

KATHLEEN HUGHES: Hello and welcome to Talks at GS. Today we are delighted to welcome Bernardine Evaristo, the renowned author and winner of last year's Booker Prize, as well as the British Book Authors' Author of the Year and Fiction Book of the Year for her novel *Girl, Woman, Other*.

In total, BERNARDINE has published eight books. And if that weren't enough, BERNARDINE is also a Professor of Creative Writing at Brunel University London. Thank you for taking the time to be with us today.

BERNARDINE EVARISTO: Hi. Well, I look forward to talking to you.

KATHLEEN HUGHES: Fantastic. Why don't we start with the obvious place, which is your most recent and most critically acclaimed work. As I mentioned in the intro, you won a number of literature prizes for *Girl, Woman, Other*. Can you please talk us through why you wrote the book and any inspiration behind the book?

BERNARDINE EVARISTO: Sure. I wrote the book-- I actually started writing it in 2013 and it took five years to write. And I wrote it because I was so aware that there weren't enough Black British women writers out there writing fiction. Well, I knew that anyway. I knew that I was only one a handful, almost, writing adult novels. And also, I was really frustrated at the lack of representation of Black British women in fiction. And I always sort of emphasize British because there is, actually, a really sort of rich and fertile field of African American women's writing, and also African writing now. But the British voice tends to get lost in that. And I was just really frustrated. So, I thought I was going to write a book with 1,000 Black British women in it because Toni Morrison once said, "Try to think the unthinkable when you start a book." So I thought, well, what's unthinkable? 1,000 women. And of course, you know, that wasn't a realistic idea. So I then reduced it to 100 women. And then that also wasn't very realistic. So I actually ended up with 12, primarily Black British women. And I always say primarily because one character identifies as non-binary.

And it was to show the multiplicity of who we are in this society, or rather to show some of the multiplicity of who we are in this society. And so, the women are aged 19 to 93. But with each woman you also go back to their past, usually to their childhood. So, you have a real sense of the trajectory of their life. And the novel covers about 120 years. So the oldest

character actually no longer is alive and is born in the 19th century. And they are all kinds of, you know, varieties.

They are different ages, as I said. But also sexualities and classes. They come from different culture backgrounds, have different jobs or occupations and preoccupations. They have different family set ups. There are four mother daughter relationships. And so, I tried to-- and they all have their own section in the book, even though it is a cohesive novel. It's not a book of short stories.

So, basically, I tried to expand the representation of who we are in this society as opposed to defining it or reducing it, because sometimes people, "Oh, well this is who Black British women are." And I'm like, "No, we're as multiplicitous as any other social grouping out there. It's just that I've put a lot of us into a single novel."

KATHLEEN HUGHES: One of the other really unique things for me, BERNARDINE, was the way that you wrote, the style that you wrote. I think you call it fusion fiction, with an [UNINTEL] of full stops, very long sentences. And it felt like you're in the conversation with the characters. Why did you choose that nonconventional style for this novel as well?

BERNARDINE EVARISTO: Yes. I do call it fusion fiction. I think I've invented it as a form. Well, my background, just to begin, my background is as a poet and also writing for theatre. And I've always been an experimental writer in one way or another. But when I say experimental, that sometimes puts people off. So, I just want to say the book is very accessible. Anyone can read it and understand it. But it doesn't look like a traditional novel because the fusion fiction means that I have created this form which looks a bit like poetry but it's not poetry. But there aren't many full stops. But there is a kind of poetic patterning that happens on the page. And it means that the writing really flows.

And I also call it fusion fiction because the characters' stories fuse with each other's. So, they are sort of interconnected in some way through X degrees of separation in some cases. And so, so the stories are fused together. But also the way in which I've fused the language, I think it allowed me to do things that you wouldn't be able to do in a traditional level.

So, it's almost as if you're really inside these characters

lives. Simply because I have shaped the text and also removed those full stops, which gave me a freedom that I wouldn't have had. And also, I think it kind of plunges the reader deep inside, if you like, the subconscious of the characters in some way because I think if I had written traditional sentences and traditional paragraphs, it would have felt more closed off. So that's some of how I think the form functions.

KATHLEEN HUGHES: I'm just curious, is it much harder to write in that style than a more conventional style?

BERNARDINE EVARISTO: For me, it was very easy, actually. Because you know something, if you remove commas, it's like it liberates the imagination. And it's like the words flew out of me because I wasn't using traditional sentences. And so I didn't find it hard. But I'm sure that there are many writers out there who don't experiment in any way. And they would probably find it impossible because they need those full stops.

And just to say that I realized when I was editing the book, because like I said, it took five years, and it went through four drafts, four major drafts, every sentence almost is crafted. So there's so many revisions happening all the time over that period of five years. But when I went through the major revisions, like I finished a first draft, finished the second draft, and then the final draft, because I was experimenting with language it was really hard to see what I'd done. And then I thought this is why we have grammar. This is why we have the full stop. Because we need to be able to compartmentalize our kind of thoughts and how we use language and so on.

