Bernardine Evaristo interview at the New York State Writers Institute (September 26, 2002)

Questioner: These questions will be obvious, I imagine. The first one is how did you come into writing in your life? Are there books that led you to writing? Was it something that was in your family? How did you begin to see yourself as a writer?

Evaristo: I didn't really become a writer until I went to drama school. I trained to be an actress for three years. It was while I was at drama school that I realized that there were very few plays written by or about black people in the UK at that time. This was in the very early '80s. I was at a school where we were encouraged to create our own theatre. So we devised our own theatre plays. All of us, in fact, had to write scripts, in whatever way we wanted to. My plays always came out as poetry, so you could call it poetry drama if you like. It would look literally like poetry on the page, with no stage directions or anything else, and I started writing one woman shows. That was my way into literature and writing. Before then I hadn't nurtured any desires to be a writer at all, I'd been in theatre from age twelve. I hadn't grown up in a literary family in any way. So that was the beginning.

Questioner: What were some of those early plays like?

Evaristo: I try not to think about them, actually. I haven't looked at them for maybe twenty years or so. They were very much about the experience of growing up black in Britain, and also looking at black history, but black history tended to be in the Caribbean. So the first two shows that I wrote were about the black British experience, but also about the Caribbean experience, even though I'm not Caribbean. They were very short. The first piece I did was a one-woman show that probably lasted about five minutes. It was built like a long poem on the page, and it was just an explosion of poetry, really. Then I started co-writing with a friend for theatre, and eventually went on to write a piece that was produced at the Royal Court Theatre in London. That was with a cast of lots of people, but again it was a poem. It was a dramatic story told through poetry.

Questioner: That initial actress desire, does that remain powerful?

Evaristo: Not at all, no. From the age of twelve I started going to a local youth theatre called Greenwich & Lewisham Young People's Theatre, and it was around the corner from where I lived. It was really the only place my father let me go, because he thought it was local and he liked the place. He thought we were well looked after, and nice children went there. So that was really why I started going to the youth theatre, because it was the only place (I was allowed to go to). I wasn't allowed to go to discos or anything like that, or go to my friends' houses. So that was the beginnings of my desire to be an actress, and then I got involved in school drama, and then I trained to be an actress. Then when I left drama school I formed a theatre company with three other woman in my year, and produced plays, wrote them, acted in them in the beginning, the first

two years. Then we got other people to write for the company and brought in lots of other actors and directors and the company grew, and I stopped acting. When I stopped acting I was very happy to. I think drama school kind of knocked my love of it out of me, as they tend to. They break you down to build you up and sometimes they never really build you up again. They're a bit like mad houses, drama schools. It's like everyone's in therapy, and the drama teachers think they're psychotherapists, and they're not at all. So my love of acting had really dwindled. I still did it, but I didn't like getting up on stage and performing in front of people, even though I did it. So when I finally stopped in 1986 I was very happy to stop. And I didn't have to get up in front of people for another eight years, which was when my first book came out.

Questioner: It sounds, from describing the drama workshops and that drama school, like (for you) writing started out as almost collaborating. You had a co-writer for some of it. How did you move away from that into writing just poems?

Evaristo: Well what happened was that I fell out of love with theatre, as well as acting, so we finished the theatre company in 1988, but I continued to write poetry. So after writing for theatre I then started to write independent poems, which weren't for theatre at all, they were poems written for the page. That was the gradual transition over several years. My way in was through theatre, and then it was writing independent poems, which is obviously a very solitary activity. Then I continued and then started to produce books. But I did love literature at home when I was growing up, and English was always my favorite subject, and I used to read widely, just go to the library and get books.

Questioner: This next question is kind of a process question. When you're writing, and when you shifted from writing for drama to writing the poetry, how did your process shift, if it did, and what's your writing day like?

Evaristo: For theatre you're writing for the stage, and you're writing a story, and you're developing characters for the stage, which is a very different medium to other kinds of writing. When I was writing single poems, they were much more reflective, and they were exploring ideas in a very different way and they weren't character based. Of course, I moved on to character based work when I started to write novels in verse. There was a long period when I was just exploring ideas through poetry. They weren't formative in any way. In the UK, if you're a poet who is black, and you read your work with some degree of skill, you get labeled a performance poet, which I hate. Because my background is in theatre, I know the difference between what I consider to be a performance and what I consider to be a reading. I don't like the stage, but my work has a performative quality to it, because of my background, but I don't like the performance.

