to be here.

**JW:** So, what I've recently watched of yours: *Grantchester* and *Riviera*, which are two very different shows.

**JJ:** Yeah, quite a different—

**JW:** Two very different—and then I've read two of your original scripts. One's called *Tiger Bone* and one's called *Illegal*? And how do you jump between writing for someone else and then doing your own original stuff, and what is your voice in all of that?

**JJ:** Yeah, it's an interesting question. It's a big one, right? I think it's the big one for writers, is how do you make a living? And ultimately, you gotta do that. And how do you do your own thing? And they're not totally exclusive. On those shows, on *Grantchester*, even on *Riviera*, to a degree, you are bringing a bit of yourself. So, it's not like you're not doing your own thing on there. But you're right, the demands are really different. So—

JW: And just for people who haven't watched them, explain what kind of show *Grantchester* is.

JJ: Oh my gosh. Right, so, yeah, they're really different. So, *Grantchester* is a Sunday night—it started as a Sunday night, I guess, cosy crime would be the genre, show about a vicar – a Church of England vicar – and a policeman solving crimes in rural Cambridgeshire. Grantchester is a little town outside of Cambridge.

JW: Good elevator pitch.

JJ: Yeah, good elevator pitch. Story of the week adaptation based on the short stories and novels by a guy called James Runcie. It was a lot of fun. I wrote—I must've written on maybe seven or eight seasons of that show. So, probably after my initial start in soap operas, probably this show I wrote the most on.

JW: And what soaps were those that you started on?

JJ: Oh, God, you won't have heard of them. There was a short-lived soap called *Night and Day*.

JW: You're right, I have not heard of that.

JJ: You've not heard of that. It was like the turn of—I say turn of the century, it makes me feel so old. It genuinely was. It was, I think, 2001, 2002. Yeah, a soap opera that was on at like five thirty in the evening on ITV. And I think it went on for about a year. I hadn't written before that. I'd literally applied for a job in a newspaper because I thought I wanted to try TV.

JW: This was post-university, came up?

JJ: This was post—yeah, went to university. Came out of there, did think I wanted to write, but write novels, not that I knew how to do that either. Never got past page 30 of a novel – writing, I've read a few [JW laughs]. But realised in the process, *oh, I kind of like dialogue*. And then I guess that was the time of Tarantino, I suppose, was the big—when I was in college, he was the guy. And obviously, dialogue was such a big thing.

JW: With Kevin Smith as well doing the *Clerks*.

JJ: Yeah, *Clerks*. All of those things.

JW: The talkies.

JJ: Yeah, really a lot of talky films. There was a movie called *Things to Do in Denver When You're Dead*.

JW: I've heard of this movie. I've not seen it though.

JJ: Yeah, it was little known. But you know when you're a certain age, and something hits you—it's not even about it; it's about you and it and that moment. And yeah, there were a bunch of talky films. And I thought, *I like dialogue. I'd like to try that*. Didn't know how to do it. Didn't really understand how any of the industry particularly worked. That's half a lie. I had an idea because I'd done some work experience: a summer job, in an agent's. And so, I had seen a script and managed to hear on the grape vine how—what an agent does, what is a writer, what is a producer? All these things that were quite mystical to me growing up. There wasn't *Curb Your Enthusiasm* or *Entourage* that broke it down for you. You're trying to figure it out.

And I was like, *well, if I like dialogue, maybe I should try writing. How do you write?* Well, TV was like, there it is in the corner of the room. *I wonder how you get into that*. And I think

I spoke to an agent who was at the agency where I was doing work experience. And they were like, 'Yeah, you should try and get work in TV.' And they were the ones saying to me, 'TV is really going to blow up. You don't understand.' Because I think at the end of the '90s, it didn't—it felt like movies were so huge. And it's the opposite now, right? And I think they saw the streaming thing coming, Freeview, and all that. And I think that was the start of all those American shows, like *Sopranos* and *Six Feet Under*. I think you look back and you go, *those were really—*

**JW:** The golden age. The box set age.

**JJ:** Yeah, real start of the golden age. Well, this was pre-that. This was like we were just getting *Sopranos* on Channel 4. And Channel 4 had really gone out and got those shows. So, it was like, ah, so it's not just—no shade to these shows—but it's not just *The Bill* or *Eastenders* or—suddenly it was like—in my mind, I was a bit snooty about TV. I was like, *I like going to the cinema. That's where it's at.* But suddenly seeing those shows, I think it was like *Northern Exposure*, shows like that, it was like, *oh, TV could be something else.*

It was literally a company who was making the TV show, put in the newspaper, 'We are looking for a,' whatever it was then, 'script editor'. Didn't get that because I wasn't a

script editor. But when the researcher job came up, I got a phone call, and it was like, 'Do you want to come and do it?' And it was within that job that—it was kind of cool because you suddenly were around, *oh, he's the producer; she's the exec*. And then you figure out that's the territory, that's the land.