So yeah, on the one hand really free and easy for me. And on the other hand, really hard when it came to editing. And also, I don't have a technical mind at all. So it was a struggle.

KATHLEEN HUGHES: So, your recent book, you know, huge focus on your work now, but you've been an author for many years. I think you were once told that there might not be a place or a market for your work. So, I'd love to get your thoughts on what do you think caused this now? You know? This interest in your work, the success of *Girl, Woman, Other*, like where did it come from having been given that feedback along the way?

BERNARDINE EVARISTO: Yeah. I have been around a long time. And I began in the early '80s as a theatre major running a company called Theatre of Black Women. Formed because we were

not considered employable as Black women in this country. So we formed our own theatre company. And then my first book was published in 1994. And I've continued to publish ever since. But I think what happened with this book is that when I started it, it was not something that would hit the zeitgeist. But three years after I started it, I think around 2016, there was the Me Too movement. And there was also the Black Lives Matter movement which began as we know and hit the world and had a huge impact.

And also, there was a generation of young women coming of age. This is my own personal kind of analysis of why this book has taken off. There was a generation of young women coming of age, in particular women of color, who were connecting globally, who were becoming powerful and being listened to by the mainstream media. And who were saying, "We are as important as anybody else. We want to be heard in this society. We want to participate in this society at every level." And so I began it in 2013. And by about 2017 I was thinking, ooh, this book is really topical suddenly. Because it wasn't when I started it because we were still at a stage where, in a sense, tokenism was rife in the publishing industry. And they just weren't interested in the multiplicity of our voices.

But by the time the book came of age, you know, was published, it was like it totally hit the moment where there would be kind of support for it from all kinds of communities online, and also of course offline, not everything is online. And also Me Too and Black Lives Matter had raised awareness about some of the serious systemic issues in our society. And of course, this book hits both of those things plus many other things.

And then it was published in May last year. And to be honest the world did not fall at my feet. You know? I've always had really good reviews, but my books haven't sort of somehow been elevated beyond that. What elevated the book was the Booker Prize. Then we look at the Booker Prize which is, I think, 51 - 52 years old. It is the most prestigious prize for the novel in the world. And a Black woman had never won it. And I think one Asian woman had won it. And three Black guys had won it. And some Asian guys had won it. So, Black women had got nowhere near that prize other than on the short list. And only four Black women have been short listed for the prize in 50 years.

And some people might say to themselves, well, their books weren't good enough. But that's rubbish. They are always great books that can make those lists. And in fact, the books that did make the Booker short list in the last few years were great

books. Andrea Levy. Zadie Smith. NoViolet Bulawayo. These were amazing books. But they didn't win.

So, the difference this year with the prize was that, I think, it's all about who's in the room, right? As they say in *Hamilton*, you have to be in the room when it happens. And there was one man who was the Chair of the Judges. But actually, there were four women who were also on that panel. Four strong women. And clearly this book spoke to them.

And I don't think that if the panel had had a different make up that I would necessarily have got through with this book. Because I remember years ago there were Tory politicians who were judging that prize, right? These Tory grandee men of a certain age whose tastes would, I'm sure, not be particularly aligned with what I was writing. But you had these four women. And two were women of color. And my book got through, obviously with Margaret Atwood. And then I haven't looked back ever since.

But that was the turning point for me. It was winning the Booker.

KATHLEEN HUGHES: Looking at the short list this year, maybe we can see a continuation of the trend that you started, right, looking at who's on that short list. But I would love to know how do you think about your breaking this barrier? And how can that have more of a lasting positive impact on improving diverse representation and inclusion within the literary and the creative worlds?

BERNARDINE EVARISTO: I think we'll see the impact of my win in years to come. Because first of all, I wasn't a young writer who won. You know? The industry is shaped, it's about like the music industry, if you don't break through in your twenties there's no chance for you. I'm actually somebody who's had a very long life and also had a sort of parallel career as an activist at the same time. And I don't think that's ever happened with this prize.

And so, I won with a book which was, I consider it to be a radical experimental novel. The fact that it's sitting in the heart of the establishment right now doesn't take away from that, which gives me a great deal of pleasure. But it is a book about Black women's lives, or womxn, because as I said, one is non-binary. So, that makes a difference as well to the industry because-- and it's a commercial bestseller. So, all of these things mean that publishers are going to be looking for work

that they might not have been looking for before.

Then we had Black Lives Matter. And more so than my win we had Black Lives Matter happening a few months ago. And suddenly all these reading lists were being circulated by all kinds of people saying, "I want to educate myself about Black lives, racism, all kinds of areas around race and gender," which they obviously felt they hadn't been reading before. And I was very much part of those reading lists. But so were a lot of other writers.

And some of those books, like Reni Eddo-Lodge's book, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*, it had been a huge hit two years ago. It dropped off the charts. It was at number 300 and something. And then I think within two weeks it went to number one and stayed there for quite a long time. And that's because people were desperate to engage with something that a lot of people, I think, probably hadn't engaged with before. And that's all because of what happened to George Floyd.

