

WRITERSMOSAIC

Peter Kalu

In Conversation with John Siddique

'We look out for one another. And that comradeship and mutual benevolence or support is what gets us through much of the hardships of life.'

— Peter Kalu

[Music]

Presenter: This is *WritersMosaic, In Conversation*. John Siddique talks to Peter Kalu about his latest publication, a memoir of vignettes called *Act Normal*.

[Music]

John Siddique (JS): Hey, Peter. It's lovely to welcome you again. It's fantastic to be with you.

Peter Kalu (PK): Wow, it's great to see you again, John.

JS: And congratulations on *Act Normal*, your new book.

PK: Yeah, it's doing okay.

JS: It is, isn't it? Fantastic. So, we're going to get into our interview in a minute or two, but I would love for you, I'd love for our listeners, if you would share with us one of the opening sections of the book. It's a book of quite short pieces, and I want to talk to you about this vignette style across 250 pieces, which is a really fascinating way of coming at things. But also, besides talking about your book, I'd like to talk about your long-spanning career, which is incredible, actually, and it's just great to be able to do that. But you're going to share with us a piece called 'Amen to the fallen: Requiem for the vanguard, for the conk-haired, & for the soft-shoe shufflers'.

PK: That's a long, long title.

JS: That's a long title [both laugh].

PK: Here we go. I'll just read.

[PK reads from *Act Normal*, 'Amen to the fallen: Requiem for the vanguard, for the conk-haired, & for the soft-shoe shufflers']

The conk-haired built the houses that we now live in. They fitted in and got on with holding down stuff – jobs and families. While the Afro-picked vanguard was marching around with placards and loudhailers and protesting, the conk-haired were changing the nappies, holding down the 9-to-5s, paying the rent money – or charming the landlord in lieu of rent. We should not underestimate their sacrifices. They too served the cause. They became masters of placating whites, so that the next generation could avoid having to do the same. God bless the conk-haired. Let them relax in peace.

Let's hear it, too, for The Vanguard. Most Vanguardists did not become so out of political ambition. As kids, they wanted to be champion roller-skaters or bike racers or pianists. It was just a matter of integrity, and one thing led to another and they ended up in the police station

having their fingers broken in the back room in the days before CCTV and body cams and duty solicitors. They left the police station with their fingers at angles so they could no longer hit the keys of a piano with their fingers, so their voices became their instrument instead and they spoke truth to power. Their integrity meant they were pitch perfect when they spoke, their tone pure. And the people heard. So we thank them for giving us voice. All hail the Vanguard. Their fingers were broken but their hands stayed clean.

Now let's tap-a-tap a short while for the soft shoe shufflers. Soft-shoe shuffling ain't easy. It ain't easy to minstrel. It easy ain't easy to sell out. You can only sell out so many times till you got nothing left to sell and they'll discard you, and everyone knows ex-Minstrels go direct to Hell and Do Not Pass Go. Black people can't tap dance no more; it just don't look right. The Minstrellers have seen to that. This is a requiem not a condemnation. Raise your hand those of us who have never minstrelled. I see no hands raised. We all got a face we fix on for white people. We all got our soft-shoe shuffle ways of getting past them, entertaining them while we ease our way past. Amen. Let me hear it. Amen. Amen to the suit-and-tie soft shoe shufflers. Amen to the respectably combed hair

soft-shoe shufflers. Amen to the grey-socks soft-shoe shufflers. Amen to the skin whitener soft-shoe shufflers. Amen to the nylon hair soft-shoe shufflers. Amen to these-rings-will-make-me-look-younger-and-whiter soft shoe shufflers. God bless the soft shoe hustlers whatever the hustle. God bless the conk-haired who held things down. God bless the Vanguardists and their broke fingers. God bless us all. Let the choir stand and play us out.'

