

# WRITERSMOSAIC

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## Manjeet Mann

In Conversation with Sita Brahmachari

'Now look at you, standing still, wondering if you have the will. But inside you there's a weapon, a spark, a fire, a sound. Harness its strength. Don't wait. Don't hide. Don't fear the fight. Let it rise from the deepest part of you. Let it echo around the Earth, a sound that moves the stars and shakes the ground beneath your feet.'

— Manjeet Mann

[Music]

**Presenter:** This is *WritersMosaic, In Conversation*. Sita Brahmachari talks to Manjeet Mann about her career as an actress, playwright, and novelist.

[Music]

**Sita Brahmachari (SB):** I want to talk about your extraordinary career as an actress, as a playwright – I think you've got two plays under commission at the moment with National Theatre Scotland – and as the free verse novelist of three YA novels, two of which we're really going to discuss today, *Run Rebel* and *Roar*, your latest novel that I think came out in 2025.

**Manjeet Mann (MM):** It did, last October, yeah.

**SB:** And I read that, devoured it, actually, and have been really longing to speak to you about it ever since then. And the author of picture books too. And I believe that after you've done this podcast, you're going off to do an acting job after this as well. So, it's a very—it's an amazing career. And it's really interesting, I think, for people to learn that you can have this multifaceted career as an artist. Your stories have been recognised by the Carnegie Medal. One of the things I think must be so amazing is that the young people, young adults themselves who read *Run Rebel*, chose it as their choice, their *Shadowers' Choice Award* for the Carnegie Medal. And we've just come out of what most people call World Book Day, but us authors know that it's World Book Month. And I think you've just had your last school visit in World Book Month.

**MM:** Yeah, this morning. I've been in a different school every single day this month. It's been crazy.

**SB:** How's that been?

**MM:** Exhausting. I was exhausted after the first week, and I thought, *oh no, what have I let myself in for?* But it's weird, once you're in the school, it's fine. You get this second life, I guess, and the adrenaline gets you through. And you really feed off being in the classroom or the assembly hall, and you really feed off the kids, and it's wonderful. The real tiring thing, honestly, is just a different hotel every night and the travel, to be honest. If we could teleport places, I'd be really happy. But once you're in the schools, it's great, and you feed off that wonderful energy that kids have.

**SB:** So, what sort of age are your books, your free verse novels, for?

**MM:** So, it's secondary school. And my usual go-to are the year nines.

**SB:** Year nine, that's a tough—I think I've written one novel for year nine, so it's a tough call sometimes.

**MM:** It is tough. I think most authors, when we chat about YA, they're quite—I've heard authors say, 'I'm scared of year nine.' And I get it.

**SB:** Why do you think? Why do you think?

**MM:** Something happens in year 9. And we remember it, right, because we were in year 9.

**SB:** What age is year 9?

**MM:** So, that's 14, really, isn't it? Yeah, so, it's 14, 13 going on 14. And I think something happens where they just shut down. Hormones must be at a certain level, I don't know. But something kicks in, and they feel like – and this isn't a complete stereotype of every year nine because I've met some year nine groups that are really open – but on the whole, over the last four years I've been doing this consistently, as lots of authors do, something shuts down. It's almost like they get scared to—they just get scared to express themselves. Can't do anything that's outside the norm. Can't be seen as being interested; that's really uncool. Can't be seen as liking something. Everything has to be a little bit like, 'Oh, I might like it, might not'. A bit indifferent. But they just can't show

any kind of excitement for something, I think. So, when you crack them, that's really special. And I would say, even if that's how they might appear when I first go into the schools, by the end of the day, they're not like that. So, you know what I mean?

**SB:** Your novels speak right into that age range though, don't they? If I think about *Run Rebel* and the struggles that Amber has as a teenager growing up in the Midlands in that story, culturally with parents who are very far away from the school environment, and the battles that she's having to face in school, almost privately as well, between home life and school life, that must really resonate with many, many young people that you meet.

