

WRITERSMOSAIC

Foday Mannah

In Conversation with Bashabi Fraser

'I'm a dance dad. Right up to COVID, my daughter used to dance. Again, when you think about gender, that was a fascinating job. I took her to dancing just because I was a teacher, which meant I was free on the weekends. But whenever I'd get there, it'd be me with all these mums.'

— Foday Mannah

[Music]

Presenter: This is *WritersMosaic, In Conversation*. Bashabi Fraser talks to Foday Mannah about his debut novel, *The Search for Othella Savage*.

[Music]

Bashabi Fraser (BF): Welcome, Foday. And thanks for joining us.

Foday Mannah (FM): Thank you so much, Bashabi. And thank you so much for having me.

BF: Before we talk about your novel, could you tell us about your own background and how you see your journey as a writer? I know that you were born in Britain. You did go back to your home country for your education, and you had more of an education, then you came back here, so lots of degrees. And now, you're an established Scottish writer.

FM: Yes, well, I'm not so sure about the established part, but definitely a writer. Yeah, I'm a child of two societies in the sense I think, back in the day, what tended to happen was people who came from the diaspora—people who came from Africa and Asia, I think the thinking was you came to Europe and studied, but the thinking was you always went back to the home countries to give back. And I think that's exactly what happened with my parents in the sense that we were born in London, but we went back to Sierra Leone in the late '70s. So, I went through primary school, high school, and university in Sierra Leone. But after I finished university, then I decided to come back to the UK,

stayed briefly in London but didn't quite like it, so moved up to Scotland. And I've stayed here ever since. And now, I work as a teacher in a highschool, yeah.

BF: And your journey as a writer?

FM: Well, writing was something I always did. I think the origins of it came again from high school. I went to an all boys boarding school. And when we got to S6, we decided to more or less establish a newspaper. So, the origins of my writings were actually non-fiction. So, the newspaper was called *The Satellite* newspaper, the thinking being it was a metaphor as satellites more or less observe everything and report them in terms of news. So, what we decided to do was more or less a bit of a rag. And it was very basic in the extreme in the sense that it involved handwriting articles on a big sheet of paper, and then we put the paper inside a glass noticeboard for people to read. So, that's more or less what it started. And then from then, when I came to the UK, I remember doing a degree in international conflict and cooperation. And I think I was a bit restless. I just thought, *what else could I do a degree in?* I just thought, *well, actually, creative writing*. So, I did the degree, and then from the degree, of course, part of the degree was you were expected to produce pieces. And then that finished, and then of course, the pieces get sent off. And eventually, one of my ideas was picked up for a novel. Yes.

BF: That sounds marvelous.

FM: Thank you.

BF: You make it sound very easy, but I'm sure it hasn't been easy, especially because of what you want to write and how you want to be perceived as a writer, am I right?

FM: Yes, I think the industry in general, I think it's very complicated. It's not easy to access at all. And I found that I think when I, for example, I got the degree in 2014, 2015, it took about five years for me to be shortlisted for a short story prize. The way I looked at it, I think many people, when they come into writing, I think are dreaming to get a novel and an agent. But I was a bit different. I remember going to Philadelphia in 2004, and a friend had taken me to a nightclub. And in the night club, there were quite a lot of rappers who wanted to become more or less established rappers. And what they tended to do was they released things called mixtapes, which were like CDs of their music. What the mixtapes did was more or less it would generate some kind of interest and a bit of buzz before the album came out later. So, I took that same thinking. I thought to myself, *okay, let's put the novel to one side for now and focus on, for example, short pieces*. And that's what I did. So, more or less I wrote quite a lot of

short stories. The other thing about short stories, Bashabi, when you think about it, the clue is in the name. A short story competition, for example, might be 2,500 words or 3,000 words. So, I decided to enter quite a lot of short story competitions: Manchester Short Story, Bristol, Commonwealth, Bridport. And I started to get quite a lot of success in quite a few of them. So—

BF: You've been shortlisted for quite a few.