JS: Fantastic. Amazing. It's such a great piece. And what's interesting is that it's a piece about coconut—I call it coconutting, or minstrelling you call it, and yet, you're not minstrelling in this piece in any way, not coconutting in any way. And what I really have enjoyed about *Act Normal* is this—there's this three dimensions to it. One is you, and it's really you, it's your brain – I know your brain so well over these 30 years – it's your brain firing this way and that way, which explains the short pieces to me in some ways. Then it's a commentary on what you've grown through and the way the world has unfolded for us as people of colour or people of the global majority and the inclusivity of that. And then at the same time, you've done something that I don't see enough of, in that you don't—you've not hidden your anger. You've not hidden your anger at all in it. And yet, the fire of that is actually necessary right now. How did you come to this point? Because you've you've written so many different forms: theatre, poetry, novels,

you've been a storyteller in prisons, you've done this, you've done that. How come now you've arrived at this vignette form?

PK: I guess I was trying to find a way, John—thank you by the way for those kinds things you said. [Laughs] We should end the interview here; it doesn't get any better than that. I was perhaps thinking about the [missing word]. Because as you say, I used to do storytelling, I used to have a carnival barn with [missing word], the [missing word] on stilts. And I wanted to figure out a way in which one could do that in language, in text, on page. So, you've got the [missing word] where everything is tenuous, everything can change, everything can shift, and in those shifts it reveals something about myself as the writer, but also it reveals something about you, the reader, the way that you read it. So, that weird shifting sands aspect is what I wanted to do. There are aspects of it maybe in say the crime thrillers I used to write, the [missing name] movie and romantic comedy I've done. But I really wanted to go to town with that novel on that uncertainty, that necessary confusion that all Black people experience in trying to navigate this white-dominated system. And so, that's the first thing.

So, the [missing word] characters are in a difficult position but always uses their wits and energy and sheer zeal for life itself to get out of it. And then at the same time, I wanted to not avoid dealing with the difficult, hard subjects, the areas where the

[missing word] character, even the [missing word] character can't help [missing words]. And to acknowledge that and to allow that anger, that indignation, to flow rather than to cauterise it, stop it. I think it's Bell Hooks who was saying at one point that you can get stuff published, but never get angry because the white publishing world—don't show your anger. We all have it, but don't show it. And I was trying to figure out a form where it can emerge without being so filtered, so obscure. So yeah, some of it is direct, and some of it is oblique.

JS: Yeah, so if you'd have gone in a novel form in this way, that burning would have been very sustained and then maybe disinvited the reader, I suppose. But because you get this mixture, then you're able to introduce little flowers of like, *look, this is what the hell's going on here, and I don't know what I can do about it*, almost.

PK: It was Martin Glynn. And I think you know Martin Glynn as well as I. And he was talking about how one thing that racism does is it reduces us. And yes, we carry anger, and yes, as Bell Hooks says, we go through hell if we express it from the terms of trying to get published, but at the same time, that is not everything. And in the private moments, as you said earlier, the whimsical and the obscure, the surreal, the downright counterintuitive thoughts and emotions that you have, I wanted to chronicle them in the same way that Sanchez, to some extent, does in his—Ignatius Sancho in

his letters. I came across that. *Oh, my goodness, this is amazing that we've got here the first voice that is really concerned with the day-to-day.* And then I was switching also to some of the French writers who were writing these really miniature pieces that were snapshots of moments on a day-to-day level without trying to chase the big ideas, but the big ideas emerge from the aggregation of all those moments. So, I was playing with a lot of different forms and precedents and trying to come up with a new way of doing memoir, really, that was the idea.

JS: One thing that you've done that I found really beautiful for this book is—I'm one of these strange people who will read the acknowledgement section, right, because I always want to know who's being acknowledged, am I in there, which I am, which is great. But you've got this bit about—I forgot, I might not be able to find it at the back now—about who you're in dialog with. Because I've always thought about writing as not copying other authors and things like that, but actually, it being an ongoing dialog moving through time. And when I don't find that within literature, I find literature tends to be drier and has less to offer. And so, you outline your lineage in a way here, which I find absolutely astonishing. And some of them are current, and some of them are of the past, and so on. So, could you tell me about who you've been in dialogue with, because this is what we're talking about in a way?