Questioner: Can you say a little bit more about that, about the distinctions that you see between performance and reading?

Evaristo: Well, an actor is, hopefully, trained, and is communicating in every way that they can to an audience whatever part they are required to play, and it's usually not a part that they've written themselves. A performance poet is somebody who gets up there and usually has a few tricks up their sleeve, and is able to deliver their work in a certain way, and often that work doesn't actually translate very well to the page. Usually it doesn't, whereas a good play is actually also very interesting to read on the page. Also, sometimes performance poets read on the page, they've actually got the book in front of them. Of course, an actor would never do that. So performance poets are not inhabiting another world when they're giving a presentation, whereas hopefully that's what an actor is doing. They're trying to become something other than themselves. So that's just something that bugs me about being labeled. People will say, "Are you giving a performance?" I'll say, "No, I'm giving a reading."

Questioner: I wanted to ask about The Emperor's Babe. It's just another world, and I wanted to ask you how you came to that subject matter and what the path of discovery was towards finding that voice, finding those characters, defining that project.

Evaristo: Well I had been interested for a long time in the black history of Britain, which goes back nearly two thousand years. It's a fact that very few people know even in the UK. There was a legion of Moors stationed at Hadrian's Wall in the North of England at the beginning of the third century AD. They were from North Africa, and they came with the Roman Army. That's the first concrete piece of archeological evidence that we have that Africans were in the UK at that time. The history continues right through to today, in different ways and different forms. Certainly from the sixteenth century there has been a significant history. So this was an area that I was interested in. There is a wonderful book called Staying Power by a man called Peter Fryer, which was published in 1986, and it's called "The History of Black People in Britain" and it begins with the Romans. I think the first sentence is something like, "There were Africans in Britain before the English came here." Which is true. It's a fascinating book, and it was the first book to document this history in a very comprehensive and thorough way. It was fantastic. That book was a great inspiration for me, because when I was growing up in the UK in the '60s and '70s, people would tell us to go back to where we came from, and there was always this feeling that you shouldn't be there. It's very different to America, where I guess people are assimilated in a different way, and the histories are very different. So people will tell you to go back to where you came from, and the popular myth was that black people only came to England in 1948, that there hadn't been any presence before then, and that you didn't belong. When I discovered through reading Staying Power that the history was actually much deeper, it challenges all those myths about a British mono-cultural society until 1948. The myth in Britain still persists to today. It was in the news last year that some of the more conservative members of our political parties were saying that Britain was becoming a mongrel nation, and that it was a bad thing. But it has always been a mongrel nation, because it has always been inhabited by people from other countries. Some of those people have been black, but from the sixteenth century also people have been Asian as well. So that was the general background thinking that I was working with. There are other books that I've read since, that have also touched on this aspect of British history.

I was asked in 1999 if I would become Writer in Residence at the Museum of London. The Museum of London is a museum dedicated to the history of London, and it is a fantastic museum, and it goes back to pre-history. It also has a huge section on the Romans. They've recreated Roman rooms, a living room, and a kitchen. You can actually walk through this part of the museum and try to imagine how the Romans have lived. I had studied classical civilizations at school, I studied the Romans, I studied Latin, but I'd forgotten most of it. Walking through this museum brought it all alive to me. I remembered in many ways how sophisticated the Roman society was, and how you could draw parallels between today's society and then. In some ways they were so sophisticated they were doing things that we do now. They had central heating, for example, they had running water, and all those things went when the Romans went, and then it had to be built up again.

So I was there for six months, and I could basically do what I liked. I could walk around the museum, I could talk to the curators, and I could write some poems if I wanted to, and I ran some creative writing workshops for some of the groups that came to the museum. I then decided that I would write a poem focusing on the different aspects of British history. So I started with some pre-historical poems about man walking up from Africa over the continent and gradually settling in England. Then I decided I would write this poem about a young black girl living in Roman London. It was just one poem. That one poem in a slightly different form is now the epilogue at the end of the book. But the character kind of took hold of me, and I started to write some more poems about her, because there was so much that I could explore about the Roman society and about her life. She started to have a life of her own. So I wrote a few more poems, and I thought I'd leave it there, and then I was approached by a publisher, and he was interested in what I was working on next, and I said, "Oh I'm writing a novel in verse about a black girl in Roman London." I wasn't, I was just

working on a few poems. He said, “Oh, that’s a good idea.” So I sent him a few of the poems, and they then bought it. And I thought, “Oh God I’ve got to write a novel in verse.” But I absolutely enjoyed it, and I think things happen when they’re meant to happen, so I then extended it into something like a two hundred fifty page book, and just built up this world that I imagined she would have inhabited.