**JW:** And when you were reading scripts that came through the door, were you thinking you could do this? Were you thinking, *these aren't that good*, or were you like, *oh, these are amazing?*

**JJ:** I think I was just dumb. I was definitely—it's that courage of youth or whatever you call it, the naivete of youth. I don't even think I was cocky. I just was looking at the scripts going, *oh, okay, this is how it works*. I was getting to sit in on story meetings. And then, sure enough, one day, the chance came. A script was late or there was some reason that someone hadn't delivered or we couldn't get it in shape. Wherever it was, I was like, *I'll just write the scene*. So, I just wrote a scene and just handed it in with the script. I didn't even say I'd written the scene; I just filled in—there was a note, and it was like it needed this new thing, so I just did it thinking it needs doing. And then the producer was like, 'Who wrote this? This is a good scene. Who wrote this?' And I was like, 'I wrote it.' And then I just stayed as this, I guess, I don't know, super sub. Not even

super, just sub [JW laughs]. And I was just filling in and writing the odd scene here and there. And then, I don't think it's unfair to say this show was—

**JW:** On—this was specifically on *Night and Day*?

**JJ:** Yeah, on that soap opera, yeah. I just ended up writing it, like writing lots of episodes of it, kind of by accident, and that was my in.

**JW:** And did you find that gave you a good basis for the future? Because there are a lot of writers, thinking about Paul Abbott, Jimmy McGovern, who started on soaps, and have now got amazing careers. Do you find, yeah, how do you think it set you up for your career now?

**JJ:** Well, first, I am not in the company. I would love to be in that company.

**JW:** You should.

**JJ:** Yeah, I think it totally set me up, both in terms of figuring out stories. I think soap is amazing for—you're working with a lot of tropes, a lot archetypes, you're working with family, multi-age characters, and yeah, I think I probably wrote maybe 40 or 50

episodes of that, which is like, in a year, you don't get that kind of experience. I haven't written like that since then, that's 25 years ago, that's insane. So, A, you're learning all the story shapes almost without realising it. And as I say, I just didn't overthink it. But now, I would be crippled with the doubt and the, *oh, that's not going to work*, whereas then, you just kind of wrote. So, I think you learn that, and then, obviously, you learn the machine. A lot of continuity you're learning. Just the whole how the sausage is made, really. And then when I finished, I obviously wanted to continue writing because I didn't—but again, I didn't really know how to do that because I'd just been doing it without being reflective at all or understanding the economy of it. Then I was like, *how do I pay the mortgage?* Not even mortgage. *How do I pay the rent?* It was rent back then.

So, then I went to get a job in kid's TV. Kid's TV was almost learning how to do it, I won't say properly, but there was definitely much more process. It was a longer running of development. And I ended up writing on a couple of kid's shows. And it was almost like that was where it was like, *oh, I've done this, but now I'm going to learn the technique of it rather than just get it out*. And then while I was doing that, I wrote a TV spec script. And I think that was the one where that agent was like, 'I like this.'

**JW:** So, this was your voice.

JJ: Yeah, this is me. Let's talk about the second spec script, which is the TV script. I think it was called—it changed title a few times. But it was called *Bloodshot*, and it was about a family firm of contract killers. So—and it was, I guess, a crime show. It had action. So, I like both of those things. But it was a family show as well.

JW: From reading the specs and speaking to you and just hearing what you just said then, I feel that family is very important to you. And I wanted to read out just the dedication at the start of the *Illegal*. You said—you can tell the listeners what *Illegal* is about, but on the first page you say, 'For my mum and all the women like her, working a long way from home'. So, I just wanted you to expand on that.

JJ: Oh, man, I forgot I put that in.

JW: It's a great dedication.

JJ: Thanks, man. It was—*The Illegal* is about a Filipino nanny, who lives in a posh house with the posh family. But she's not treated particularly well. She's not treated—she's not abused in a traditional sense, as if she should be grateful for that, but she's not—they've kept her passport. They haven't sorted out her visa. They expect her to work really long hours.