PK: Well, without looking at the—

JS: [Both laugh] I have the list right here.

PK: You just take a few. In terms of this idea, I've been in dialogue with you, John. I mean, forget everyone else, I've been in dialogue with you for a couple of decades, three decades, something like that.

JS: Well, we met in 1991, the first time. How long is that? 35 years.

PK: There you go. [JS laughs] So, a lot of times, I've been interested in why things happen, what is the convention, and why the convention has arisen? And that's not only on the level of the paragraph or the chapter or anything like that, but it's also about, John, there was a thing to enter into this conversation about dialogue, who I'm in dialogue with. I'm sure it was Derrida who studied—he wrote a lot about narratology, the art of narrative and stuff, who has said that of genre, that it's not prescriptive, it's descriptive. People think it's prescriptive. You've got to do it that way. He said, 'No, no, this is just descriptive.' A crime thriller has these elements. It doesn't have to. It's just that that's what we consider to be the crime thriller. So, with the memoir as well, I was like, *okay, this is how it's been done*. I read 20, 30, 40, 50 over the

course of a couple of years. And I thought, *why? Why do we do it this way?* That's the first thought. That's important, isn't it, always to question the convention? That's Derrida. And then let's take another idea that I know we shared. I love saying his name: Wayne C Booth.

JS: Oh, yeah. Booth. Yeah, absolutely.

PK: *The Rhetoric of Fiction*.

JS: *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. It's on the shelf in there. My God.

PK: And he, in that book, there's this thing about the ideal author and the flesh and blood author. And one of the things with memoir is that there does tend to be a sense that while they're painting what happened to me over the course of these years, there's also a background painting, which is the ideal author. And I thought I wanted to subvert that. And so I switched to say Jean Genet and his criminal—parallel criminal activities, and Chester Himes, who wrote a lot of his stuff while in prison. And even Oscar Wilde to some extent. And it's not 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol'.

So, I wanted to try to create a memoir in which there is an element of anti-memoir, of not painting yourself as the ideal author, but actually, the author who's full of flaws. And the one element that I felt summarised that really was the passage where one of my actual or imagined exes is cussing me. Now, this must happen the world over, [laughs] the ex is going to cuss the person they were in the relationship. And she was saying, 'So, there he was sat in his cum soaked underwear.' [Both laugh] And I just thought, *there is nothing more undignified than such a description*, so rather than waiting for someone to speak it of me in some living room or wherever, I'll write it down myself as a way of getting that flesh and blood, with all flaws, description.

So, a lot of the philosophers and the other writers and the thinkers that I'm in dialogue with, if you like, I don't really seek out that dialogue. I don't think, *what can I write about Derrida, or whatever?* It's simply that as I'm writing, I'm thinking, *it is dishonest, maybe, to claim that this thought is a thought that I spontaneously arrived at*. I've actually read somebody, and I know the root of it, so let me put it at the back, so that everybody will stop at-ing me and saying, 'That's straight from Sartre, that.'

JS: Well, I call my lot my inner writing group. And actually, it's not just the case that I am leaning into them and their technique, because what you're talking about now, in many ways, is about allowing those kind of grimy details in of things that you wouldn't

necessarily put in, very much reminds me of Charles Bukowski, who was mentioned, of course, in your list. And you read a novel by Bukowski or the poetry and stuff like that, and he's the first to say I'm just a bum, and I'm doing this, and I'm drunk, and I'm looking out my window, but here's a moment of beauty.

PK: Yeah, absolutely. With Bukowski, I remember reading, he wrote something like *Post Office*, all his jobs. And I thought, *what a great idea, let me write all my shit jobs too* [laughs]. And that was—became a strand within *Act Normal*, all the shit jobs I did. And it's so much fun. The fun is not in the job you actually did, the fun is every time you digress from it, you didn't do it.