FM: Quite a few, yes. So, that gave me the validation and the momentum to more or less think, *actually, this is something I can build on*. So, before I even started to query agents and try to get more or less published, I'd already established this foundation with short stories. And then from then, of course, it went from there.

BF: Wonderful. Would you like to share at least one of your short stories with us before we move on to *The Search for Othella Savage*?

FM: Yeah. I think, when you think about it, of course, I wrote *Yellow Woman*. My father died in 2016, in Sierra Leone, in January 2016.

BF: Sorry.

FM: That's okay. So, it was a case of going back to Sierra Leone. And it was just in the aftermath of the Ebola epidemic. And so, there was this consciousness. You think about more or less when you get to Sierra Leone, one of the things you do is more or less shake people's hands to sympathise with you. And I remember when they were saying, 'No, you can't shake people's hands because even though the Ebola is finished, but there's still the [inaudible] in the background.' So, I remember seeing this giant poster, it was more or less advertising the precautions to take when it came to Ebola. And what stood out was the fact that there was a woman on the poster, and she had this yellow hazmat suit on. And the thinking was more or less the particular woman was presented as more or less being an outlier. Because the thinking was that such a grim task should not be undertaken by a woman, it should more or less be a man's job to deal with death.

So, I used that to write a short story about this woman who is the only member of an Ebola team who go to retrieve dead bodies. So, for example, somebody dies from this disease, they call the centre, and they take the bodies. This was a true task. So, I more or less used her as a conduit, more or less where you have this yellow woman, and she becomes like a mythical figure. The woman turns up wearing yellow to take away these dead bodies. And she becomes ostracised in her area where she lives. Her husband

leaves her. And her husband takes the child with him because more or less she's doing things that are considered not to be feminine. So, that was more or less a short story I wrote. So, in the story, of course, it's a typical day in her life when they get the call, she wakes up in the morning, they get the ambulance, they go collect the dead body, and they take the dead body to more or less where it has to be disposed of. But it's more or less within that, she also gets interviewed by a journalist from overseas who follows them along. So, that was more or less what I did.

BF: It's about, again, a woman. And I find that your novel, which won the Siewcharran Prize, Mo Siewcharran Prize, and also the Bloody Scotland Debut prize, shortlisted for it, could you share with the audience what the novel is about – I've read it, so I know – and what led to you write it? Because women are the central characters, and your—if I may call her the narrator in way because we see through her perspective, Hawa Barrie. Would you like to tell us a little bit about what made you pick the story, the plot, and about the women characters?

FM: Yes, absolutely. Again, Bashabi, again, it was responding to themes. When I finished my degree, you enter quite a lot of competitions, and there will always be a theme. So, for example, I remember entering the [missing name] Prize because it more or less had to be about food and drink. So, when it came to this, the thinking, the Mo

Siewcharran Prize, I think the thinking is ethnic minorities do not tend to write crime. And I think when you think about a history of literature, I think we are not burdened, but I think a lot of our literature tends to more or less look at big historical issues, think slavery, think Jim Crow, think immigration, think Windrush, think more or less things like that. So, the thinking was more or less at times, we don't, for example, see many Black writers, for example, do crime or fantasy or children's books. So, the call from the Mo Siewcharran Prize was specifically for a crime novel. I, to be honest, I read quite a lot of crime as a kid. So, I just had this idea about something that happened in Edinburgh, actually, around about 2007: a nurse was abducted from her house in around about December, deep winter, Christmas time, was locked in the boot of the car, and she was in there I think about three or four days. And the person who did it was actually from South Africa, a fellow called Justice [missing name]. Talk about irony that was, his name, to do something to her. So, I used that as a foundation point to create this novel about this kind of person who preys on women, who locks them in the boots of their cars, and then, of course, I connected that to more or less religion and the insidious nature of religion and things like that. So, yes, fundamentally Because of the court case involved, the woman, I just thought maybe I should use that and take it forward, so that's what I did.

BF: We won't have spoilers. I want people to read the novel because I was totally hooked from page one. And I was just wondering about the title, *The Search for Orthella Savage*, the eponymous character. Do you want to say a little bit about your choice of the name and her role in the novel, which Hawa Barrie, who's her friend, then adopts the role of the sleuth, self-appointed sleuth? So, Orthella Savage and the naming of her.

