

WRITERSMOSAIC

Ebony Reid

In Conversation with Lemara Lindsay-Prince

'I disconnected completely, seeing Bailey, the gun, the chaos and myself lying on the ground with my friends from outside my body. I snapped myself out of the daze and began running so fast down the hill towards my house.'

— Ebony Reid

[Music]

Presenter: This is *WritersMosaic, In Conversation*. Lemara Lindsay-Prince talks to Ebony Reid about her debut non-fiction book, telling the stories of young black men living on the council estate she hails from herself.

[Music]

Lemara Lindsay-Prince (LLP): I'm Lemara, editor, programmer, literary strategist. And today I'm joined by Dr. Ebony Reid to discuss her first book, *Trapped Life*. We'll be talking about the nuances of inner city life, we'll be talking about the emotions that undergird it, and we'll be pulling at a new narrative, a new story, one less sensationalist and one more soothing in understanding how the mandem in a London estate live their life in one year. Hello, Ebony.

Ebony Reid (ER): Hello, Lemara [both laugh].

LLP: How are you today?

ER: Not too bad, thank you.

LLP: Yeah.

ER: Yeah.

LLP: I think it's really important to acknowledge the connection we have in that I was your editor.

ER: Yes.

LLP: At Merky Books.

ER: Amazing editor.

LLP: I appreciate you, my G. And you were my author. And we could talk more probably about beyond that, the importance of that relationship and the connection I felt from the work, but I first want to congratulate you on finishing your first book.

ER: Thank you.

LLP: Yeah. I'm really proud of you. And I want that to be known because writing a book, first of all, is no easy feat.

ER: It isn't at all.

LLP: But the characters we meet in here, the lives, the importance, how it resonates, and what it says about, if you dare me saying, urban life, past, present, and possibly to come, it's so important to have it on the record, and you've done that.

ER: Thank you.

LLP: So, I want to give you your flowers in that respect.

ER: Thank you so much.

LLP: You're welcome, my G. Always, okay. And then I want to flip it, and I want to start, not necessarily at the beginning, but at the end. And just on the way up here, we were

talking about, 'Oh, Lemar, did you read the epilogue?' And there's a discussion on which I push you to be like—I would love to see you, not round it off and we all go into the merry sunset, but start to be a bit more reflective at the end. And there's a line Jack says – Jack's one of the many brilliant, powerful, empathetic, and if I don't dare say, hurting characters in your book—

ER: Yeah, very much hurting.

LLP: —says, 'Ebony, just tell it how it is.' So, my first question then is: do you feel you've done that? Do you feel you've honoured their stories? What does it mean to tell it like it is?

ER: Well, first question, I do believe I've honoured the stories and I've done them justice. And I've been given great feedback from the mandem who have read the book.

LLP: Okay.

ER: And they've all noted how human I've created the characters. So, they all argue that there's so much substance in the characters. And that was the aim from the beginning because I think for me, I was always dissatisfied with the commentary. So, the academic commentary, popular imagery on urban young people that tends to paint them as these caricature gang members. And what this does is it strips away their latent humanity. And I think that's the main thing that I've done. I've opened the door, I've blown all those misconceptions and stereotypes out the window, and I've allowed, as I said, the humanity, the emotions, the pain, the motivations for the street violence to come to a fore. So, it's not a tale of gangland violence, although violence is obviously in the pages, quite a fair bit actually. Once I read it back, I was thinking, *wow there is some really heavy chapters there*. But I think underneath all of that, there's also lightness, there's also moments of joy; joy that many people take for granted, like listening to music, hanging out in the cotch, listening to music. We might take these things for granted, but they're a blessing for the mandem who go into these spaces to find some level of refuge and escape from the toxic nature of trap life. So, I suppose, [laughs] to answer your original question, I do believe and I'm really extremely proud of myself that I was able to tell such a human story that the mandem are proud of. Yeah, that was my main objective.

LLP: Yo, yo. And you've done that tenfold. And it leans into another observation or—I'm so happy that you said the word humanity because when I reread, I was preparing to talk to you, I Googled what humanity means. And I'm going to butcher it now, but it was alluding to human-centric values: empathy, relating to one another, compassion. And what I think you do is marry the humanity of the mandem with the reality of the situations that they're experiencing and living in. So, moving on from the tell it all, how was that balance to make them full human portraits and have us see them as people, but in the same sense, not shy away from their reality?