The Roman City was in the city of London. A lot of people don’t know what the city of London is, but it’s the financial district, which is basically the square mile where all the money is made, where billions of pounds pass through every day. It’s also on the Thames. There is also part of the old Roman walls, called the London Wall. There’s also a map of the Roman city which is transferred onto the modern city, so you can see where its perimeters were, and you can see where some of the big buildings were, like the Governor’s Palace, or the Temple of Mithras. So I then created this character. People ask me how I got an idea for this person, how she came alive. I think with me, the act of writing brings the character to life, and I knew that I wanted her to be young, that she would be married off at an early age, that she would have a very modern voice. Through that modern voice, history would be brought to life, so it wouldn’t be dull. Also we don’t know what the Romans really thought. You’re always using your imagination anyway. I also knew that she would be feisty, that she would be a strong character. Through the act of writing, the character started to take on a life of her own. I was researching the book as I was writing, which for me is the best way to do it. The research involved using the museum, talking to the historians, and lots of books. I probably had about fifty books that I worked with, and a lot of those books were children’s' books, because it was very important to get lots of historical detail. The children’s books, with the pictures, and perhaps the Latin word inscription of what something was used for was very useful for describing a day-to-day life in the Roman city.

The final part of the research was also walking around the city on a Sunday. During the week it’s just full of business people, people working in offices, all the bankers, etc. On a Sunday it’s deserted, because no body lives there, it’s just empty. So that was the best time to walk around the city and to try and imagine what the Thames was like then, when it was jungle on the other side. When it was just forest and perhaps some farmland. What it was like to have the old wooden bridge that once crossed the Thames at Cannon Street. What it was like when London was full of submerged rivers. There are probably about twenty of them that have been bricked in; some of them are dead, they’ve just been filled in and nothing’s happened to them, some of them have become sewers. But there were two rivers that were above ground during the time that she would have lived. One of them was the River Fleet, which became Fleet Street, which was where all the newspaper industry was based until very recently. And the other was the Wallbrook Stream. So I was also imagining the kind of life centered around the river, around the Thames, around the market area, around the forum, etc.

I would research different sections according to which section I was writing. I knew vaguely what the outline of the story would be. She would be married off to this rich Roman, and she would be an aspiring poetess. She would have these sassy friends, and she would have a relationship with the Emperor, Septimius Severus. But each section would be researched as I wrote it. I think what happens then is that you just take what you need. People say to me, “Oh did you read The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire?” And I say, “No! Why would I want to read that?” I read a book called Daily Life in Ancient Rome. It’s fantastic, how people live their lives, what they did from the moment they woke up to the moment they went to sleep. What it was like going to see the gladiator games, what it was like traveling, what business was like, what the streets were like, etc.

Questioner: That is clear proof that every museum should have at least one poet in residence, or a couple poets in residents.

Evaristo: Yeah. They thought I was going to be walking around with a pen and paper, searching for the muse. They were a bit disappointed that they didn't see me very often. When I first went there and I was talking to the historians about the black presence in Roman London, they were very dubious. Not because they proved otherwise, but because they just hadn't thought about it, and so said, "Oh, that's not possible." And then I said, "Well, you know, people could have sailed up the Nile from northern Sudan." The Romans conquered Egypt. They went as far as the Sudan, probably even further. The traffic was two-way. Rome was a very multi-racial city. People could have sailed up the Nile, traveled across Europe on those brilliant Roman roads, and settled in Roman London. Why not? But people had a blockage about it at the museum. They just didn't understand. Then the book was published, and it got a lot of attention, and then about a year later they introduced a black Roman character into the museum as one of the guides, who takes people around. So I just thought it was a great achievement, because at the beginning they were very skeptical of the idea, and then obviously it challenged them, and then they kind of bought it.