And so, all of these things together meant that the publishing industry suddenly was doing a lot of breast beating and saying, "Ooh, we're looking at our stats. We're looking at who we employ. We're looking at what we publish. And we realize that we have been really exclusive or exclusionary in terms of people of color and Black people in particular. And we want to change. We want to open up." And so, there are various measures that are happening as I speak from the industry to make this happen. And I am hopeful that we will see change as a result of all of these things.

KATHLEEN HUGHES: One point that you brought up. It's the importance or what extent do you think the role of literature has in helping to educate people, whether it's fiction, non-fiction, to better understand either Black history or the experience of communities around the world? What's the role that literature has to play?

BERNARDINE EVARISTO: It opens up the world to us, doesn't it? And takes us outside of our own lives and our own points of view. Although sometimes it's really also important to see our own lives reflected in literature. But that's not why we're read. Eventually, you know, if you're going to be a lifelong reader you don't want to keep reading your own story. Right? So, if you're, for example a white writer and you only ever read about-- say you're a white male writer-- sorry, a white male reader and you only ever read about white men, I think, you know, you're probably missing a trick there because actually

through reading about a broader range of demographics, you are going to just be so much more enlightened about the world as a whole.

I mean, we talk about literature generating empathy, or at least fiction generating empathy. And that's true. It definitely does because you're stepping inside someone else's shoes. When you're reading a novel, and a novel could be 50,000 words, could be 100, 120, 150, even 200. You know, Hilary Mantel, god knows how many thousands of words she writes. You're actually engaging in the act of committing to understanding stories that are not your own stories.

And, you know, fiction is one of the forms in which we can draw on people's emotions. And even if you're not engaging emotionally, you're engaging intellectually in the story that's in front of you. And you're expanding your mind and expanding your world view. You know? That could be stories around-- from race. It doesn't have to be about racism, but it could be about stories by Black people or Asian people, working class stories, queer stories, disability. All of those narratives out there that are being told but not as much as they need to be. Then I think we are going to become more sophisticated and just better human beings, right? Because it's hard not to be if you encounter with work.

And then of course there's non-fiction and then there's poetry. And non-fiction can be incredibly educational. I think watching films is one art form and you engage with films in one way. But a film usually lasts about two hours and then it's gone. You know? Whereas long form fiction, it is a commitment. It is a commitment of at least a day, you know, for a novel, or of several days or even several weeks. So those are just some of the ways in which I think it's really important for people to enrich their lives through reading literature. And just to understand different perspectives, lives, points of view.

KATHLEEN HUGHES: In the spirit of kind of you paying it forward, are there any young, up and coming Black writers that we should keep our eyes open for?

BERNARDINE EVARISTO: Yeah, for sure. You know? I usually mention British writers. But there is one particular book that I read this year which I just thought was just one of the best books I've read for a very long time. And it's called *The Vanishing Half* by somebody called Brit Bennett. And she's an American woman. And it's about passing, you know? It's about the

idea that you're a person, a Black person, but you're so light skinned that you pass as white. And it's about two sisters, twins, and one chooses to pass and the other chooses to identify as Black. But it is a beautifully written story. And she's very much in the vein of Toni Morrison who is my favorite novelist. So she's amazing.

And then they've got people don't often talk about the poets, but there are some terrific young poets coming up. Theresa. Lola. Rachel [UNINTEL]. Mona Arshi. [UNINTEL]. A guy called Derek Owusu. All those names. Have only published one book. Have a look at them. And see the kinds of stories they're telling through their poetry. Then there's Liv Little. She is a writer, but she's also an editor. And Liv Little is the founder of gal-dem magazine. And gal-dam, G-A-L hyphen D-E-M is a magazine she started off I think four or five years ago. And it's for women of color. And it is an incredible magazine. And I think any young woman should be on there and just, like, seeing all those perspectives and the sort of analysis and critique and stories that you just don't get in any of the mainstream magazines. Or if you do, it's just a token gesture.

And then I'll mention a couple of directors because I edited, guest edited *The Sunday Times Style* in the summer, which was just the most amazing thing to do. And a lot of these people I put in there, these artists. And there were a couple of theatre directors. One is called Ola Ince who is directing in the West End at the moment, young Black woman. She's only about 29. Fantastic. Look out for her. And another one is called Lynette Linton, who is the Artistic Director of the Bush Theatre in Shepherd's Bush, which is a really good, what you'd call off Broadway theatre venue. And she's been there a couple of years. She's just doing terrific work. So many names.

You know, if you want to know the people I recommend, have a look at my Twitter account. And also Instagram. Because I'm always talking about them and making little videos about them and so on.

KATHLEEN HUGHES: I'm conscious that we've taken up a lot of your time BERNARDINE. But I really want to thank you so much for spending this time with us. It's been fantastic talking and getting your thoughts. And we really enjoyed this time together. So thank you very much.

BERNARDINE EVARISTO: Well, thank you very much. This has been lots of fun. I've really enjoyed it. And you've been great

at hosting it. So thank you, yeah. It's all good.

KATHLEEN HUGHES: Thanks for everything. Take care.

BERNARDINE EVARISTO: Okay. Yep. Bye everybody.

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