ER: Yeah. That was—that's a very interesting question and an important one, because it was extremely difficult because I think I always had in my mind, and also in my academic research as well, to be very careful that I didn't perpetuate the negative stereotypes. And I think, obviously, drawing on the issues of violence, drug dealing, these are all very heavy, controversial topics, and these are the topics where the mandem seem to be painted as purely criminogenic by outlining these kinds of topics. So, I was very careful in terms of the portrayal. And I feel like I had to—I couldn't shy away from the violence because the violence formed the backdrop to their lives, but I had to write it in a way where I showcased the violence, the drug dealing, the criminality, but I also gave—I suppose I told the story of, okay, they're amassed in

violence and criminality, but why? And what does it mean, what does it feel like to be amassed in this trap life, with restricted circumstances, constrained by your circumstances? What does it feel, and what does it mean? So, I feel like I was able to prize that out with the dominant characters. So, I was able to highlight these big themes: post-code wars, the drug economy, the trappers within the drug economy, but who are they behind these labels, if you want to call it that? Who are the people behind the labels? Why are they doing what they're doing?

LLP: Talk to me then, because I think it's unknown on first [missing word], your relationship to Northville and your relationship to the mandem. Why and how can you write from this perspective and have this connection with them?

ER: Well, I suppose I should start at the beginning. So, I was only 13 when street violence crashed into my world, ruining what was supposed to be a fun summer holiday. I think if I close my eyes, I can still vividly picture the day when Bailey rushed onto the basketball court with a gun by his waist, shouting at us to go home as gunshots echoed across the tower block flats. That stripped away, I would say, the innocence of our childhood, overwhelmed with fear as we went on the floor, dragged down Lorrie with me, just paralysed by fear, really. Rivals came into the estate that day

to track him down and murder him. So, I'd say—or luckily, I should say, that he escaped the ambush that day, but that didn't stop. The chain of postcode rivalries continued. In the following years, four men I knew all died violently. I couldn't name it at the time, but I did recognize that a disturbing phenomenon had gripped my community by the throat: a plague of murders involving young Black men. So, I guess I took those memories of the years of bloodshed into the academy with me because I wanted to essentially understand what was going on.

With my MA, I wrote about the violent street violence, and then the PhD where I carried out an ethnographic study, where I was really able to prize apart the different ways in which the mandem become trapped in their transitions from childhood to adulthood. So, at the heart of all of this are the mandem, of course. They were my participants. So, these were men that I grew up with, some of whom I went to school with, neighbors, friends. And they helped me piece together that thesis. And from the thesis, I decided to merge my academic insights with my personal experiences in order to write this story, with their agreement, of course. And this is where we are.

LLP: It was always a respect to be paid to them and also their—more than their cosign that, ‘No, Ebony, you can write this.’ I want us to read the passage because we—that's the opening of the book.

[ER reads from *Trapped Life*]

‘Cory and Neva’s uncle Horris was blasting music through his mini sound system while some of his friends were drinking Courvoisier and bunning spliffs. I was practicing shooting with Lorrie while winding Cory up about his greasy lips, which resembled those of rapper LL Cool J, when out of nowhere Bailey, a slightly older teenager from our estate who we all respected, hurried over to us with a gun near his waist.

“Run, get inside now and don't come out until I tell you to,” he shouted.

His eyes were nervous and darting between the basketball cage and the tower block. I held my breath, and in a split second five shots pierced the air in the distance, each bang slicing through the silence. I dropped to the ground, instinct kicking in, as a cold wave of fear flooded through me.

Lorrie's delayed reflexes caused her to freeze, so I pulled her down beside Jacks and me, not letting go of her hand.

We were all terrified. None of us had ever seen a gun before and, in that moment, I disconnected completely, seeing Bailey, the gun, the chaos and myself lying on the ground with my friends from outside my body. I snapped myself out of my daze and began running so fast down the hill towards my house, bumping my head with Cory on the way. As I frantically tried to put the keys in my front door, I heard another round of gunshots, this time echoing loudly across the high-rise tower block flats nearby. I thought I heard Bailey shout for help, but my imagination was continuing to play tricks on me, as he stood composed in the centre of the basketball cage, loading his gun, needing no help whatsoever.