**MM:** I mean, that's what I've been told. I don't by any means feel like I'm coming in and changing lives or whatever. But I can just go on what I've been told, and, yeah, it does seem to resonate with a lot of kids, a lot of adults as well. As we know, YA has got a big adult readership as well. I do think books are for everybody, no matter the age that they're targeted at. But yeah, I hear a lot of adults saying, 'That was my upbringing, and I wish I'd seen that.' But definitely from the teenagers, yeah, it seems to, yeah, it hits a nerve, that one, I think.

**SB:** It's a very emotional read, *Run Rebel*, because I think what you expose in that story is the undercarriage of life for many young people that can't be kind of expressed in the school environment. So, mum and dad are both illiterate, but that's not something that's ever talked about at home, but that Amber is carrying through her days. Obviously, the patriarchy of the home life as well. You don't pull any punches about that. We really see Amber struggling and being controlled by her father in the story. But it feels very realistic. It feels like that can be the dual life that many young people live. I wonder how that resonates with your own growing up as a Midlands teenager, whether that's a question that young people ask you or they wonder about.

**MM:** Yeah, I mean, I'm quite honest. So, I do say at the very beginning that it's not 100% autobiographical, it's not my memoir, but I would say it's a good 80% there. So, there's a lot of my teenage years and a lot of my own experiences and what I went through at home and at school and how I felt. It's very much me in year nine.

**SB:** Do teenagers respond to that truth in the book, do you think?

**MM:** Yeah, they do. I think maybe that's something—that's one of the reasons why it resonates so much, that they're just—I think we're all a bit nosy, aren't we? So, when there's a story out there that's really somebody's life, it just—I think for them, that

might feel quite special and just like, *oh, okay, wow, it's like it's true*. And then of course, because I say, 'Oh, it's only 80%', or something like that, they're like, 'Which bits? Did you do this? Was there really a Gemma?' So, yeah.

**SB:** There's a really interesting aspect of that book which I haven't seen before really in YA books, which is the relationship between the bully and the bullied in the story. So, Amber is very much, well, bullied might be a very light word, abused, possibly, at home, but she goes on then to bully at school. And I think that's really honest in the book about where people get power and where people feel disempowered. And how do people respond to that?

**MM:** They always want to know, 'Is that bit true?' And I'm like, what I would say to that is, I like to have a little bit of mystery. But I've always been really interested in generational trauma. And that is a bit of a thread in all of my books.

**SB:** It's very much there in *Roar* as well.

**MM:** It's very much there in *Roar*.

**SB:** And *Crossing*, actually.

**MM:** And it is in *The Crossing* as well. So, yeah. And so, that's why it felt really important for Amber to also become a bully, because the traumatised traumatise, the bullied bully. So, it's there with Dad as well in terms of – I'm not excusing what he does at all – but I think there's always a reason behind everything. So, that's his reasoning, that he was a traumatised child and a traumatised young man coming up through life, which ends up in him, obviously, being quite a violent man. And I thought it was important as well that people aren't always likable and that I want kids to feel conflicted about how they feel about Amber. Because she can't just be this heroine and just, oh, just brilliant and courageous and wonderful. And she is those things, but also, there's this rub of, *oh, but she's a bully. She's making someone's life hell.* And I just really wanted to present that as a conflict for young people because we're not inherently good and we're not inherently bad. Most of us are just in the middle, and sometimes we sway towards one side or the other depending on what's happening in our lives. And I just think that's a really important conflict to kind of present.

**SB:** The fact that that is so important in the binary world of the way things are presented in social media. So, it's written—all of your novels are written, for young adults, are written in free verse. And I just—and *Run Rebel* was your first novel. And I'm just wondering what the decision was to write in free verse or whether it was

connected to your previous work as an actor as well. How did that come about, writing in free verse?