**JW:** Not paying her overtime.

**JJ:** Yeah, they're not paying her overtime. But she then goes on to discover, via this—there's this unscrupulous journalist character who comes in, and through him, she discovers that the family are involved in illegal activity, TBC. I mean, it's a bit of a moving piece at the moment with that script. And the journalist wants to use her as his inside woman in this house. So, for me, it's a low status character, by virtue of their situation, being asked to take on a very high stakes job, very high stakes crime job. So, it's very much a—I wanted to write it as a thriller with a very unusual lead; a character who would traditionally be non-speaking, in the background of scenes, bringing cups or tea, or taking the kids is the star of the show. And—

**JW:** There was one scene I—the most memorable scene for me, and maybe it's because we actually touched on this before I actually read the script years ago, you mentioned this theme to me, but it's when something is happening to the journalist, and she's actually in the room, but nobody notices her. It's that invisibility which I love about it because it is, like you say, someone who traditionally would be a non-speaking part. And maybe as an audience member, you have also not even really noticed her,

but the show is about her, and it's her POV. And I love that her—it becomes her superpower, her invisibility. Well, in the—I don't know what becomes of her—

JJ: Mate, have you read the pitch? It says in the pitch that in the pitch. It says, 'Her invisibility is her superpower'.

JW: And yeah, I think that is absolutely, yeah, and it's written for those, yeah, the people you don't notice. And I sometimes feel like one of those people myself, and I'm sometimes on the other side and I'm sure I'm not noticing people. But I love that she's actually there. She's there when this really violent thing happens, and no-one notices her.

JJ: Yeah. Yeah, that's it. And that dedication was really—my mum was that person. Yeah, she was a cleaner, worked in a lot of posh houses in West London. Big Filipino community around Earl's Court, World's End, that sort of way. And yeah, a lot of my early memories are being a tag along, just sitting with—I can't remember what I called the kid in the show, Otto, or whatever. It's like playing with them but realising that you're there almost as a hired playmate because your mum is cleaning the place. And my mum wasn't an illegal immigrant, but I think that sense of status, big status gaps between people, is really what that show's about, and yeah, wanting a character to

really subvert that, that's obviously, in the end, she will win and will take down, whatever the crime ends up being, but from a position of what looks like weakness but hopefully she turns into strength.

**JW:** And then you've got *Tiger Bone*, and I really enjoyed that. And what I thought that did brilliantly was bridge two worlds, bridge the world between the Philippines and here, specifically in the North, in Wilmslow, in Manchester, and Greater Manchester, that's where it's set. So, yeah, tell us a little bit about *Tiger Bone* because I really enjoyed that script.

**JJ:** *Tiger Bone* is, yeah, I guess another crime thriller, but yeah, it's a bit funnier. It's about a mixed race, middle-aged dad. I don't know where I got the inspiration from. [JW laughs] Just sometimes it just comes.

**JW:** Married to a Northerner.

**JJ:** Married to a Northerner, and of my generation. So, growing up through the '80s and '90s. And I guess he's someone who is really assimilated. I think that's—he's—I think there's a—he's literally a white van man. He does posh kitchens, French kitchens. I think one of the lines in the treatment was like—what is it? 'White picket fence, white

wife, white life', in a way. And it pushes into that in a, hopefully, a fun way. And one day, this kid turns up from the Philippines. This 19-year-old turns up.

**JW:** Bong.

**JJ:** Bong Bong, who claims to be his son from a holiday romance that he had – I can't do the maths – 19 years plus nine months ago. And this just throws Rod's world into chaos. He's all sorts of—Rod is the dad. He's got issues with his own family at home. He has lost touch with his heritage. And what's more, poor Bong is also carrying 10 kilos of tiger bone powder.

**JW:** Which you think is drugs.

**JJ:** Which you think is drugs, but actually is to be used for Viagra, I guess [laughs]. But to be delivered to some particularly dangerous gangsters. It's very specifically about, I think, mixed, being mixed, mixed heritage. And I think in some ways, without reducing the character, I think Bong is, in a way, a racial superego for Rod. He's someone that he almost needs to stop denying.

**JW:** And Rod's mum had passed away as well and used to live in the house with them for a little bit. And she cooked meals and stuff. So, there was a lovely flashback scene of Rod eating Filipino food and his white wife trying to make that food for him as well. So, I love that, those complex questions of identity and just aspects of it, which came across in the script, I thought was great. And I liked it being Northern and it being set in the North as well. And yeah, it's just refreshing to read. And did you find it because—you grew up in West London, right?

**JJ:** Yeah.

**JW:** And you went to uni, was it Cambridge?

**JJ:** It was Cambridge, yeah.

**JW:** So, did you find—was that a big—did that make you feel more of an outsider going—how did you feel in London compared to going to Cambridge?