And an interesting situation because one of the foundation elements of it, really, is actually relationships, and those relationships can be at work as well as in relationships, personal romantic relationships. And I was interested in how we survive these jobs that really grind us down, really. We survive through other people. And I started to feel—because I don't know what the book's about, John, and I just wrote it. [Laughs] But you start to feel—one thing I noticed was that there are a lot of dialogues between people, and I thought maybe that's one of the sustaining forces of my life, that people like yourself and other people that I meet and who look after me, who look out for me, and that's—we look out for one another. And that kind of comradeship and

mutual benevolence or support is what gets us through much of the hardships of life. And maybe that's what I was trying to depict. But again, this is me theorising after I've written the book [laughs], which always feels bogus.

JS: No, you can add anything you want in now, you're our genius.

PK: I could, I could. I mean, it's—there is the other thing that goes on in my head, really, is that it's very, very rare for me to be able to have a conversation about something that I'm interested in when I know that nobody else in the room is actually interested in it. And so, the only way I can have the conversation is if I write it down, have it with myself. And so a lot of these texts are to do with, let's take anybody, anybody's name, like Thomas Glave. When he's writing essays, the way he's writing essays is just off the planet. I'm like, *can I do an essay that is even 10% weird in the way that Thomas Glave writes his?* Or take, I don't know, Chester Himes. If you ever see Chester Himes, the way Chester Himes sets up—what I've just read, 'Amen to the fallen', that's got a lot of Chester Himes in it. If you look at how Chester Himes comes and attacks a paragraph, he doesn't hang around, he's like, *let me just take the breaks off what I'm feeling here, what I'm going to say.* And that was another influence, really, in the sense that why are we all playing so safe with what we can do with the paragraph level and the structure level and at the switching of tones level?

JS: Well, this is a really interesting thing. Because a thought I was having while reading your book and the times that we're in right now is how many of us have been lured into the idea of if we are respectable, we will survive, which I think goes right back to early colonisation and the 400 years ago and slavery and so on and then on the Indian colonisation island and everything. And we thought that if we were respectable enough, somehow that would get us through.

PK: Absolutely.

JS: And I think it's time to not be respectable anymore. And I really enjoyed this about your book, that actually the disrespect is so needed.

PK: It's, again, it's something that I picked up from, say, Audre Lorde. If you read her *Zami*, her memoir, it's just as if she just doesn't care anymore what people think, and that produces sometimes the best writing, I feel. And so, a lot of times I thought, *hmm, am I allowed to write this?* Then you think, *am I allowed to swear?* Fuck it [laughs].

JS: I think the minute you think, *am I allowed to*, is actually when you have to, isn't it?

PK: Yeah. I saw Irenosen; one of the other short stories, ends with, 'Fuck this, fuck that, and fuck the other too.' I was like, let's go, let's go [laughs].

JS: I want to ask you one last thing about the book, and then—which is not really about the book, but something that's been on my mind because we're in prize-giving season at the moment, at the time we were recording this. And a few people I know, including yourself, are up for prizes. And it got me to thinking how much—I'm going to say the wrongest thing now—I'm being disrespectful now, how much I dislike prizes because we've become a prize-focused culture. Whereas a book will get window display, seen, and so on, the reviews, the TikToks about it, the social media about it if it's long-listed and short-listed for a prize, and yet, what if your book wasn't? It's still as good a book.

PK: Yeah, absolutely.

JS: And you were telling me while we were having a cup of tea before coming into my little studio to do this how somebody you know [knew] you'd written this book, not an ounce of interest in it whatsoever; the minute they hear you're short-listed, then there's interest. How are you navigating this? And what can we do about this prize culture thing?

PK: How do we navigate? Well, John, the thing is that I've been doing this for 30 years. We've done prizes [laughs].

JS: Take the prize. Take the prize.