Questioner: You said another thing that you were doing at the museum was doing poetry workshops, and obviously before then and since then you've done a lot of teaching, so I guess this is kind of a teaching question. What have your teaching experiences been like, how has being a verse novelist influenced your teaching, and how has your background influenced your teaching? I also wondered what it was like teaching in England versus teaching in America.

Evaristo: Actually I don't really do that much teaching. I try to sort of shy away from it most of the time, but when I'm offered a really good gig, like, "Do you want to come and live in New York for three months?" then I will say yes and do it. Or, for example, at the University of East Anglia where I was this year. This year I've done a lot of teaching. I was at the University of East Anglia for six months as Writing Fellow for the first six months of the year. That was really because they paid me a lot of money, they gave me a flat and a cleaner, and I only had to teach two hours a week, and they said, "Write your book." It's a program that really supports writers. That's why I did that. Of course, coming to New York, it's self-evident. And then occasionally I'll do other workshops, but I don't actually do a lot of teaching because I know that a lot of writers can end up as teachers, which is not very well paid in the UK. I know Toni Morrison getting a small fortune for being chair of two departments in America is very different from a university professor in the UK or a schoolteacher.

What I do is I teach fiction and I teach poetry. In novels in verse, story structure is very important, so I've always felt quite confident teaching story structure. I just finished a novel, which is a prose novel. What I do is I teach poetry, I teach fiction, and I always encourage my students not just to explore and experiment but also to tell stories through their poetry, because it's a form that I like a lot. I think that every teacher brings their own interests to their classroom. Teaching in the UK, teaching at UEA is not too different, too dissimilar to teaching here at Barnard, I mean I've only been here for three weeks at Barnard. They're all girls; at UEA they were a mixed bag. I would say that their level of education is probably the same. UEA is a very good school for English and Creative Writing. In order to do the Creative Writing minor they have to submit an essay. There are 20 places for 450 students, so the standard is really high. I found that a lot of the students don't come out with all the clichés and pitfalls that a lot of beginning writers do come out with, and they're only 18 or 19. But I pretty much found the same here, as well, at Barnard. It helps me crystallize my ideas about the creative writing process, through teaching it. Of course as I'm teaching, I'm also reflecting on whether I'm doing what I'm teaching. I'm not always. I find it helpful as a writer in that way, and also I enjoy the atmosphere in the classroom, I enjoy watching students develop and grow. Genuinely I do enjoy it, but I wouldn't enjoy it if I had to do it all the time, if I was employed three terms of the year I would probably loathe it; I'd probably feel resentful. Just coming and going and sort of sharing what I know with students is always very rewarding.

Questioner: I'll ask a question about the prose novel you mentioned. I'd love to hear how you describe what it was like to switch from verse novel to prose.

Evaristo: It was hard. My first novel in verse was called Lara, and that was actually a prose novel for about three years, and I produced 200 pages under great duress. I was also learning how to be a writer while I was writing that book. I was learning how to be disciplined and motivated, which I am now, but I wasn't so much then. I had to grow into that. So I produced 200 pages of a novel which I hated, because the language was very plain for me; coming from poetry, it was incredibly plain, and it didn't excite me at all. So I threw it away in the end, and I transformed the story into poetry, and that was how I came to that form with Lara. With The Emperor's Babe it was the other way around; it was a poem that then expanded.

With Soul Tourists, which is coming out next year, I approached it as if it was poetry, so I was perfecting every line before I moved on to the next. I felt like I was writing myself into a hole. There was one stage where two or three pages were taking about two or three weeks to write, because I was thinking about how it flowed and the imagery I was using and everything, and the story wasn't being told. The story wasn't actually making much sense. It just wasn't moving on. So I showed it to a friend, who was also a writer and a teaching, and he said, "You've got to get that story going. Don't worry so much about the language." Once I did that, it became easier. The thing is, you actually end up with more words when you're writing a prose novel. Although The Emperor's Babe consists of 250 pages, it's poetry. I don't know what the word count is on it, but it's probably a third of the prose novel. In the end, with the first draft of the prose novel I produced 93,000 words, which to me is an inconceivable amount of words to have to structure and try to look at objectively and make sense of. There are simple technical things like, "he said and she said," how people speak. Although characters speak through my novels in verse, they mainly do through monologue. There isn't a great deal of extended dialogue. How do you sustain extended dialogue using all the basic tools of fiction writing? For a fiction writer, it is easy. Some people don't actually put in "he saids or she saids," some people do. Hemingway, he just says "he said, she said," and that's it. I was trying to find my way of describing how characters speak. I think that's still problematic for me. Once I got into the novel it was how to use poetic language, which is what I love doing, how do infuse the language with poetry without reducing it, in the way you reduce poetry to the essence of something. Then, you know, sustaining character development and all sorts of things, it was very hard.