**JJ:** Yeah, that was quite, yeah, that was definitely a culture shock. Yeah, because I'd grown up in West London. Through that '80s, '90s period, it was mixed but still not super mixed. But then going to Cambridge was this whole other thing. And I think really

it was as much about class as it was anything racial. It was like—I'd gone to a boys' comprehensive school in Central London. And it was enough there. If you'd read the set text, you were already miles ahead [laughs]. Whereas—

**JW:** Did you find that? Were you miles ahead throughout your whole high school time?

**JJ:** I was a boffin.

**JW:** A boffin.

**JJ:** I was a neek. That's what my kids say: a neek. I was a neek. But yeah, I was definitely a boffin. I was definitely, yeah, did all right at school. I definitely tried. Then you go to Cambridge, and you're like, *oh my God, this is a whole other level of boffingdom*. It's like NASA. [JW laughs] I'm like NASA. And I'm the rubbish boffin. It's like you take the kids off the front four seats of every school bus, right? But it was like, some school buses are longer than others. So, they're ahead. Yeah, so there's definitely an alienation about going there, which, yeah, I think for sure has influenced my writing. I guess it's not an equitable thing to go a Filipino nanny at a posh house. It's like, oh no, poor Cambridge student. It's not the same. But you can extrapolate those things. And I guess with Rod, the character in *Tiger Bone*, the idea of assimilation and trying to fit in, the idea of a

monoculture, a dominant culture, that you're like, *oh, how do I cope with this*, is definitely something that is in him. But, yeah, I think Cambridge was a part of, for me, that—a really specific time. Because it was odd. It was like you think you feel one way in one context, and it was like, it doesn't [inaudible]. From zero to 18, you live in this environment, you feel like this person, then suddenly you're like, *oh, my God*, the world that you thought existed is totally different.

**JW:** And did you enjoy your time at Cambridge? Did you find your people?

**JJ:** Yeah, definitely. Loved it. And definitely found my people. And I feel like I got a lot from it. I did an English degree. Again, it was just exposure to be around that many books and to get to read them. And I hadn't really been to many plays before. We weren't really an art family or anything like that. So, to get to go to be in plays and—I didn't really do the footlights thing, but you could go and watch. There were loads of that kind of stuff. There were loads of societies or—I was in charge of the [inaudible], which is the common room video player. So, I got to keep that in my room. And what it meant was I would just have my movie nights, and we would just sit and watch classics, all these classic movies with smart people who just had opinions and learn and all that kind of stuff. So, it was, yeah, it was an amazing place. And I think I had started—I said I wanted to write novels. I did—I started to write there. That's where I started to write

short stories, articles, whatever it was, and in a way that I probably—I don't think I was particularly doing at home. I think at home it wouldn't have occurred to me. But you're around people who are doing that kind of thing, and it's like, *maybe I can do that*.

**JW:** And do you find you tap into different parts of your history at different times? So, for example, I like *Grantchester*, the episode I watched of yours, is set at an all girls' college when there's a murder. And then there's a *Riviera*; there's a yacht race episode that you've written. So, are you tapping into these things and people you've met at Cambridge for one time and then tapping into your mum's experiences and your experience at other times?

**JJ:** Yeah, yeah. 100 percent. *Grantchester* was great because so much of it is set in Cambridge collages. You're doing a lot of that. But also I had—my dad was really old. My dad was born in 1920. He was pretty old when I came along. Yeah, very old when I came along.

**JW:** My dad was old, too. 1920, that's even older.

**JJ:** Yeah. So, he would have been the same age as the Robson Green character in *Grantchester*. So, in a way, that '50s England made a lot of sense to me. Even though I

grew up in the '80s, at times, some of the values were very old world. So, *Grantchester*, for me, was this combination of, yeah, that experience, the Cambridge thing. But also, I think I wanted to be a priest when I was a kid.

**JW:** You think you wanted to be a priest?

**JJ:** Yeah. Looking back on it, I think there was a phase. I wanted to be a stuntman as well. And it was in that phase when you're like what do you want to do when you get older?

**JW:** I don't think there's ever been a priest stuntman.

**JJ:** I think it was like—oh, maybe that's the next show. *Stuntchester* [JW laughs].

[Music]

**JW:** Thank you so much for your time, man. It has been a pleasure. It's been too long. Catch up soon.

[Music]

JJ: Thank you, Jonny. It's fun.

[Music]

**Presenter:** John Jackson was in conversation with Jonny Wright. To hear more writers, go to [writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk).

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