FM: Yes, very much, again, a lot of her experiences are my own experiences, in the sense that she was born in the UK but then moved to Sierra but then comes back again. I've always just liked, of course, from *Orthello*, I always quite liked a female Orthello. I remember watching—there was a television show once, and there was an Orthella character, and I remember thinking, *that's a beautiful name to have*, because it symbolically represents so much, I think, about Black strength and things like that. So, I used the name Orthella, of course. And of course, when you think about it, she is very—even though she, at times, veers – again, no spoilers – veers into dark avenues, but fundamentally, she is very socially conscious, very, very intelligent. Her mother lectures Black literature, for example. So, she is very grounded in terms of more or less what is progressive politics and actually very, very left wing. So, I just thought to more or less use her as a kind of representation of this idea of more or less she has this idea that I want to empower women, I want to do something positive to these women living

in Scotland. But again, things at times, the best intentions at times, go askew. And that's exactly what happens to her.

And her friend is Hawa Barrie, who does not have the privilege or was not born in Scotland but comes here to study. And they're friends, of course, very, very close friends. So, once Orthella disappears, then Hawa thinks, *I have to go out of my way to find my friend*, especially as another woman from within this same sphere has disappeared, so there's something quite dark and dastardly happening here. So, of course, like you say, Hawa becomes a sleuth who thinks, *I have to do something to find my friend*. Particularly as the police maybe, because she's a woman of colour, the police are maybe not as engaged as they should be. So, it becomes a case of she believes she has a unique perspective. This is not just a criminal act but it is also to do with this culture: I am from this culture, ergo, I should be able to provide a bit more context and a bit more help in terms of what's happening.

BF: I think I was quietly interested in Hawa Barrie being a [missing name] scholar. And you have this very intellectual girl, but she's quite vulnerable as well because she needs the support of community, she needs a place to stay in which she can afford. And this is when the two very different sets of characters, on the one hand we have the women, [missing name], who's American but Black American, who wants to know more about

her roots, and she's, of course, she's a singer. And you were mention rap, and, I mean, this whole tradition of blues and jazz is what has made the world what it is, where we all identify with that rhythm that comes with the whole idea of Black poetry and Black music, if I can call it that. But there's [missing name], this talented woman, who's made it. And somehow she reminds me of Shug Avery in *The Color Purple*.

FM: Yes, that's a beautiful comparison. Yes, it's a beautiful comparison.

BF: The blues singer, who then becomes protector for *Celie* in *The Color Purple*. Would you like to say about your choice?

FM: Yeah, Bashabi, honestly, I'd never thought it until you said it. That's a beautiful comparison. And when you think about it, absolutely, the parallels are very, very obvious, even though I've never realised them. I just quite like—many people read the book, and it's interesting reading reviews online when you speak of—if someone sees [missing name] almost like a reader proxy in the sense that when she asks Hawa questions about Sierra Leone, it's an opportunity for the reader to learn about Sierra Leone. So, when Hawa explains to [missing name] this is what happens, it's more or less explaining to the reader this is what happens.

And when I wrote it, I never really thought about that. But, yeah, music is, I think, very, very essential to the story. I'm very much into blues and jazz but also much more modern forms like R&B and hip hop. So, even when she meets [missing name] in the hotel room earlier on, that's what [missing name] says, that I have—I even created a whole musician called [missing name], who's totally—she's not real at all. I remember one of the interviewers actually asking me that, 'We've gone online, and we've searched for this [missing name], and we could never really find her.' And I'm like, 'No, no, no. I've just made it up completely.' Of course, [missing name] in thinking Arabic or Islam is like an angel. So, I just thought that's a beautiful name to have this singer. And [missing name] says, 'I worked with [missing name] in the studio [inaudible].' Hawa, of course, finds this fascinating because she listens to [missing name] and thinks, *oh, dear Lord, you actually worked with this pop star*. So, they, of course, they develop a friendship. And it, of course, becomes about hair, Black hair, when she says, for example, 'Are there any people in Edinburgh who do Black hair?' And she says, 'My friend does it.' So, there are all these links to more or less Black culture and Black things like that.