He stood still for a moment, surveying the tower blocks before taking off and disappearing behind the flats. As I stepped through the doorway, my parents were relaxing in the kitchen, but quickly noticed something was off. I launched into a frantic explanation of the nightmare I had just witnessed, and their concern grew as they listened.

That summer, unlike any I had experienced before, suddenly felt like a prison sentence since I was grounded from going to the basketball cage. Even Lorrie's, Neva's and Cory's parents put a pause on their summer adventures. What used to be a carefree summer now felt more limiting.

This was my initiation to neighbourhood violence and the brewing tit-for-tat territorial feuds that would wreak havoc and bloodshed in our community. Bailey escaped the ambush from a rival estate that day, but the incident set the tone for the months and the years to come. That summer unfolded with several incidents of gun violence, and in the years that followed four men I knew all died violently. I couldn't name it at the time, but I recognized that a disturbing phenomenon had gripped my community by the throat: a plague of murders among young Black men. The young men I'd grown up with were dropping like flies, killed other local boys or men, most of whom would eventually suffer the same fate.'

LLP: There's so much there, so much richness, so much vividness. My question is about language here, in that this is a non-fiction book, but it reads and you've written it like fiction. So, that's—I feel like there's so many meeting points, so you're melding so much here. Talk to me then about being trained in the academic way and how to

approach the page and how you landed on this beautiful, 'brutiful', vivid, hairs on the back of your head way. There's so many times in this book that the moments read like movie scenes.

ER: Oh, thank you.

LLP: Brother, you wrote it. You're welcome to that, do you know what I mean?

ER: That's very kind.

LLP: So, talk to me about finding your voice on the page and, yeah, yeah, yeah.

ER: As you know, I've been academically trained. So, there is a specific way in which we write. So we analyse, we need to ensure that we back up all our points with evidence, and draw on the literature in the field. So, I think originally, I was writing from a very academic standpoint. And you just told me I need to take—

LLP: Dead that [laughs].

ER: Yeah, take that academic hat off.

LLP: You said it much nicely. I was like, 'Yeah, there's a lot of quotes, there's a lot of "1993, 2000, [missing names]."' I said, 'There's a lot of theory here, bruv.'

ER: Yeah, you did. You said there was so much theory. And I agree. And I think once you told me that my voice carried weight and I didn't need to support it with evidence, I was able just to let go and write from a—write as me. So, while there is academic commentary there, it is somewhat diluted, in the sense that I've ensured that I've dissected it in order for a general audience to be able to receive it. So, I don't feel—maybe I—did I take off the academic hat entirely? Probably not. But it's there, but it's in the background. At the forefront is the story, as you said, trying to build the place. So, thinking about the different places, what the places mean to the mandem, who's in the place, what's happening in the place, who's doing what, what can I smell, what can I hear? And I've tried to do that across the chapters. And specifically, I would say that the shubs stands out to me because that was a real celebration.

LLP: Okay, shitshack.

ER: Yeah, the shitshack. That was a real celebration of the vibrancy of Jamaican culture. And there's a scene where we enter the parties in full swing, some of the South Jamaican guys from South are willy bouncing. The camera lights are there. They're filming the Jamaican ladies in the camera, talking about how pretty and cute they are. So, it was almost like as I was writing it, I closed my eyes, sat there, pictured what goes on in the shubs. So, I was closing my eyes and just trying to remember what—how I experienced the shub in order to bring the scene and the characters to life. And I'm hoping I was able to do that. So, to answer the question, getting rid of some of the more academic language and writing in a more descriptive way where the characters drive the story, so what they're doing, what they're saying, what they're feeling drives the chapters as opposed to the academic commentary.

LLP: So, when I received this proposal, I got a call from your agent. And she said, 'I think—I just got this proposal I want you to take a look at', got it, and instantly what drew me to it was the fact that, we speak about the book, you are taking the reader

through Northville, but Northville's most intimate spaces, the public spaces, but the intimate spaces.