**MM:** Yeah, so, there was a couple of things. I think the main thing though was—no, I'll rewind. So, the first verse novel that I read was *The Weight of Water* by Sarah Crossan. And I wasn't a writer. I wasn't even thinking about being a writer at the time that it was presented to me. And my partner had read it, and he gave it to me. He said, 'I think you're going to love this book.' And I was like, 'Oh, right, okay.' At the time, because I wasn't a writer, I was like, 'Why are you giving me a YA novel? I'm an adult woman.' And I was just so drawn in, I was like, *wow*. I'd never seen a book presented that way, and it blew my mind. And I found myself really reading it out loud, seeing it way more visually than I would maybe a more traditional novel. So, it really spoke to the actor in me.

**SB:** Did it feel more like monologue, or did it feel—?

**MM:** Yeah, it felt like a dramatic monologue. It was just way more dynamic, I think. So, yeah, so, it just really appealed to that visually creative side that I have, which is I am a very visual person. And so, when it came to then writing my first novel, which maybe might have been a good six years afterwards or something, before I put pen to paper for *Run Rebel*, I'd been doing a lot of script writing. So, I came to writing through

playwriting. And actually, writing a verse novel, writing poetry, is very similar to script writing, I think, just in terms of, I mean, simply, less is more, you have to take away all the weight, and almost like in poetry, just those few lines, they have to do all the work. It's all the breath, it's the space where so much of the story is told. And I feel like poetry is exactly the same. The white space says just as much as the words themselves. Where you place the words on the page says so much about character. If there is one word that's on the opposite side of the page, that's perhaps me, the writer, saying to you, the reader, the character's feeling detached, the character's feeling lonely, their mind is elsewhere. If the words are all over the place, as in one of the poems in *Run Rebel*, she's overwhelmed in that moment. So, that's why there were just all these words all over the place. In script writing, you have a beat; that's the actor, you take a breath there, you're letting the audience in there, you're saying read between the lines with what's happening in that breath. I love it, and I think it comes naturally because for me it's very similar to script writing.

**SB:** And there's quite a lot of research to show that this is the year of reading and trying to have a boost in young people who have fallen out of love, it seems, with a lot of reading, especially as you get towards that year nine point in school where perhaps exam pressure is on. And I often hear people saying, 'I don't have time to read for pleasure now', which is a real shame. So, you're writing right into that age. But I think

the research shows that poetry is something that's really enjoyed by that age range as well. So, I imagine it's quite a visceral experience for readers to be able to read a story in one sitting sometimes. There's a lot of space, isn't there, in free verse writing, and in that space, you let the reader in, and I think that's partly the magic. Can we hear a little bit from the beginning of *Run Rebel*?

**MM:** Yeah, absolutely.

**SB:** And I picked these two books to talk about particularly because I think there's so much—although one, *Roar*, is set in Delhi and in India and in *Roar* spaces and *Run Rebel* is set in the Midlands, there is a lot of connection between class and caste and the containment of possibilities for the characters you're exploring in both of these books.

**MM:** Absolutely. Okay, so I'll read the prologue from *Run Rebel*. Here we go.

[MM reads from *Run Rebel*]

### **Prologue**

A wound.

Triggered  
by a beating.

It grew.

Thriving  
on neglect.

It swelled.

Flourishing  
on her spine.

When ripe,  
a clotted  
Blister.

It.

Crippled.

Her.

Weighing down

on her

too-small

frame

for her

adolescent age.

My. Mother.

Sat

hunchback,

working.

Silent.

Ignored and ignoring

pins of

prickly pain pulsing.

*What's wrong with your daughter?*

a neighbour asked.

*She's not*

*sitting or standing upright?*

*It's been weeks.*

My grandmother

looked at

my mother

as if she were

observing her

for the first time.

My grandmother

fell

to

the

floor.

*Crumpled like a sheet*

*falling from*

*a washing line,*

my mother tells me.