And of course, at times I think, when you think about ethnic minorities, and you think about you and I, myself – you are from India, I am from Sierra Leone – at times we think we get lumped together. And I always talk to people like, 'No, no, no. Even within India itself,' and you would be able to tell it much better, Bashabi, 'there are so many

strains of culture.' And the same thing happens in Sierra Leone where they speak, for example, like 17 different languages. So, a Black person from America and a Black person from Africa might have skin colour in common, but their cultural more or less vistas or what they more or less have is significantly different. And I thought it was important to more or less important to show that you have [missing name] on one side who wants to know.

And I think for a long time it was actually very much in fashion for many people who were, for example, American to try to connect to their roots. That became a thing. I think I mention in the novel that Oprah Winfrey does that, where they will get a doctor to test your DNA and say, 'Oh, Bashabi, even though you are from basically New Jersey, your ancestors came from the democratic republic of Congo.' And everyone goes [cheers]. So, there is that kind of thing that happens where she believes, *actually, I am a sister. So, I need to connect.* So, meeting Hawa becomes an opportunity for her to, even though it's a crime novel, but it's also a chance to look at culture and things like that. [Inaudible]. And, of course, she sings. She sings when they go to the karaoke, she joins in Edinburgh. But she also sings at the wedding in Sierra Leone. So, there's a fascinating thread of her being more or less projecting or sharing her gift with people.

BF: A gifted girl. And you talk about Sierra Leone, and it's very important for you and for the reader to know that Sierra Leone has its own distinctive culture. But when Hawa is Scotland, she is in a community within a community. And community is very important, isn't it, in the novel, in Sierra Leone? And this is where the very shady character of Pastor [missing name] comes in and the role of church. Do you want to speak a little about your choice of the theme here about the role of religion, of Sierra Leone culture, of community?

FM: Yes, I think religion is intrinsic. You know yourself, Bashabi, I think where we come from, religion is more or less absolute, be it Islam, be it, for example, Sierra Leone is about 50:50 down the middle, half Christianity and half Islam. And my thinking growing up in Sierra Leone is if you can harness that power, if you can convince people that I am a proxy to a higher power, that is significant power to yield, and that's what these pastors and preachers do. A lot of them are more or less slick oil salesmen. They are charlatans, there's no two ways about it. But they are able to convince people that I am speaking, I am here as a representative of God, ergo, if you want something, you need to come through me.

And this ties out to – again, I'm sure you know about this, Bashabi – this ties out to women. Because I think a lot of the times in societies in general, women, especially

where I come from, are always presented as being more or less defective in the sense that there are so many things that are considered to be stereotypical markers of validation when it comes to being a woman. For example, childbirth. Growing up in Sierra Leone, if you did not have a child, there was something wrong with you. You had to get married, but not just married, but you had to get married to a 'good man'. And a good man in our culture is more or less a rich man, who could be abusive, who could be basically promiscuous, but once he has money, he is seen as a good man. And so, I more or less call these things and tie them together.

My late mother was a good example. She speaks marrying my father in the '60s in Sierra Leone and not being able to get pregnant for five years. And she speaks about the mental trauma of that. They used to say to my father – my father is called Foday just like me – they used to say to my father, 'Foday, you have married a fellow man.' What that more or less meant was you have married a woman who cannot produce children, ergo, she is a man. And my mother speaks, for example, about coming to the UK and getting pregnancy. And her thinking was maybe because there was no pressure on her, that once she moved from Sierra Leone to here, she had three boys in London. And it is actually quite sad.

BF: It says something.

FM: It does, doesn't it? It just happened. And even when she died, I mean, she died at 52, she died quite young.

BF: Very young.