ER: The private ones also.

LLP: The private ones also. We are on the block, we are in the cotch, which is someone's mother's house, right? We are in the shubs, we are at church. Before that we're at the mosque, we are in court. And, for me, it was like the view of understanding these men – I'm gonna come to women because I think it's—you know me already, very important, very, very important part of this book – but the way in which we view the humanity, the everydayness, the levity, the sadness of these men is in very specific locations. And I love that because I feel like, again, if you think of it as like a movie or documentary, you take us to places we may not have imagined so much happens, so much secrecy, so much privacy. So, tell me then why these places? When you were thinking, *actually, I want to broaden this beyond the cage, beyond the block*, why have we gone to these separate spaces to tell this story?

ER: Well, some of these spaces [were] where I carried out field work for my academic research, so that's why they were selected in that instance. But other places, like for example actually the shubs where [it] was in the academic piece, the cotch for example was a new place, the trap house, I believe, was a new place as well. I selected these places because they formed the backdrop of the mandem's lives. This is where they spent time, where they chilled. I then had to think about, *okay, if I'm choosing these specific locations, what are the big themes in these locations?* So, for example, the cotch was a place of refuge. So, this is where the mandem would go when they needed respite from the toxic nature of trap life. So, once they crossed over to that threshold of Leanne's house, they were able to take off their road mask or leave their identities, their road identities, at the door and become their true selves.

LLP: Which is playful. There's dancing dancing.

ER: Playful, dancing.

LLP: There's singing, there's revelry, they're celebrating Christmas in uniformed outfits.

ER: Exactly.

LLP: There's love.

ER: There is love, lots of love. Lots and lots of love. Creating memories, taking photographs. Leanne being the primary character who tries to nurture them, support them, and give them the childhoods that they never necessarily had because half of the time they're hyper vigilant and they are trying to deal with life outside, which as you know, is quite dangerous. They're trying to navigate postcode rivalries and all sorts of other tensions within the urban environment.

So, I feel like every chapter, there's an emotion, a universal emotion as we just discussed, all the universal human emotions that are unraveled in these spaces. And I feel like that was really important for me to showcase because we tend to hear about purely the violence and the criminality. Because even though I'm thinking now about the courthouse where Andy was arrested, that's not just about imprisonment and the criminal justice system, although that's the big theme; it's also about how family love and a struggle of trying to keep their son on the straight and narrow and just the

immense love and the role of women as nurturers, as supporters, and not really having nowhere to go. Once they take on the issues of their children, there's nowhere to turn. Generally in the discourse around street violence, women's voices tend to be sidelined, or they're in the background somewhere, and I think, for me, I try to bring their experiences to the spotlight to showcase the pivotal role that they play in the mandem's lives.

LLP: I'm really glad you started talking about the court chapter with Andy. So, we are in this scene of Cassius, who's a big character in this book. I don't know if he delivers the news.

ER: Yeah, he does. He does deliver the news.

LLP: And he's been arrested for selling drugs, to complete shock of his family, unknown that this is happening, right? And there's a bit where Andy's mum, Andy's sister, Andy's dad, who is present in his life but not so much and not in a relationship with his mother—

ER: Yeah, not in the household, but in his son's life.

LLP: They all go down to the police station. And there was this bit of Andy's mum turning up with a plate full of his favorite food. And I sat there and I was like, *no, would that happen?* And yeah. And I think I'm mentioning this because there are these moments where, again, not to sensationalism, but the disbelief of kindness in these moments, of care being the first thing. And I want to talk about not only care, but guilt. It struck me in that chapter, but also as a throughline through the book, specifically Cassius was very nervous to be the one who told the news because he set this up for Andy to do, to make a little [inaudible] doing that, and then was very much we see Cassius in the book as quite a forefront character, big voice, a big personality.

ER: Very much so.

LLP: Sets the tone. You're laughing. You know what your boy is like. Sets the tone. And then to see him do a complete 180 and be on the back foot. Talk to me then about the guilt they carry for the lives they lead. There's a line you have, which I really, really love. Here, we go back to Cassius. It says, 'It has always been painfully clear how hard it is for

Cassius and the mandem to picture a life beyond Northville. After all, it's in Northville where they discover the roads or where the roads find them.' Come on. So, then talk to me about that guilt. They're not bragging about what they do. They carry that with them.