Slumped

on the back

of a motorbike,

my mother travelled

along dusty dirt tracks,

through several Indian villages

to the nearest hospital.

The poison

drained.

The rotten flesh

carved,

gouged,

burrowed

out.

My mother

concealed her

anger.

Her mother

showed

no

remorse.

The wound –

now

a scar.

The size

of a fist.

A crater  
buried between  
shoulder blades.

*It is the curse of being a girl,  
my mother tells me.*

*You are the property of your  
parents, husband, brothers.  
you endure,  
never question it.*

I question it.'

**SB:** You really question it in your novels [MM laughs]. It just keeps coming back. And obviously, in the times that we're living in now in which we're seeing so much the rise of misogyny and the normalisation of vile behaviour towards girls and women, especially online but in everyday life as well, we hear it from leaders of the world too, I imagine that your books are really resonating with a lot of young women but also

young men, boys, in classrooms as well. Your books seem to ask the boys, the young men, to step up. So, David, who's the romance in *Run Rebel*, he steps up, doesn't he?

**MM:** Yeah. Yeah, he's a good guy. As is [missing name], so, Ruby's husband.

**SB:** Indeed.

**MM:** And it was really important for me to not write a book where it's like all men are bad. It is just Dad, and the reasons why Dad does what he does are his own. And again, like I said, I don't excuse his behaviour at all, but [missing name] is a good man, and he wants to do better but has his marital problems with Ruby. And then you've got David, who is, yeah, the young boy who wants to step up and—

**SB:** Support his classmates.

**MM:** Support, exactly.

**SB:** And help her to run.

**MM:** Yeah.

**SB:** A theme in—we're going to look at these connecting themes between *Roar* and *Run Rebel*, but the theme that seems to keep coming back in your stories, and I think it maybe was part of the genesis of *Run Rebel*, is the freedom that comes for Amber in running and physical release. And she runs, if she's not allowed out of her home, she's running up and down the steps, isn't she, inside, to get rid of some of the stress and emotion that she's facing. I understand that you formed a running group as part of the creation of this book. How did that come about?

**MM:** Yeah, so, it was before it, actually. So, I started up a not-for-profit called Run the World, where I—at the time, I was working in Birmingham with a group of women who were survivors of domestic violence. And we would meet every week, and we would go for a run around the park, and then we would come back and we would do creative writing exercises. And at the end of our time together, which was almost a good six months, they created their own personal stories, and they recorded an audio walk. So, we partnered with the Birmingham Repertory Theatre. And we had this audio walk going round the park where the women, anonymously, recorded their stories, and people could take the same route that the women had ran, but as they were taking that same route and walking that route, they could listen to their stories and hear how the women grew in those six months in confidence and courage and belief in

themselves and how their lives changed a little during that time. But *Run Rebel* did coincide with that, so that group really helped in terms of the writing of *Run Rebel*.

**SB:** One of the aspects of the book that Amber finds, in this year of reading, she finds this book, *The Anatomy of a Revolution*. And the book is set in sections of the stages of that revolution. How much is writing a rebellious act for you?

**MM:** Oh, I guess a big one, even though I've never really thought about it like that. I guess I see it as my activism, I guess. That's what I've always called it. I always say, oh, I'm not one of these brave people that can stand on a stage and make those big speeches. I'm not a Greta Thunberg. I'm not a Malala. That's not me. I'm not a social media activist. You'll never see me sharing anything online. I try and actively stay away from it. But when there's something going on, either just personally in my own life, like *Run Rebel*, *Roar*, or it's going on outside, *The Crossing*, again, also *Roar* as well—

**SB:** With the refugee crisis and the hatred and the Hostile Environment.

**MM:** And where I was living at the time, in Kent.

**SB:** In Folkestone when you wrote *Crossing*.

**MM:** Yeah, so that was really inspired by, yeah, my time living in Kent. The way I rebel, I guess, is through work. So, it will be in a book; I'll try and write a TV show about it; I'll write a play about it. That's what I do. So, I don't know if that's seen as—I see as quiet activism.