FM: Very, very young. I remember the funeral because, of course, her people were quite angry with my father because they broke up. But they kept saying that—in our culture, people, when they are angry they say it aloud. And it was almost like them chanting, 'When you got married to this man, his people said that you were infertile, there was nothing good about you. But look what God did for you, you have three lovely boys.' So, these things stick in your mind about how women are represented. And I'm sure you know that yourself, Bashabi, where we come from, where you have to have a child otherwise—so, it's actually quite sad the way women are treated. So, that fundamentally means that women are more open to exploitation. You want a child? Come to church. You want to go overseas? Come to church. You want to get a good man? Come to church. So, the church, therefore, finds itself in a position to exploit these women, and that's what happens.

BF: I think it's an exploration that takes the reader right through to the community where women are given a voice by you, as a writer. So, thank you for doing that.

FM: Thank you very much.

BF: I also want to look at the cultural association. Just want you to talk about—I was really taken up with the food. I know where people bring food to a gathering, they share, they have music, they dance. But you also bring recipes in. So, is there a place in Edinburgh or Glasgow where one could have Sierra Leone food?

FM: I don't know Sierra Leone, but I think African food. Sierra Leone food, definitely, I think women I know or people I know, for example. I think I do that in the novel. There's a hairdresser in Glasgow who actually serves food also. So, I know women who more or less do that unofficially. So, for example, you more or less put out a contract saying, 'I want you to make,' for example, 'cassava leaves.' They cook them, they cook it in their house, and bring it to you. Or maybe they sell it in little bowls. That's what happens in Glasgow, where you can, for example, you go get your hair done, and then she also has bowls of cassava leaves that sells to you and says, 'I don't have money to more or less open a restaurant, that's beyond me, but I can run it from my house where by you tell people, and I drive and deliver.' So, it's a very, very basic system.

BF: It's a [missing word] kitchen.

FM: It's a [missing word] kitchen. And that's exactly what they do. And the same thing applies to functions. That's exactly what happens. My daughter who was born, and she loves functions [inaudible]. And I think she likes the drama of the functions. Because even though she's Black, she's very, very Scottish. So, whenever we go, she laughs at—you know it yourself, we are very different the way we, I think ethnic minorities from Asia and Africa, interact with each other. And she finds it fascinating. We all bring food, and there's a story, and everybody brings their kids. So, for example, it might be a graduation party, it might be a wedding party, it might be a christening party, but it's the same format: everybody brings a dish, everybody gets dressed up, everybody's there. We dance, we sing, we celebrate, and everybody goes away again. So, that is quite key in terms of diaspora, in the sense you have these thriving communities. And it's not just Sierra Leone, and I'm sure that you know yourself, Indian, Senegalese, and Gambians and Koreans, they all have these little clusters. And it's a fascinating thing that you come together, you celebrate, and everybody goes back to their life in the UK. You come together and celebrate. So, that's what happens in the novel. There's a bit where she takes [missing name] to a party in Glasgow. That's exactly it. And of course, the lady who has married a white man has a big house says it to her, 'You need to

come more. Edinburgh's not far to Glasgow. You need to come and see me a bit more.'

Things like that. That's what this—

BF: I can see the realism in your novel. That's why food is so central to Sierra Leone, African, ethnic minority culture. But I also was struck by the fact that when Hawa went back, she always went to meet her professor of Black literature, who is Orthella's mother, and they speak about Alice Walker, Langston Hughes, and Toni Morrison. So, are these writers who have inspired you?

FM: Absolutely, yes. Without a shadow of a doubt. When I—it's a fascinating thing I think, and I'm sure you know this, you are a professor of literature yourself, Bashabi, you know this better—

BF: Retired.

FM: Retired, Bashabi, but you know this better than me. I think our degrees back in Africa, in Asia, are fascinating if you study an English degree because you study everything. And that's what happened. So, you do the English classics, you do Shakespeare and the drama of his age, you do metaphysical poetry, romantic poetry, but then, because, of course, we're Black, we also have to do Black literature. So, that's

more or less African literature, also Caribbean literature, but also African American literature. So, you study all the writers you mentioned, Alice Walker, Langston Hughes, also Lorraine Hansberry, [inaudible], Richard Wright, *Black Boy*, *Native Son*, books like that. So, I just thought to have a professor of Black literature as Orthella's mum, especially as she's very, very socially conscious, very intelligent, I thought that would be a good position for us to have. Of course, her father is dead. Her father went into politics, and he dies. But her mother, I thought, that would be a good example to have this very powerful figure, very much like yourself, this professor. I thought, yeah, whenever she comes and whenever she speaks, she has this whole aura about her. I thought that would be quite interesting. She's very much Orthella's mother. Orthella basically is cut from the same cloth as her mother: intelligent, assured, very, very socially conscious, and understands how to make things happen, yes.