ER: Yeah. And that is quite an important point because despite what society may think, no one wants to be on the roads. They are, in many ways, forced into this kind of lifestyle because of the numerous psychosocial factors that influence their pathways into trap life.

LLP: Break down psychosocial for me.

ER: Basically, the psychological is the trauma, the childhood trauma, which collides with the present trauma. The sociological aspect is the pressures that they experience on road, the environmental issues. And all of this combined traps them in a particular lifestyle. So, I think in terms of Cassius, the guilt he's feeling is, well, he always told the mandem to be honest with their families, so when these things did happen, it wouldn't catch them off guard. But Andy, of course, wasn't forthcoming with what he was doing

for a living because he cares so much what his family thinks of him. The guilt comes from knowing that he put his friend on. He thought, in a road context, he's helping his friend, putting him on, but in the wider scale of Andy's life, he knows this life isn't for him. He knows he's going to be struggling in prison. He's going to struggle being away from the family. So, I feel like that's where the guilt comes into play for Cassius in particular.

Most of the mandem are desperate for a change. But I feel like road life, which is a UK street culture, once they're in this road life, they tend to be trapped in this liminal space, which they don't—they depart from childhood, but they don't necessarily get to respectable adulthood, which makes it very difficult to integrate into mainstream society. So, it's an inevitable rites of passage that they have to go through. And none of them are necessarily prepared for it. They go in, they think, okay, they can make some easy money or quick money, which they realise very soon that it's not easy money at all; it's really hard work. But the point is it's the emotional toll is devastating when they reach adulthood with nothing to show for themselves but this existential crisis.

LLP: Come on. It's so interesting. There, so much of it, I gathered, is inherited, like I didn't choose this life, this life chose me. And of course, our focus is on the mandem,

but I also think in what you just said, society, big, old society, has such a role to play in continuing to lock these men, these black men, in this view of themselves. So, where do they go? And you have a brilliant example, again in the revision, which I so enjoyed rereading and seeing how much this book has grown, in Andy saying, 'I've been looking for jobs.'

ER: Yeah, exactly. He's trying.

LLP: He's trying. Also the other escape comes from being out of, not [missing words] ends, but also the country and finding freedom there. And I think that freedom, I'm drawing a point between what you're saying, like, 'Lemara, but they're still dreaming.'

ER: Yeah, they are.

LLP: They are still dreaming.

ER: That's the light that exists even with the carnage, even amidst the darkness, there's still little bits of light that exists. And I thought that helps me to write the story the way

that I did because I had an aim. I needed to showcase those lighter moments, the difficulties of wanting to escape trap life, and then documenting the reasons why they can't escape it, or as I say, unblock trap life. Yeah, I think that that's the difficulty really. So, how do you carry all of this stuff? Try to enter mainstream with no qualifications, really, hardly any of them had qualifications, no formal training, no work experience as such. How do you therefore enter? And also, with the pain, all the things that you've seen on road, the violence that you've had to do, dish out, the violence that has been inflicted on you, how then do you enter mainstream society and try to live a productive life with all of this? It's a really difficult task.

LLP: I did also get the sense of so many things you witnessed, there was a continual loss of your innocence of seeing your friends be the way they are. So, I wondered, and you don't have to—push back if you don't want to answer it, do you also think you've inherited some of the trauma through writing this book?

ER: I think I did. I did touch upon that. I thought I did try to reflect on how the writing process impacted me. And I think I tried to acknowledge that growing up in the hood, more broadly, witnessing the fragility of human nature, is going to profoundly impact anyone. So, maybe my struggles, of course, were there, maybe silent, no less real

though, because they were there, but I didn't have to navigate the same space as the mandem. I didn't have to build a road reputation. I didn't have to prove my masculinity in the ways that the mandem did. But I'm not naive to say that growing up in an urban environment hasn't imprinted on my heart and my mind. And yeah, I believe the writing process has impacted me profoundly because I've had to really write about some really deep and devastating incidents. And I've been present.

LLP: Present through war.