**SB:** You went on to write *Crossing* as your second free first novel, which again, did extremely well and had amazing critical acclaim. And obviously, written into this Hostile Environment towards refugee people. I think it really moved me, that novel. And then, your third novel is *Roar*. And the reason why I really wanted to talk about the connection between these two novels is because one of them's set in the Midlands and one of them's set in Delhi, and yet, when I read *Roar*, last year I think it was, I did feel this fire in my belly reading this story. It's called *Roar*. It has this rage about the treatment of women not being protected by governments, contemporary governments, not being able to speak out, but also the great inequality of the caste system in India. Would you mind just reading a little bit of the beginning of that novel?

**MM:** So, this is from the prologue again. I do love a prologue.

[**MM** reads from *Roar*]

## **'The warrior within**

*In ancient times there were female warriors.*

*Warriors who led armies into battle*

*fought men twice their size*

*sizing them up on the field*

*before slaying them*

*fighting them and frightening them.*

*These warrior women*

*rode on the backs of lions.*

*Sword in hand they*

*revolted against kings,*

*gained control of kingdoms*

*and placed the kingly crowns on their own heads.*

*These long-forgotten warriors*

*fought for freedoms*

*thinking the battle was won*

*but here we are still fighting*

*still cycling through rising and falling  
folding in on ourselves  
trying to shrink ourselves and tell ourselves*

*Don't be bright, bold, brave*

*be small, sexy, smiley.*

*Be. Nice.*

*And when some have had enough*

*we all rise with a hashtag*

*surfing on clouds.*

*Finally! We rejoice. We're there.*

*There where?*

*When there are girls being banned from school*

*and married off too soon*

*and when her body is presented battered and bruised*

*there are picket lines*

*stripping her of her right to choose.*

*It's hard to remember there's a warrior inside us,*

*when there are TikTok stars  
who deserve to be behind bars.*

*It's hard to see that warrior  
but she's there  
you've just got to believe it.*

*Look in the mirror  
and you'll see her  
staring back at you  
saying you don't have to be extraordinary  
or have a gift  
or a special power  
some otherworldly god-like quality  
you don't need a sword a tiger, a boon  
you can do extraordinary things and be perfectly  
normal.*

*The warrior is in you.*

*The hero is in you.*

*Yes you sitting there one eye on the TV*

*one eye on your phone double-screening*  
*she's in you scrolling through socials sitting in a cafe*  
*and you still in bed past noon*  
*and you counting the pennies*  
*and you back from the night shift*  
*and you on the school run*  
  
*and you clock-watching in maths*  
*and you studying for your next exam*  
*and you back-chatting the teacher*  
*and you being bullied in the corner*  
*and you dealing with anxiety*  
*and you having to grow up before you had to*  
*and you who haven't grown up enough . . . yet*  
  
*and you*  
  
*and you*  
  
*and you.'*

SB: When did you start thinking about writing this novel?

**MM:** There's just one thing that I want to say because you talked about when you perhaps became aware of the caste system when you went to Calcutta. I mean, I was very aware of it growing up here first in the UK. It was very prevalent in my home. Everything was all about caste. I had friends—if I made a friend who was South Asian and Indian, the first question my mother would ask was, 'What's their name?' And if I gave the first name, she'd be like, 'No, no, no, what's her surname?' So, you'd give the surname, and she'd be like, 'Oh', and she'd know what caste they were. And if they were a lower caste, it was almost like she was saying something very bitter in her mouth. And I had a friend of mine, my best friend – she's still my best friend now, so many years of friendship – but she's of a lower caste, and she wasn't allowed to come to my house. So, I was just very aware of it, how it worked in this country. So, when I went to India, it wasn't a surprise. It was just, *oh, well, that's how it is.*

So, when I started thinking about *Roar*, the first seed was seeing—reading an article online about the rise in witch hunting in India. And as it predominantly affects the Dalits in India, who were previously known as the untouchables – they're almost outside of the caste system; they're almost seen as so low they're not even in the caste system – I knew that it had to be in there. But it's a weighty subject, and how do you talk about that when it's something that is in Indian—in the bedrock of Indian culture, I

suppose, for thousands and thousands of years. Yeah, violence against Dalits in India, men and women, but more women, but definitely men as well, is just so prolific.