BF: And very intriguing too, so for the reader, that's very important. You don't lay anything on plate, Foday. You draw the reader in, and you take them on a journey, and then things are sorted out slowly. And I think you leave them very satisfied at the end. So, what are you working on now?

FM: Well, I've got a few things, like I said. I have—the initial novel I wrote as part of my degree was based on a civil war. And like I said, I think I chatted to you a bit off air

earlier on, it was to do with child soldiers. But I think how we classify child soldiers is quite problematic, in our culture especially. Again, it looks at gender in the sense that there are lots of rehabilitation programmes, United Nations, World Bank, pumping money into Sierra Leone to more or less rehabilitate these children who have been traumatised by war. But when we think about child soldiers, the classification is actually very much exclusively boys. And I think we struggle as a society to categorise girls affected by conflict.

So, the story more or less is an interesting story because initially when I started to write it, the thinking was to have a street boy who pretends to be a child soldier to gain access to this centre that has electricity and running water and food. But midway through the story, I remember thinking there's a bit where girls get admitted, and I thought to myself, Bashabi, *well, actually, the story is not the boy anymore, the story is actually the girl's*. So, I remember taking it back and rewriting it and more or less starting it at the front and saying, no, no, no, the real story here is not the boy, the real story is the girls who come to this centre. And of course, they're faced with all kinds of prejudice and discrimination, in the sense that, for example, if you think about a lot of them have more, for example, suffered rape during the war, but that is seen as a stigma is against them. You're defiled, you're unclean, you're dirty, you shouldn't be here, there's something wrong with you. So, it's more or less this dynamic about

how—and that's war, but that's society in general. I think society is incredibly—you don't need me to tell you, I mean, you're a woman of colour yourself, Bashabi, but, yeah, I think society is incredibly discriminatory when it comes to women, especially women of colour, and even when we talk about kids. So, even when we talk about rehabilitation, boys or about the girls. So, that's more or less what I've been looking at.

I'm also thinking I'm a dance dad or I was a dance dad. Right up to COVID, my daughter used to dance. Again, when you think about gender, that was a fascinating job. I took her to dancing just because I was a teacher, which meant I was free on the weekends. But whenever I'd get there, it'd be me with all these mums. So, that's a fascinating dynamic. Few dads, very, very few dads,, but predominantly it should not be a gender task. You're literally in a car, drop off, pick up. But what does society do? It has to be—there's even a programme called *Dance Moms* on television, and it's all these mums shouting at each other. So, I also thought that would be quite a good thing to explore, not just a man but a man of colour amidst all these women. And they were lovely to me, they used to take care of me, so that was quite good. They were lovely to me. But it was fascinating thing. Me and Mandeep are going to Blackpool and Liverpool because we used to travel far to Dundee and Aberdeen for dancing, just you and the child in the car, you go off and away. And there's everything, costumes and changes and jewelry and what you have to do. It was a fascinating life, and I'm thinking, yeah,

there's something there worth pursuing in literature, I think that would be good to look at.

BF: Exploding the stereotype. And that's what you do. It's been wonderful having you, Foday Mannah, author of *The Search for Orthella Savage*. Thank you for being with us.

FM: Thank you so much.

[Music]

BF: In Conversation with *WritersMosaic*. And I look forward to your two books, one on dancing and one on girl soldiers.

[Music]

FM: [Laughs] No pressure.

[Music]

BF: No pressure.

[Music]

Presenter: Foday Mannah was in conversation with Bashabi Fraser. To hear more writers, go to writersmosaic.org.uk

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