PK: We have navigated it. And so what have we done? What have I done? I've always felt that what I'm trying to do is best externalise somehow who I am with a degree of that awful word, authenticity, and to stay true to those thoughts and feelings that I have and get them down on the page. And I'm totally prepared as a writer to disappear without trace, with nobody knowing what I wrote and nobody reading it. It's fine. It's fine. I'm doing it for the craft and for something that it does for me. It's almost an audit of my own soul, to choose a really accountancy metaphor with a very big, heapy philosophical—or else we're in Scientology [laughs]. To have a conversation with myself about where I am, who I am, and often I find simply the writing down of things is one of the ways in which I better understand myself. So, I'm not really geared towards let me win an award. Let me gain that prize. I really feel that what's happening is we're all in it together as writers. We're all comrades, really. We're all on the same ship. And okay, the zeitgeist or the fad or the moments in time throw up this writer, venerate this writer. And for me, it is quite random.

And so, sometimes, if you want the loops, I remember we were in a workshop way back when – you probably may not have been in this particular one – I remember writing a poem. It was about the colonial and post-colonial energies. And it was 'Boomerang, boom, boom, boomerang, swift after you.' And it was written in backwards. And what it was [saying was] that, yes, colonialism happened, but it's a boomerang, it's coming back, and we cannot erase its effects; its effects will be long-term and will be felt in Britain, as everywhere around the world. And I remember reading it in the workshop, and people were like, 'Huh, Pete, what is that about?' And then I sent it off to publishers, and they were like, 'Well, Pete, send me something a bit better or something more on point.' And I'm like, 'No, I like this poem.'

And I kept it, what, 10 years or so. And then somebody asked me for a poem for the Manchester Museum. And he said, 'This poem, I love this poem. Let's do this poem.' So, he records it with me. We put it on the wall of the museum. And then what happens, my little daughter, four-year-old, walks in, I think with her class, with her classmates. She sees, 'Daddy, Daddy,' because I'm having to hold the boomerang as I'm doing this the song or the poem. And she goes, 'Daddy is a fighting man. Daddy is a fighting man.' And I'm like, 'It's a poem, now. It's just a poem.' She said, 'No, no.' She's only four, okay. 'Daddy is a fighting—' I said, 'Okay, Daddy is a fighting man.' And that was enough. I didn't need any more acknowledgement, I didn't need a prize, a competition; it's just

that it made a difference to her, and it gave her something that made her think, *yeah, Dad is fighting, and it's a fight worth having*. And so, yeah, literature prizes are just like one percent of what literature can do, and I'm not really somebody who writes for prizes. I rarely enter them to tell you the truth [laughs]. I look and think, *20 quid to send a [laughs] short story? I could get a full meal*.

JS: You are leaving Commonword, or you've left Commonword, or Cultureword as it is now called. And Cultureword, Commonword, has been an incubator for so many of us in the North. I know the North doesn't get the attention it deserves in terms of the arts, a lot of the time, or the money goes into the South. But we battled on, as it were. Sometimes we're a bit too community based, and this sort of thing. And I know – it's really weird, we have this conversation every single time – here I am interviewing you for *WritersMosaic* and the Royal Literary Fund right now, but if I had not come and sat in the identity workshop with you 35 years ago, when you were just taking over as a young project coordinator there, I'd not be interviewing you now. So, it's like chicken and egg, chicken and egg, chicken and egg.

And the thing is, Commonword, Cultureword, you've produced Lemn Sissay, Marcia Hutchinson has come through these workshops; she's shortlisted for the Women's Prize at the moment. These names pop up, but there's more than names too, there's

something alive that's been going on there. So, you're very bound up with the Commonword story as a writing institution in the north of England, largely unsung, I'm afraid, but those of us who know you, value you. But you've decided to leave. Tell us about that.

PK: Yeah, it's a lovely family, a lovely community, and it's a source of so much inspiration and love, of respect and mutual support, solidarity. And just cutting back when you came along, I know that, John, your style is now lucid, very clear, like deep water; it's profound, but it's clear. When you came, you brought an energy that was really hard for many people to understand. You were doing so many different things in the poetry that you brought along. And I was just like, *oh, my goodness, thank God, someone's come along* [laughs] *who's doing something different*, because I needed that from you. It wasn't just one way. And this is the thing with all the writers: they bring something.