Questioner: I am fascinated by the process and I'm wondering what you ever looked to as any kind of a model. When I first encountered you (by e-mail), I commended you for the courage demonstrated in really launching in this form. My question is who do you read and what interests you, other literature? Also, in doing this, and doing Lara, was there anything that gave you the sense of "I can do this," or were you really just breaking down your own senses of boundary?

Evaristo: I think I was doing both. My favorite poet is Derek Walcott, and my favorite book of his is Midsummer, which actually uses the sonnet form. Lara, if anything, is syllabic. That wasn't really intentional, but it doesn't use any of the traditional forms. I like the shape on the page of big blocked text. Walcott has always been an inspiration for me, for many, many years. I really do think he's a very great poet. What he is able to do is to transform the mundane into the extraordinary through absolutely astonishing, beautiful imagery. So he has always been a model for me.

Then there have been lots of novels that I've read over the past ten to fifteen years that I have found really inspirational. Often it's just one novel by a novelist, it's not the whole works that has triggered off something in me. Usually they are writers who are very unusual. For example, Kari Hulme, Maori writer, The Bone People. Some of them have won some of the major awards in the UK, but I don't know if that's how they've come to my attention. Maybe that's just coincidence. But Kari Hulme is a Maori writer, very unusual book set in New Zealand, covers a quite lengthy span of time, and just a very original writer. Ben Okri's The Famished Road, set in Nigeria, a very spiritual book; again, beautiful use of language; again, very unusual in its subject matter, and also the way in which he wrote it. There is a writer called Michelle Cliff, who is from Jamaica. Her early books were almost like prose poems, and she was presenting snapshots of her life in the Caribbean, and

she is a very light skinned, almost white looking Caribbean woman. I remember being very influenced by her in the early '80s, simply because she was working with a form that was fascinating and very poetic.

Then there are novels that I have found very inspirational and I really deeply admire the book, even though I'm not necessarily a fan of the writer, and even though the book is not necessarily experimental in any way. For example, Remains of the Day, by Kazuo Ishiguro is just a fantastic book, because it's really about one guy, a butler, and it's all about the world as he sees it. He just presents this butler in a particular way, and we interpret him in a particular way, and it has such emotional depth to it, but it's also so subtle. I like the idea that it's just one character that sustains and stays the same throughout the whole of the book. More recently, Captain Corelli's Mandolin. I think all of these books are probably very flawed. With The Bone People, with Famished Road, you can easily chop off the last third. It's the first two thirds that are so stunning. You kind of have to flip through the end of the book sometimes. You could say that they are structurally imperfect, but they have so much going for them that it doesn't really matter.

English Passengers by Matthew Kneale is another book that I really like. It was published a few years ago in the UK. It's about these Manx seamen who sail to Australia. It's about what the settlers did to the Aborigines in Australia, but it's also about these Manx seamen and their journey to Australia. What I was going to say about Captain Corelli's Mandolin, it's such a joyous book, it's so exuberant, but it's also incredibly flawed. There are huge sections that should have just been taken out. But I'd rather read an exuberant, flawed book, than a book that doesn't have that special spark of light for me in it. I've always liked Toni Morrison. I don't think her last two books, but certainly her early books. African-American women writers above all else showed me that I could write my own stories, set in the UK. In the '70s and '80s, most of the black fiction being published in the UK was African-American, and the publishing industry said there was no market for black British writers. They simply didn't publish hardly anybody. For lots of the black writers writing at that time who were looking for models, African-American fiction was really the model. Then of course it's a very different culture and a very different history, so in a sense it also became disempowering. The world was saying, "This is the black experience," but you were saying, "Actually, I grew up in Woolage, in a mixed race family in this boring suburb in London, and my experience is completely different from theirs." But the fact that they were writing these narratives, and some of them doing it so well, was incredibly inspirational.

Questioner: I think we should stop. This has been wonderful.

Transcribed by Kelley Conroy