

## A matter of survival

Maggie Gee

Writers are ungovernable creatures. For me, writing began as a way of expressing what I couldn't say out loud. Coming from an over-controlled household where saying the wrong thing might cause an explosion, writing felt like a matter of survival.

Why did I write *The White Family* in 1995, a novel about British racism, mostly white against black but also referencing black against white, and internal divisions among people of colour? Most of the characters were seen from inside, although I am a white writer. It didn't go well, to put it mildly. I was in the middle of a two-book contract, but my mainstream publisher rejected the book and then 16 publishers followed suit. I have the rejection emails in a file. Some are classic: 'a very dark book'. At least one publisher kindly explained that as the UK was now 'post-racist', the book was out of date. Really?

Seven years later, that 'post-racist' nonsense was no longer tenable. The Macpherson Report (1999), which examined the murder of Stephen Lawrence, confirmed UK police were 'structurally racist'. Britain was no longer so pleased with itself. An independent publisher, Saki Books, published *The White Family* (2002), there were rave reviews and it was shortlisted for the Women's (then Orange) Prize and the International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award.

Since then, I've written *My Cleaner* (2005) and *My Driver* (2009), two novels told through alternating voices, one white, one black, a satire on the colonial relationship between Britain and Uganda. The key decision was putting both characters in the first person. At first I felt a bit hesitant and wrote Ugandan Mary Tendo in the third person, white Vanessa in the first, but it didn't work: the power was unequal. I just had to be both people. (NB, first I filled a dozen notebooks with research, based on two long trips to Uganda and talking to Ugandans in the UK, much of it notes from one-to-one listening.)

I had better go back to the beginning, childhood. I wrote diaries and poems in my bedroom, but the brevity of poetry felt constricting and so did the poem's single perspective – I often saw multiple sides of things. Aged 19, I broke out into a novel.

Novelists creating characters are bursting out of the cage of selfhood. We become other, erase the lines. The characters who come to us don't obey rules. They are people we deeply desire to be, to know about, and from the inside. Soon they begin to write themselves. The more different they are from us, the more liberating the process. Scientifically and philosophically, you might argue that skin colour and culture 'don't matter' as much as deeper human differences. But because of colonial and economic history, our society has linked race and culture to unequal power and privilege. They stem from a story of horror and pain, and lead to a forest of rules and taboos in whose shadow we cower, forever apprehensive, nervous about 'getting it wrong', or of the new crime, cultural appropriation.

I was in my 40s when Birkbeck College published as a pamphlet my text for their annual William Matthews Lecture, 'How May I Speak in My Own Voice: Language and the Forbidden' (1996). I chose the subject: a list of the taboos and silences I knew I was writing against. Among them were class, race and gender. (Thirty years later, I notice that 'May I' in the title: now I do not ask permission.)

Frightened for the first few decades of my life, I decided not to continue like that. I was around 15 when I learned all families were not like mine. At first you just think, 'This is the way things are' – a shouting father, a frightened mother, although there was always

love in the house. Occasionally there was more than shouting; my father and adolescent brother fought hand to hand while the women wept and pleaded in terror; occasionally Dad hit my mother and the sound of scuffles was not unusual; once he knocked my glasses off and my elder brother tried to defend me. Once, when I was a teenager, he couldn't stop hitting me – out of fear, I see now, that I was becoming sexual.

When I learned this behaviour wasn't universal, I felt more unhappy and alone – until I discovered James Baldwin. It helped more than I could ever say to read about a similar family. Empathy: connection: someone else had survived it. I was not alone in the universe.

In terms of racial and cultural lanes, Baldwin's world was so different from mine: black American working class versus white lower middle-class bungalow-land. In terms of our deep humanity, though, everything he wrote applied to me, spoke to me and deeply helped me. Reading him, he was with me and in me. Maybe I could escape, like him.

I wonder about something else. It's no justification for terror in the family, but explains how artists might benefit from it. Perhaps something inside me was permanently broken by my constant fear of enraging my father, my longing to protect my mother. I

did not dare to be myself, as a child might in a freer family. I was always reacting, anticipating, trying to interpret others' behaviour. No fixed lines defined my ego. I think that was true throughout my twenties. Increasingly I noticed and deplored in myself my plasticity in social and sexual situations.

Then two things happened: a love relationship with someone who absolutely let me be, and the publication of my first novel. Instead of seeing myself as a people pleaser, I found I had what Keats called 'Negative Capability' – I could become other people in my writing, maybe especially people who suffered, but also people who were freer than me.

Now, as a person at the other end of my life on earth, I still have an obstinate need to be free. I've worked hard, but rarely for other people. I married a man not corrosively jealous, who would never hit me or keep me at home, we didn't acquire expensive habits, and we had a child late, so enjoyed years of freedom. I did not choose between love and work, the sharp-fanged choice that has dogged women artists.

How free is anyone, all the same? I am finishing my seventeenth book and have spent more hours peering at screens and scattering the ants of edits on paper than walking,

dancing or looking at clouds, my definition of absolute freedom. But at least within the work, I have been free.

I haven't written what publishers wanted, I haven't written what agents suggested, I merely flinched when puzzled or actively spiteful publishers or critics poured scorn on my ideas – I try to remember the ones who praised me. None of my books is formulaic. Frequently I've gone out on a limb, as I did with early novels about global warming such as *Light Years* (1985) or *Where Are The Snows* (1991).

Rules and taboos! They are the constraints that energise writers to overturn them. I rejoice when black writers write white characters – it proves we can imagine each other. I, in my turn, have tried to 'write black'. It's a form of love, crossing lanes and lines. There are risks, there have been penalties, but I hope that love will win, in the end.

## Maggie Gee

Maggie Gee has published seventeen books and been translated into fourteen languages. Her pioneering novels are often satires, and she is fascinated by what we are not supposed to do, think or say. She first warned about global warming in 1986, when only scientists believed in it, continuing in *Where are the Snows* (1991), *The Ice People* (1997), *The Flood* (2004) and *The Red Children* (2022). She also wrote frankly about racism and the aftereffects of empire in *The White Family* (2002), shortlisted for the Orange [Women's] Prize and the International Dublin Impact Prize, and in a pair of books set in Uganda and in Britain, *My Cleaner* (2005) and *My Driver* (2009). She served for nine years on the Board of ALCS and was the first woman to chair the Royal Society of Literature, of which she is now a Vice-President. She is a Professor Emeritus of Bath Spa University and has an OBE for services to literature. If she had another life, she would be a painter who danced in her spare time.

A recording of this interview can be found at [writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)

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