But there comes a point where I just thought, *I'm done. I have nothing more left to give. We need a new energy, a new energy. We need someone to come in and bring it in a different way, bring their own chops, bring their own insights*. And also, I keep saying to myself, *I'm gonna read a lot more, especially some of these classics*. And I never do. I think, *well, that's—when I'm old*. And I thought, *you know what, this when I'm old bit is*

sort of running out a road. You are old now, Pete. You need to start reading the classics if you want to read them and enjoy them. And there are other writing projects that I've always deferred. And I feel, yeah, now is the time. It just felt right. It just felt right. And it's intuitive. It's got no major logic to it, it just feels, *this is the moment*.

JS: And do you think that the writing moving forward now is going to continue on in the—I'm not saying you'd write *Act Normal* again, because you can't, but this depth and lucidity that you have now come into. Because I've read some of your crime fiction, some of your sci-fi stuff, and seen some of your plays and things like that. We've performed alongside each other as poets. I wasn't in prison when you were doing *Strange Ways* and all of that sort of thing, although *Strange Ways* is a really interesting environment to go into. I've been in there doing work as well. And so, you've got so much to draw on. But you feel like this is—I'm not saying this is the final direction for you, but do you feel like this is the way to go?

PK: I do feel that the multiplicity of voices, the switching between genres, and the indifference [laughs] to whether I'm becoming obscure. If I want to talk about Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, I will. If I ever want to talk about the clash between Freud and Jung, I will. I don't care anymore [laughs] whether people are interested or not. So, no doubt my next book will just tank [laughs]. But who cares?

JS: Yeah, you've got to keep on going, haven't you? So, just to close out, I'd love it if you would go to your writer circle in your head or your inner bookshelf and maybe recommend for our listeners three books from your bookshelf that maybe haven't been seen enough, or the writer isn't known enough or something, and for you to give them a bit of light.

PK: Okay, well, from one side, there's a novel that probably came out 15 years ago, it's by Samuel Shimon, it's called *An Iraqi in Paris*. And it's the most bizarre and life affirming novel. If you think you've had a strange life, read *An Iraqi in Paris*. It's just the most incredible book. And Irenosen Okojie, who wrote *Speak Gigantular*, the short stories in that are just like the sweetest herb [laughs] and your mind just takes off when you're in these completely unexpected places. And the craft is brilliant, the thinking is brilliant, the emotions are brilliant, the characters, it's just a completely alternative universe, like Octavia Butler or something. Absolutely superb.

JS: She bends your head. She really does. I've read her. What she does to your brain is something else.

PK: You have to—I would recommend you start with a short story before you go a Derrida novel [laughs], like that title, [missing name]. But with the third one, I'm spoiled for choice, really. What can you do today? I would take *Invisible Cities*, maybe, by Italo Calvino.

JS: I was thinking of just that. You know, I was thinking of *Invisible Cities* and Calvino when reading you.

PK: Did I put him as a credit?

JS: No, I don't think you did.

PK: Oh, I apologise, Calvino [laughs]. But yeah, [music] some of his bizarre landscapes replicated that feeling, certainly to a small degree, in *Act Normal*. He was another writer who was just, woof, where are my socks? He's blown them off [laughs].

[Music]

JS: Yeah, bless you. Thank you, Peter. Thank you for coming in and talking to us. It's my pleasure to have you.

[Music]

PK: It's always great meeting you, John.

[Music]

JS: We'll do it again soon, eh?

[Music]

PK: Absolutely.

[Music]

Presenter: Peter Kalu in conversation with John Siddique. To hear more writers, go to writersmosaic.org.uk.

Peter Kalu was in conversation with John Siddique

A recording of this interview can be found at writersmosaic.org.uk

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