ER: Yeah, through some really devastating and saddening incidents. I, when Ash was shot, and I ran to the house with them, and I vomited on the floor because I was so—I didn't know how to deal with it. I believe that was the first time I actually saw the mandem bleed out. And that was really difficult to revisit, I suppose, because obviously it happened in, I believe, around 2000—I can't remember the date of the books. I think it was 2011 to 12, it was a year—

LLP: You wrote, and I want to come to that, you wrote this in a year.

ER: Yes, in a year.

LLP: A specific year in your life and that time. Having to revisit moments from the past and still obviously be mindful that the mandem is still trapped in this lifestyle. And sometimes one would argue, where does it go? And I think for me, it went into the writing. It wasn't an easy thing to do. There was long pauses, stops and starts; I questioned whether I could actually keep going. But I think ultimately, I had a goal in mind: I had to write these stories in a way that humanised the mandem and done justice to their stories. And I put—I used the pain as a catalyst to sit down and just write the story.

LLP: I wonder if you had ever thought it made it easier for you to be in these spaces with them because of your gender.

ER: Yeah.

LLP: And also wanted to talk about I think you do such a brilliant job. And I remember, if you don't mind me saying, one of my first edits was that I don't want these mothers,

these girlfriends, these female figures to be side characters. They carry so much weight. Whenever something happens, they are there, and you are there. And I want to talk about the role of women. What ways did you see them come to the fore and really exist as a heartbeat throughout it all?

ER: David Gadd, who is an esteemed psychosocial scholar in the field, did provide some feedback on the book, and he did draw attention to the role of women. And what he argued, in his own words, was that women, mothers like Leanne, tend to detoxify the embattled states of minds that the mandem get into. So, the women tend to detoxify that, but often have nowhere to go with what they take in.

LLP: Who's caring for them as they care for others?

ER: Yeah, this is what David Gadd drew attention to, which is an important point. While I agree that they have nowhere to go with what they take in, I believe that all of the—I wouldn't even say it's community work, but the role that they play is so instrumental in the mandem's lives, and they do it out of pure love. They're so resilient and showcase so much strength. Their lives are shaped by this heavy emotional, as well as a physical

burden as well. And I think it just showcases the ripple effect, doesn't it? The lifestyle that the mandem leads has a ripple effect on the families, of the female figures who are in their lives. And just goes to show that this is why, collectively, there needs to be much more support for the mandem and also all the people who are trying to steer them away from this lifestyle or are just at a loss as to what to do. There needs to be a bit more support there, I think, overall.

LLP: Is it really naive of me to say how could things be different? How?

ER: Such a big question. I think I spoke about unblocking trap life, and what does that look like? I just think that there's just so much different angles. And I feel like I wrote quite honestly in the conclusion that this story doesn't have a neat and tidy ending. But what I would say is that the psychosocial factors need to be prized out. So, some of the factors that lead to young men being amassed in this type of lifestyle needs a bit more understanding.

LLP: The first thing that came to my mind is like, boy, [missing word] please don't have that understanding. We, some of us in close kind of reach of outside this room, don't have that understanding. Yeah.

ER: Yeah. I don't think—trap life is not a term that the police, politicians, or academic use when describing this lifestyle. But it's an important—it was an important concept that I wanted to define and put into public consciousness by showing the struggles the mandem experience. Any solution has to take these factors into consideration. And in an attempt to unblock this trap life, just to unblock it, that will be the main thing for me.

LLP: I know your community, your mandem, have picked up the book. But having something not only with the word, but the imagery, that to me is an invitation for someone who may not think a book is for them or literature represents them.

ER: Yeah.

LLP: They will be, I hope, more curious to be like, *huh, this resonates with me. I know this language. I know this imagery. Let me have a look.* I think, for me, this is such a beautiful—

ER: Thank you so much.

LLP: You're more than welcome. It's such a beautiful, searing, important, and unexpected portrait of black masculinity.

[Music]

ER: And survival.

[Music]

LLP: And survival that exists. So, well done to you.

[Music]

ER: Thank you so much. Very kind.

[Music]

Presenter: Ebony Reid was in conversation with Lemara Lindsey-Prince. To hear more writers, go to writersmosaic.org.uk.

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