**SB:** Your book feels like a very political book, *Roar*.

**MM:** Yeah.

**SB:** It doesn't just talk about now. The witch hunt isn't just happening now. You go right back, don't you, in history to a particular witch hunt.

**MM:** Yeah, the only one that's ever been recorded on Indian soil. So, there might have been more earlier, but the first one that was recorded are the Santhal trials in the 1700s.

**SB:** How did you find out about those trials?

**MM:** Going to the British Library and doing many, many, many months of research. And when I found it in a book, it was like I'd struck gold. But in terms of *Roar*, I always say in schools, set in India, but it's a universal story. Shalini says to Rizu, 'Witch hunts are happening all over the world, just depending on where you're from, it presents

itself in a different way.' And I always say, you don't have to look too far from our front doors in this country to see who the witch hunt is against. As soon as our head is turned and we're going, *oh, yes, those people are the ones to blame*, then your mind is elsewhere, you're just believing everything, and you're not looking at the people who are really benefiting, who are really the cause of all the issues in society. And it's not just our country, it's happening worldwide. Absolutely, and actually, I had a girl at the very first session on the start of World Book Month, and I explained what happens to Rizu, her best friend accuses her of being a witch, her ex-best friend accuses her of being a witch—

**SB:** Because she thinks she's stolen her boyfriend.

**MM:** Because she thinks she's stolen her boyfriend. The argument's captured on phones, and everybody starts to believe that she's a witch, and it starts in the school and then spreads to the whole community. And there was just this one young student, and she was like, 'But how? Why would people believe it?' She just thought it was ridiculous. And I said, 'I can see how you would think it's ridiculous but look at how many people turn out onto the streets in August 2024, for example. All the hate marches, all the far-right racist marches that were going on up and down the country, that's misinformation that was spread on social media. And look how quickly that

spread. And suddenly, you're having people burning down hotels where there are humans inside, but you're told that they're evil and that they are nothing, and the language that is used dehumanises them to such a point that thousands of people take to the streets and think that it's okay to torch it.' So, do—and she was just like—you could just see it sinking in and just clicking and like, *oh, I see*. So, as soon as you start to, in this case, call somebody a witch, and then it spreads to the rest of the home. Then it's the mother's a witch, and actually, she started this curse a long time ago, and suddenly, it all just spreads. This family is dehumanised, and so, it's okay for an angry mob and a witch doctor to come to the door with tragic consequences.

**SB:** At the end of *Roar*, I know you said you love a prologue, but you also love an epilogue.

**MM:** I do love an epilogue.

**SB:** I don't think it's a spoiler for the plot to ask you to read the epilogue because I think it just shows you a little bit the epic journey you take us on in this novel.

**MM:** Hope so. Yes, this is just the very end of the epilogue because otherwise it'll be a massive spoiler. Here we go.

[MM reads from *Roar*]

“Now look at you, standing still, wondering if you have the will. But inside you there's a weapon, a spark, a fire, a sound. Harness its strength. Don't wait. Don't hide. Don't fear the fight. Let it rise from the deepest part of you. Let it echo around the Earth, a sound that moves the stars and shakes the ground beneath your feet. So rise, my warriors, rise. Create your ripples, let them spread, let them soar, and change the world forevermore, [music] because even the smallest ripple can become a wave, and every whisper a roar.’

[Music]

**Presenter:** Manjeet Mann was in conversation with Sita Brahmachari. To hear more writers, go to [writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)

[Music]

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